

## Composition and Reading



# Composition and Reading

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LEMOORE*



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PART I

# FACULTY RESOURCES



# I. Request Access



To preserve academic integrity and prevent students from gaining unauthorized access to faculty resources, we verify each request manually.

Contact [oyer@achievingthedream.org](mailto:oyer@achievingthedream.org) and we'll get you on your way.

## Overview of Faculty Resources

This is a community course developed by an Achieving the Dream grantee. They have either curated or created a collection of faculty resources for this course. Since the resources are openly licensed, you may use them as is or adapt them to your needs.

## Now Available

- Assessments

## Share Your Favorite Resources

If you have sample resources you would like to share with other faculty teaching this course, please send them with an explanatory message and learning outcome alignment to [oor@achievingthedream.org](mailto:oor@achievingthedream.org).

## 2. I Need Help



Need more information about this course? Have questions about faculty resources? Can't find what you're looking for? Experiencing technical difficulties?

We're here to help! Contact [oeer@achievethegoal.org](mailto:oeer@achievethegoal.org) for support.



PART II

READING, ANALYZING  
AND EVALUATING  
NON-FICTION





# 3. Reading to Write

## WHAT THIS HANDOUT IS ABOUT

This handout suggests reading, note-taking, and writing strategies for when you need to use reading assignments or sources as the springboard for writing a paper.

## READING STRATEGIES

- **Read (or at least skim) all parts of the reading.** Sometimes the cover, title, preface, introduction, illustrations, appendices, epilogue, footnotes and “about the author” sections can provide you with valuable information.
- **Identify the genre of the reading.** What kind of a reading is it? (Journal article? Mass media? Novel? Textbook?) Why was it written? Who does the author assume is going to read this work? (Books about politics written for an audience of political scientists, for example, might be very different from books about politics written for the general public, for historians, or for sociologists.)
- **Consider the author.** What do you know or what can you learn about this person? Why did he or she write the book? What sources of information and/or methods did he or she use to gather the information presented in the book?
- **Guess why your instructor assigned the reading.** How does it fit in with other readings, class discussions, major course themes, or the purpose of the class?
- **Get out a calendar and plan your reading.** Get out a calendar and plan your reading. Plot the number of days or hours that it

may take you to complete the reading. Be realistic. It may help to read one chapter of the reading and then revise your calendar—some readings take longer than others of a similar length. Visit the Learning Center if you'd like to learn more about scheduling your work or reading more quickly and effectively.

- **As you read, record your reactions and questions.** Any reaction or question is valid, from the specific (“What’s that word mean?”) to the general (“What’s her point?”). Write them down now so that you’ll remember them later. These reactions and questions can serve as material for class discussion, or they can be the jumping off point for brainstorming a paper.
- **Read with a friend.** Find someone else who is reading the same book. Set reading goals together and plan to share your reactions to sections of the reading before class, after class, over e-mail, and so on.
- **Visit your instructor during office hours to discuss the reading.** Your instructor will set aside hours when he or she will be available to meet with students. This is a great time to talk about the reading, ask questions, share your reactions, and get to know your instructor. You can do this with a friend or in a small group as well.
- **Think about what is missing in the reading.** Issues, events, or ideas that are missing, left out, avoided, or not discussed/ addressed in the book might be important. Thinking about these omissions can give you a critical perspective on the reading by showing you what the author (consciously or unconsciously) doesn’t want to deal with.
- **If you know you will have to answer a particular question in response to the reading, read with that question in mind.** Sometimes faculty will give you essay questions in advance. As you read the text, refer back to those questions and think about your emerging answers to them.

## WRITING STRATEGIES

### While reading

- **Write as you read.** Record your reactions informally and briefly after you've read for a while. When you're done reading a section, write for five minutes to capture your personal thoughts, reactions, and questions as you go along.
- **Keep your notes with your book.** Tuck a few sheets of paper or a notepad inside the book to record your ideas as you read.
- **Share your informal writing with a friend.** Trade notes/questions/reactions to the book. Write five-minute responses to one another about the reading. This can be done by e-mail.
- **Draw while you read.** Drawing pictures, maps or diagrams of relationships or important issues that you see emerging from the reading can help you understand them. Be willing to revise or redraw the map as you read.

### After you read

- **React to the whole reading.** Take twenty minutes to record your reactions to the reading as a whole. (Return to the reading strategies list to get you started if you need to.) Don't be afraid to guess, hypothesize, or follow a tangent.
- **Reread the writing assignment.** The Writing Center has a useful handout on understanding assignments that may help.
- **Get out a calendar and schedule the time you will need to write your paper.** Working backwards from the due date, plot a timeline for producing the paper. Include time for at least one rough draft and one chance to receive feedback from others (a friend, your teaching assistant, your professor, the

Writing Center, etc.) before turning it in.

- **Plan your research and think about citation.** If the assignment requires library research, decide upon a strategy for collecting and citing sources as you research and write. Be sure to cite any quoted information or information that was not generated by your own analysis. Your instructor can answer all of your questions about this important step.
- **Write a draft, preferably a few days before the paper is due.** Instructors can usually tell the difference between papers that have been carefully drafted and revised and papers that have been hurriedly written the night before they are due. Papers written the night before often receive disappointing grades.
- **Get feedback from at least one person, and preferably several people, before you finalize your draft.** When possible, give your readers a copy of the assignment, too. E-mail can make this process easier. See the Writing Center's handout on getting feedback.
- **Proofread your paper to catch errors before handing it in.** Taking the time to spell-check and proofread will make your paper easier to read and show your reader that you cared about the assignment. The Writing Center's handout on editing and proofreading may help.

## When you get your paper back

- **Read all of your instructor's comments.** Assess your strengths and weaknesses in completing this reading/writing assignment. Plan what adjustments you'll make in the process for the next reading/writing assignment you will undertake. It may help to save all of your old papers so that you can refer back to them and look for patterns in your instructor's comments. You may also want to keep a small notebook for your own assessment—writing down that you didn't leave

ample time for revision on one paper, for example, may help you remember to schedule your time more effectively for the next paper.

## 4. Audience

### What this handout is about

This handout will help you understand and write for the appropriate audience when you write an academic essay.

### Audience matters

When you're in the process of writing a paper, it's easy to forget that you are actually writing to someone. Whether you've thought about it consciously or not, you always write to an audience: sometimes your audience is a very generalized group of readers, sometimes you know the individuals who compose the audience, and sometimes you write for yourself. Keeping your audience in mind while you write can help you make good decisions about what material to include, how to organize your ideas, and how best to support your argument.

To illustrate the impact of audience, imagine you're writing a letter to your grandmother to tell her about your first month of college. What details and stories might you include? What might you leave out? Now imagine that you're writing on the same topic but your audience is your best friend. Unless you have an extremely cool grandma to whom you're very close, it's likely that your two letters would look quite different in terms of content, structure, and even tone.

## Isn't my instructor my audience?

Yes, your instructor or TA is probably the actual audience for your paper. Your instructors read and grade your essays, and you want to keep their needs and perspectives in mind when you write. However, when you write an essay with only your instructor in mind, you might not say as much as you should or say it as clearly as you should, because you assume that the person grading it knows more than you do and will fill in the gaps. This leaves it up to the instructor to decide what you are really saying, and she might decide differently than you expect. For example, she might decide that those gaps show that you don't know and understand the material. Remember that time when you said to yourself, "I don't have to explain communism; my instructor knows more about that than I do" and got back a paper that said something like "Shows no understanding of communism"? That's an example of what can go awry when you think of your instructor as your only audience.

Thinking about your audience differently can improve your writing, especially in terms of how clearly you express your argument. The clearer your points are, the more likely you are to have a strong essay. Your instructor will say, "He really understands communism—he's able to explain it simply and clearly!" By treating your instructor as an intelligent but uninformed audience, you end up addressing her more effectively.

## How do I identify my audience and what they want from me?

Before you even begin the process of writing, take some time to consider who your audience is and what they want from you. Use the following questions to help you identify your audience and what you can do to address their wants and needs.

- Who is your audience?
- Might you have more than one audience? If so, how many audiences do you have? List them.
- Does your assignment itself give any clues about your audience?
- What does your audience need? What do they want? What do they value?
- What is most important to them?
- What are they least likely to care about?
- What kind of organization would best help your audience understand and appreciate your? What do you have to say (or what are you doing in your research) that might surprise your audience?
- What do you want your audience to think, learn, or assume about you? What impression do you want your writing or your research to convey?

## How much should I explain?

This is the hard part. As we said earlier, you want to show your instructor that you know the material. But different assignments call for varying degrees of information. Different fields also have different expectations. For more about what each field tends to expect from an essay, see the Writing Center handouts on writing in specific fields of study. The best place to start figuring out how much you should say about each part of your paper is in a careful reading of the assignment. We give you some tips for reading assignments and figuring them out in our handout on how to read an assignment. The assignment may specify an audience for your paper; sometimes the instructor will ask you to imagine that you are writing to your congressperson, for a professional journal, to a group of specialists in a particular field, or for a group of your peers. If the assignment doesn't specify an audience, you may find it most



useful to imagine your classmates reading the paper, rather than your instructor.

Now, knowing your imaginary audience, what other clues can you get from the assignment? If the assignment asks you to summarize something that you have read, then your reader wants you to include more examples from the text than if the assignment asks you to interpret the passage. Most assignments in college focus on argument rather than the repetition of learned information, so your reader probably doesn't want a lengthy, detailed, point-by-point summary of your reading (book reports in some classes and argument reconstructions in philosophy classes are big exceptions to this rule). If your assignment asks you to interpret or analyze the text (or an event or idea), then you want to make sure that your explanation of the material is focused and not so detailed that you end up spending more time on examples than on your analysis. If you are not sure about the difference between explaining something and analyzing it, see our handouts on reading the assignment and argument.

Once you have a draft, try your level of explanation out on a friend, a classmate, or a Writing Center tutor. Get the person to read your rough draft, and then ask her to talk to you about what she did and didn't understand. (Now is not the time to talk about proofreading stuff, so make sure she ignores those issues for the time being). You will likely get one of the following responses or a combination of them:

- If your listener/reader has **tons of questions** about what you are saying, then you probably need to explain more. Let's say you are writing a paper on piranhas, and your reader says, "What's a piranha? Why do I need to know about them? How would I identify one?" Those are vital questions that you clearly need to answer in your paper. You need more detail and elaboration.
- If your reader seems **confused**, you probably need to explain more clearly. So if he says, "Are there piranhas in the lakes

around here?” you may not need to give more examples, but rather focus on making sure your examples and points are clear.

- If your reader **looks bored and can repeat back to you more details than she needs to know** to get your point, you probably explained too much. Excessive detail can also be confusing, because it can bog the reader down and keep her from focusing on your main points. You want your reader to say, “So it seems like your paper is saying that piranhas are misunderstood creatures that are essential to South American ecosystems,” not, “Uh... piranhas are important?” or, “Well, I know you said piranhas don’t usually attack people, and they’re usually around 10 inches long, and some people keep them in aquariums as pets, and dolphins are one of their predators, and...a bunch of other stuff, I guess?”

Sometimes it’s not the amount of explanation that matters, but the word choice and tone you adopt. Your word choice and tone need to match your audience’s expectations. For example, imagine you are researching piranhas; you find an article in *National Geographic* and another one in an academic journal for scientists. How would you expect the two articles to sound? *National Geographic* is written for a popular audience; you might expect it to have sentences like “The piranha generally lives in shallow rivers and streams in South America.” The scientific journal, on the other hand, might use much more technical language, because it’s written for an audience of specialists. A sentence like “*Serrasalmus piraya* lives in fresh and brackish intercoastal and proto-arboreal sub-tropical regions between the 45th and 38th parallels” might not be out of place in the journal.

Generally, you want your reader to know enough material to understand the points you are making. It’s like the old forest/trees metaphor. If you give the reader nothing but trees, she won’t see the forest (your thesis, the reason for your paper). If you give her a big forest and no trees, she won’t know how you got to the forest (she

might say, “Your point is fine, but you haven’t proven it to me”). You want the reader to say, “Nice forest, and those trees really help me to see it.” Our handout on paragraph development can help you find a good balance of examples and explanation.

## Reading your own drafts

Writers tend to read over their own papers pretty quickly, with the knowledge of what they are trying to argue already in their minds. Reading in this way can cause you to skip over gaps in your written argument because the gap-filler is in your head. A problem occurs when your reader falls into these gaps. Your reader wants you to make the necessary connections from one thought or sentence to the next. When you don’t, the reader can become confused or frustrated. Think about when you read something and you struggle to find the most important points or what the writer is trying to say. Isn’t that annoying? Doesn’t it make you want to quit reading and surf the web or call a friend?

## Putting yourself in the reader’s position

Instead of reading your draft as if you wrote it and know what you meant, try reading it as if you have no previous knowledge of the material. Have you explained enough? Are the connections clear? This can be hard to do at first. Consider using one of the following strategies:

- Take a break from your work—go work out, take a nap, take a day off. This is why the Writing Center and your instructors encourage you to start writing more than a day before the paper is due. If you write the paper the night before it’s due,

you make it almost impossible to read the paper with a fresh eye.

- Try outlining after writing—after you have a draft, look at each paragraph separately. Write down the main point for each paragraph on a separate sheet of paper, in the order you have put them. Then look at your “outline”—does it reflect what you meant to say, in a logical order? Are some paragraphs hard to reduce to one point? Why? This technique will help you find places where you may have confused your reader by straying from your original plan for the paper.
- Read the paper aloud—we do this all the time at the Writing Center, and once you get used to it, you’ll see that it helps you slow down and really consider how your reader experiences your text. It will also help you catch a lot of sentence-level errors, such as misspellings and missing words, which can make it difficult for your reader to focus on your argument.

These techniques can help you read your paper in the same way your reader will and make revisions that help your reader understand your argument. Then, when your instructor finally reads your finished draft, he or she won’t have to fill in any gaps. The more work you do, the less work your audience will have to do—and the more likely it is that your instructor will follow and understand your argument.

# 5. Text: Evaluating Information With Critical Thinking

Evaluating information can be one of the most complex tasks you will be faced with in college. But if you utilize the following four strategies, you will be well on your way to success:

1. Read for understanding by using text coding
2. Examine arguments
3. Clarify thinking
4. Cultivate “habits of mind”



## 1. Read for Understanding Using Text Coding

When you read and take notes, use the text coding strategy. Text coding is a way of tracking your thinking while reading. It entails

marking the text and recording what you are thinking either in the margins or perhaps on Post-it notes. As you make connections and ask questions in response to what you read, you monitor your comprehension and enhance your long-term understanding of the material.

With text coding, mark important arguments and key facts. Indicate where you agree and disagree or have further questions. You don't necessarily need to read every word, but make sure you understand the concepts or the intentions behind what is written. Feel free to develop your own shorthand style when reading or taking notes. The following are a few options to consider using while coding text.

Shorthand	Meaning
!	Important
L	Learned something new
!	Big idea surfaced
*	Interesting or important fact
?	Dig deeper
√	Agree
≠	Disagree

See more text coding from PBWorks and Collaborative for Teaching and Learning.

## 2. Examine Arguments

When you examine arguments or claims that an author, speaker, or other source is making, your goal is to identify and examine the hard facts. You can use the spectrum of authority strategy for this purpose. The spectrum of authority strategy assists you in identifying the “hot” end of an argument—feelings, beliefs, cultural

influences, and societal influences—and the “cold” end of an argument—scientific influences. The following video explains this strategy.



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*<https://library.achievingthedream.org/westhillsscenglish1a/?p=23>*

### 3. Clarify Thinking

When you use critical thinking to evaluate information, you need to clarify your thinking to yourself and likely to others. Doing this well is mainly a process of asking and answering probing questions, such as the logic questions discussed earlier. Design your questions to fit your needs, but be sure to cover adequate ground. What is the purpose? What question are we trying to answer? What point

of view is being expressed? What assumptions are we or others making? What are the facts and data we know, and how do we know them? What are the concepts we're working with? What are the conclusions, and do they make sense? What are the implications?

## 4. Cultivate “Habits of Mind”

“Habits of mind” are the personal commitments, values, and standards you have about the principle of good thinking. Consider your intellectual commitments, values, and standards. Do you approach problems with an open mind, a respect for truth, and an inquiring attitude? Some good habits to have when thinking critically are being receptive to having your opinions changed, having respect for others, being independent and not accepting something is true until you've had the time to examine the available evidence, being fair-minded, having respect for a reason, having an inquiring mind, not making assumptions, and always, especially, questioning your own conclusions—in other words, developing an intellectual work ethic. Try to work these qualities into your daily life.



## 6. Why It Matters: Reading

### Why should we evaluate academic reading strategies?

Reading is fundamental to writing and research at University, but often gets overlooked – lecturers assume that students know how to read, and students assume there's only one way to read – but neither of these things is necessarily true! There are ways to read that can improve information processing, can help with building an argument, and importantly for many students, can save lots of time!! – Academic Literacy Workshops, University of Cape Town<sup>1</sup>

The passage above makes an important point: most of us assume we know how to read for school. However, methods that may have been fine in the past (skimming, quick reviews, relying upon class lectures or notes) won't hold up well as we move further into higher education.

This module defines a specific category of reading–academic reading–and discusses a range of skill sets and strategies that are specific to this type of reading.

It's helpful to remember that academic reading is an act of **performance**. Rather than sitting back and passively receiving information we read in college, we will be asked to directly act upon that information in some way. We will be quizzed or tested. We will

1. Hurst, Ellen, Ed. *Academic Literacy Workshops: A Handbook for Students and Instructors*. U of Capetown. 2011.

be asked to debate, analyze, or critique what we read. We will need to read closely, remember the text accurately, and compare it to other texts for style and content.

The following video addresses how academic reading is a key component of inter-related skills that demonstrate mastery of critical thinking.

**Requirements for Critical Thinking**

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<https://library.achievingthedream.org/westhillscenglish1a/?p=24>

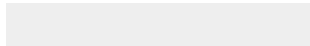
As this video points out, as a reader in college you will be asked to embrace a “healthy skepticism” for every idea you come in contact with. This will take energy and work—it’s much easier to accept what others tell us on face value than to critically assess each idea that comes our way. However, education in the fullest sense means developing the tools for this critical response, building it into an

automatic reflex that makes us thoughtful, engaged citizens of the world around us.



## Learning Outcomes

- Evaluate various types of reading material
- Evaluate general reading strategies
- Evaluate reading strategies for specialized texts
- Evaluate vocabulary usage
- Evaluate thesis ideas of texts
- Evaluate supporting claims of texts
- Evaluate use of logic and structure in texts
- Evaluate summary skills for reading comprehension



7.

## Varying Your Sentence Structure and Vocabulary

Effective writing includes variation of sentence structure, vocabulary, and other elements to keep the reader interested and engaged with the argument.

### *Learning Objectives*

Use varied sentence structure

### *Key Takeaways*

#### *Key Points*

- The tone, voice, and style of your writing are as important as the details you provide to support a thesis.
- Papers will be boring for the reader if every sentence uses the same structure. Some of the best ways to vary sentence format are by adding and rearranging clauses.

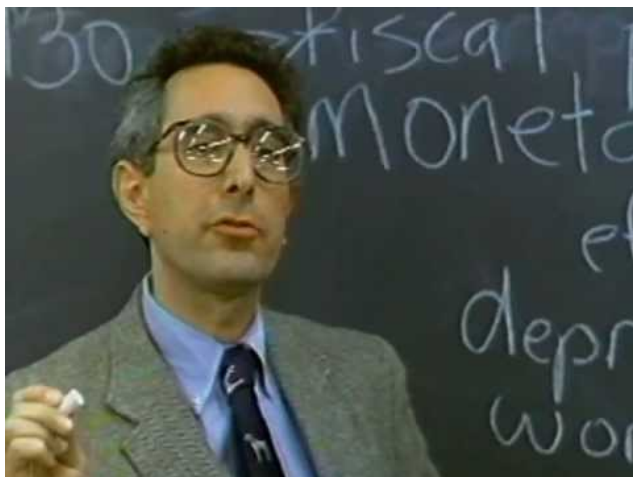
- Sentence length, sentence structure, sentence type, tone, vocabulary, transition words, and types of evidence can all be varied so that your argument is more convincing and your points more compelling to the reader.

### *Key Terms*

- **clause:** The smallest grammatical unit that can express a complete proposition.
- **tone:** The manner in which speech or writing is expressed.

Argumentation isn't just about what you say but how you say it. Even the most solid argument won't get far with a reader if the text isn't engaging. But how do we do that?

Perhaps the biggest secret to creating captivating writing is variation. Without it, your reader might fall asleep from boredom.



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<https://library.achievingthedream.org/westhillscenglish1a/?p=25>

**Anyone? Anyone?:** Variation is a tool that will help you engage your readers in the topic, so they don't end up slack-jawed and numb.

If you've ever been in a vibrant debate with someone you respected about beliefs you hold dear, you have a sense of just the kind of life we want to capture when we're writing. Learning, debating ideas, digging for the truth: these things are all fun! No need for "anyone" to be drooling on his desk.

If variation is key, what can we vary? We've discussed the importance of structure. Readers need to depend on the paper's structure to be able to follow the argument. The introduction, conclusion, body paragraphs with topic sentences and transitions are all essential. Within the structure, however, you can vary the following:



- sentence length
- sentence structure
- sentence type
- tone
- vocabulary
- transition words and categories
- types of evidence

You'll want to have reasons for the choices you make. Adding random rhetorical questions will sound strange, but if you ask the right question at the right time, it will make the reader think. The same will be true of all variation. There must be a good reason to choose a particular sentence structure or a new type of evidence.

There are no codified rules on how to vary sentence structure, nor are there lists of all the different types of phrasing you can use. The English language allows for so much flexibility that such a list would be never-ending. However, there are some aspects of writing that you should consider when looking for different sentence formats.

**Clauses:** The easiest way to vary sentence length and structure is with clauses. Multi-clause sentences can connect related ideas, provide additional detail, and vary the pattern of your language.

**Length:** Longer sentences are better suited for expressing complex thoughts. Shorter sentences, in contrast, are useful when you want to emphasize a concise point. Clauses can vary in length, too.

**Interrogatives:** When used sparingly, questions can catch your reader's attention. They also implicate your reader as a participant in your argument by asking them to think about how they would answer the question.

**Tone:** If you really want a sentence to stand out, you can change the tone of your writing. Using different tones can catch the reader's attention and liven up your work. That means you can be playful with your reader at times, sound demanding at times, and

cultivate empathy when that feels appropriate. Be careful that the tone you choose is appropriate for the subject matter.

Syntax variation cultivates interest. Start playing with structure. Try changing a sentence's language to make it sound different from the ones around it.

## Syntactical Variation

Here is an example of what a paragraph with a repetitive syntax can sound like:

"*Looking Backward* was popular in the late nineteenth century. Middle-class Americans liked its vision of society. The vision appealed to their consumption habits. Also, they liked the possibility of not being bothered by the poor."

Choppy? Uninteresting? Here's the rewritten version, with attention paid to sentence variation:

"The popularity of *Looking Backward* among middle-class Americans in the late nineteenth century can be traced to its vision of society. The novel presents a society that easily dispels the nuisance of poverty and working-class strife while maintaining the pleasure of middle-class consumptive habits."

What's different here? The rewrite simply combines the first two and the last two sentences and adds a bit of variation in vocabulary, but the difference is powerful. Of course, if all the sentences were compound like these, the paper would begin to sound either pretentious or exhausting. If this were your paper, you might want to make the next sentence a short one and get to your thesis statement soon.

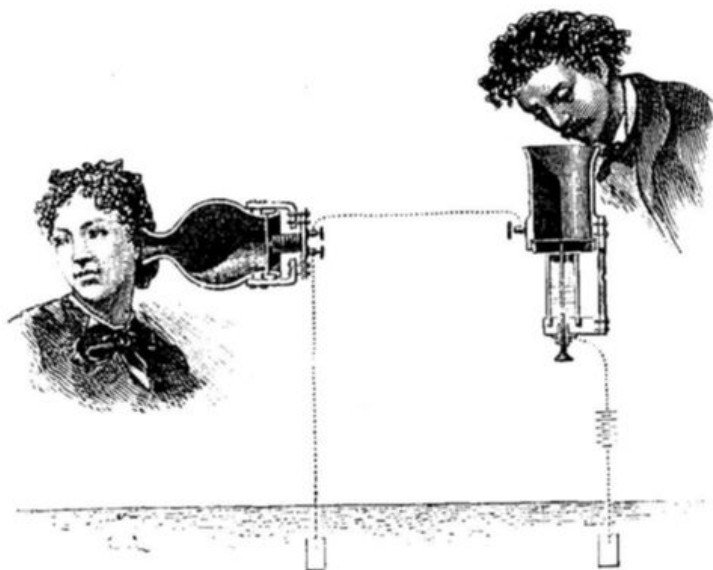
## Varying Vocabulary

One way to avoid appearing overly repetitive is to consult a thesaurus and use synonyms. However, when using synonyms, you should make sure that the word you choose means exactly what you think it means (“Penultimate,” for example, does not mean “the highest,” and there’s a difference between “elicit” and “illicit.”) Check the connotations of synonyms by looking up their definitions.

## Varying Transitions, Signal Words, Pointing Words, and Pronouns

Writers who are familiar with their own habits will sometimes research a word or phrase they typically overuse (“however,” “that said,” “moreover”) and replace some of those words with another transition, or they might rework a sentence to avoid using any transition words in that spot if they feel they’re overdoing it. Nouns, too, often get overused when pronouns would sound more natural. Don’t worry about this too much in the writing phase. You just want to get your thoughts on the page. But as you revise, keep an eye out for repetition and switch things up a bit to keep your paper interesting.

Introducing variation benefits not only your reader but also you, the writer. Conceiving of different ways to communicate essential elements of your argument will allow you to revisit what makes these elements essential and to consider the central argument you are making. Each variation is a chance to introduce nuance into your writing while driving your point home. However, variation should never be your main goal—don’t sacrifice audience comprehension to achieve stylistic virtuosity. You’ll just sound silly. The argument is the point.



**Engaging your reader in different ways:** Vary the types of sentences you use to keep your paper interesting.

## 8. How to Read Like a Writer

[Click here to view the \*How to Read Like a Writer\* chapter.](#)

## 9. Reading Games

Click [here](#) to view the *Reading Games: Strategies for Reading Scholarly Sources* chapter.

PART III

# APPLYING STRATEGIES TO CREATE ESSAYS





# 10. Thesis Statements

## What this handout is about

This handout describes what a thesis statement is, how thesis statements work in your writing, and how you can discover or refine one for your draft.

## Introduction

Writing in college often takes the form of persuasion—convincing others that you have an interesting, logical point of view on the subject you are studying. Persuasion is a skill you practice regularly in your daily life. You persuade your roommate to clean up, your parents to let you borrow the car, your friend to vote for your favorite candidate or policy. In college, course assignments often ask you to make a persuasive case in writing. You are asked to convince your reader of your point of view. This form of persuasion, often called academic argument, follows a predictable pattern in writing. After a brief introduction of your topic, you state your point of view on the topic directly and often in one sentence. This sentence is the thesis statement, and it serves as a summary of the argument you'll make in the rest of your paper .

## What is a thesis statement?

### A thesis statement:

- tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
- is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel.
- makes a claim that others might dispute.
- is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

If your assignment asks you to take a position or develop a claim about a subject, you may need to convey that position or claim in a thesis statement near the beginning of your draft. The assignment may not explicitly state that you need a thesis statement because your instructor may assume you will include one. When in doubt, ask your instructor if the assignment requires a thesis statement. When an assignment asks you to analyze, to interpret, to compare and contrast, to demonstrate cause and effect, or to take a stand on an issue, it is likely that you are being asked to develop a thesis and to support it persuasively. (Check out our handout on understanding assignments for more information.)

## How do I get a thesis?

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a “working thesis,” a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

Writers use all kinds of techniques to stimulate their thinking and to help them clarify relationships or comprehend the broader significance of a topic and arrive at a thesis statement. For more ideas on how to get started, see our handout on brainstorming.

## How do I know if my thesis is strong?

If there's time, run it by your instructor or make an appointment at the Writing Center to get some feedback. Even if you do not have time to get advice elsewhere, you can do some thesis evaluation of your own. When reviewing your first draft and its working thesis, ask yourself the following:

- *Do I answer the question?* Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that misses the focus of the question.
- *Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?* If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument.
- *Is my thesis statement specific enough?*

Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like “good” or “successful,” see if you could be more specific: *why* is something “good”; *what specifically* makes something “successful”?

- Does my thesis pass the “So what?” test? If a reader’s first response is, “So what?” then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.
- Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering? If your thesis and the body of your essay do not seem to go together, one of them has to change. It’s o.k. to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper. Remember, always reassess and revise your writing as necessary.
- Does my thesis pass the “how and why?” test? If a reader’s first response is “how?” or “why?” your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.

## Examples

Suppose you are taking a course on 19th-century America, and the instructor hands out the following essay assignment: Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War. You turn on the computer and type out the following:

*The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.*

This weak thesis restates the question without providing any additional information. You will expand on this new information in the body of the essay, but it is important that the reader know where you are heading. A reader of this weak thesis might think, “What reasons? How are they the same? How are they different?”

Ask yourself these same questions and begin to compare Northern and Southern attitudes (perhaps you first think, “The South believed slavery was right, and the North thought slavery was wrong”). Now, push your comparison toward an interpretation—why did one side think slavery was right and the other side think it was wrong? You look again at the evidence, and you decide that you are going to argue that the North believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld the Southern way of life. You write:

*While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.*

Now you have a working thesis! Included in this working thesis is a reason for the war and some idea of how the two sides disagreed over this reason. As you write the essay, you will probably begin to characterize these differences more precisely, and your working thesis may start to seem too vague. Maybe you decide that both sides fought for moral reasons, and that they just focused on different moral issues. You end up revising the working thesis into a final thesis that really captures the argument in your paper:

*While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.*

Compare this to the original weak thesis. This final thesis presents a way of *interpreting* evidence that illuminates the significance of the question. *Keep in mind that this is one of many possible interpretations of the Civil War—it is not the one and only right answer to the question.* There isn’t one right answer; there are only strong and weak thesis statements and strong and weak uses of evidence.

Let’s look at another example. Suppose your literature professor hands out the following assignment in a class on the American novel: Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn*. “This will be easy,” you think. “I loved *Huckleberry Finn*!” You grab a pad of paper and write:

*Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.*

Why is this thesis weak? Think about what the reader would expect from the essay that follows: you will most likely provide a general, appreciative summary of Twain's novel. The question did not ask you to summarize; it asked you to analyze. Your professor is probably not interested in your opinion of the novel; instead, she wants you to think about *why* it's such a great novel— what do Huck's adventures tell us about life, about America, about coming of age, about race relations, etc.? First, the question asks you to pick an aspect of the novel that you think is important to its structure or meaning—for example, the role of storytelling, the contrasting scenes between the shore and the river, or the relationships between adults and children. Now you write:

*In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.*

Here's a working thesis with potential: you have highlighted an important aspect of the novel for investigation; however, it's still not clear what your analysis will reveal. Your reader is intrigued, but is still thinking, "So what? What's the point of this contrast? What does it signify?" Perhaps you are not sure yet, either. That's fine—begin to work on comparing scenes from the book and see what you discover. Free write, make lists, jot down Huck's actions and reactions. Eventually you will be able to clarify for yourself, and then for the reader, why this contrast matters. After examining the evidence and considering your own insights, you write:

*Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature.*

This final thesis statement presents an interpretation of a literary work based on an analysis of its content. Of course, for the essay itself to be successful, you must now present evidence from the novel that will convince the reader of your interpretation.

## Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Anson, Chris M. and Robert A. Schwegler. *The Longman Handbook for Writers*. 2nd ed. New York: Longman, 2000.

Hairston, Maxine and John J. Ruskiewicz. *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers*. 4th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

Lunsford, Andrea and Robert Connors. *The St. Martin's Handbook*. 3rd ed. New York: St. Martin's, 1995.

Rosen, Leonard J. and Laurence Behrens. *The Allyn & Bacon Handbook*. 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997.

## II. Organizing an Essay

There are many elements that must come together to create a good essay. The topic should be clear and interesting. The author's voice should come through, but not be a distraction. There should be no errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, or capitalization. Organization is one of the most important elements of an essay that is often overlooked. An organized essay is clear, focused, logical and effective.

Organization makes it easier to understand the thesis. To illustrate, imagine putting together a bike. Having all of the necessary tools, parts, and directions will make the job easier to complete than if the parts are spread across the room and the tools are located all over the house. The same logic applies to writing an essay. When all the parts of an essay are in some sort of order, it is both easier for the writer to put the essay together and for the reader to understand the main ideas presented in the essay.

Photo of a white kitchen lit with windows. Rows of glass jars line shelves over the countertop, and a hanging rack of pans and pots appears beneath that. Although organization makes tasks easier to complete, there is not just one way of organizing. For example, there are hundreds of ways to organize a kitchen. The glasses can go in the cupboard to the right of the sink or to the left of it. The silverware can be placed in any number of drawers. Pots and pans can be hung on hooks over the island in the center of the kitchen or hidden in cupboard space beneath the counter. It does not matter as much where these items are placed, but that they are organized in a logical manner. Essays, like kitchens, can also be organized in different ways. There are three common strategies; however, it is important to note that these are broad



categories. Variations of these strategies can be used, and they may be combined with one another.<sup>1</sup>

### *Strategy 1. Reverse Outlining*

If your paper is about Huckleberry Finn, a working thesis might be: “In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore.” However, you might feel uncertain if your paper really follows through on the thesis as promised.

This paper may benefit from reverse outlining. Your aim is to create an outline of what you’ve already written, as opposed to the kind of outline that you make before you begin to write. The reverse outline will help you evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of both your organization and your argument.

#### **Read the draft and take notes**

Read your draft over, and as you do so, make very brief notes in the margin about what each paragraph is trying to accomplish.

#### **Outline the Draft**

After you’ve read through the entire draft, transfer the brief notes to a fresh sheet of paper, listing them in the order in which they appear. The outline might look like this:

- Paragraph 1: Intro
- Paragraph 2: Background on Huck Finn
- Paragraph 3: River for Huck and Jim
- Paragraph 4: Shore and laws for Huck and Jim
- Paragraph 5: Shore and family, school
- Paragraph 6: River and freedom, democracy

## 1. Organizing an Essay

- Paragraph 7: River and shore similarities
- Paragraph 8: Conclusion

### **Examine the Outline**

Look for repetition and other organizational problems. In the reverse outline above, there's a problem somewhere in Paragraphs 3-7, where the potential for repetition is high because you keep moving back and forth between river and shore.

### **Re-examine the Thesis, the Outline, and the Draft Together**

Look closely at the outline and see how well it supports the argument in your thesis statement. You should be able to see which paragraphs need rewriting, reordering or rejecting. You may find some paragraphs are tangential or irrelevant or that some paragraphs have more than one idea and need to be separated.

## *Strategy 2. Talk It Out*

If your paper is about President Roosevelt's New Deal, and your



working

thesis is: "The New Deal was actually a conservative defense of

American capitalism.” This strategy forces to explain your thinking to someone else.

***Find a Friend, your T.A., your Professor, a relative, a Writing Center tutor, or any sympathetic and intelligent listener.***

People are more accustomed to talking than writing, so it might be beneficial to explain your thinking out loud to someone before organizing the essay. Talking to someone about your ideas may also relieve pressure and anxiety about your topic.

***Explain What Your Paper Is About***

Pay attention to how you explain your argument verbally. It is likely that the order in which you present your ideas and evidence to your listener is a logical way to arrange them in your paper. Let’s say that you begin (as you did above) with the working thesis. As you continue to explain, you realize that even though your draft doesn’t mention “private enterprise” until the last two paragraphs, you begin to talk about it right away. This fact should tell you that you probably need to discuss private enterprise near the beginning.

***Take Notes***

You and your listener should keep track of the way you explain your paper. If you don’t, you probably won’t remember what you’ve talked about. Compare the structure of the argument in the notes to the structure of the draft you’ve written.

***Get Your Listener to Ask Questions***

As the writer, it is in your interest to receive constructive criticism so that your draft will become stronger. You want your listener to say things like, “Would you mind explaining that point about being both conservative and liberal again? I wasn’t sure I followed” or “What kind of economic principle is government relief? Do you consider it a good or bad thing?” Questions you can’t answer may signal an unnecessary tangent or an area needing further development in the draft. Questions you need to think about will probably make you realize that you need to explain more your paper.

In short, you want to know if your listener fully understands you; if not, chances are your readers won't, either.<sup>2</sup>

### *Strategy 3. Paragraphs*

Readers need paragraph breaks in order to organize their reading. Writers need paragraph breaks to organize their writing. A paragraph break indicates a change in focus, topic, specificity, point of view, or rhetorical strategy. The paragraph should have one main idea; the topic sentence expresses this idea. The paragraph should be organized either spatially, chronologically, or logically. The movement may be from general to specific, specific to general, or general to specific to general. All paragraphs must contain developed ideas: comparisons, examples, explanations, definitions, causes, effects, processes, or descriptions. There are several concluding strategies which may be combined or used singly, depending on the assignment's length and purpose:

- a summary of the main points
- a hook and return to the introductory "attention-getter" to frame the essay
- a web conclusion which relates the topic to a larger context of a greater significance
- a proposal calling for action or further examination of the topic
- a question which provokes the reader
- a quote
- a vivid image or compelling narrative<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Reorganizing Your Draft

## 3. Parts of an Essay

### **Put Paragraphs into Sections**

You should be able to group your paragraphs so that they make a particular point or argument that supports your thesis. If any paragraph, besides the introduction or conclusion, cannot fit into any section, you may have to ask yourself whether it belongs in the essay.

#### ***Re-examine each Section***

Assuming you have more than one paragraph under each section, try to distinguish between them. Perhaps you have two arguments in favor of that can be distinguished from each other by author, logic, ethical principles invoked, etc. Write down the distinctions — they will help you formulate clear topic sentences.

#### ***Re-examine the Entire Argument***

Which section do you want to appear first? Why? Which Second? Why? In what order should the paragraphs appear in each section? Look for an order that makes the strongest possible argument.<sup>4</sup>

## **4. Reorganizing Your Draft**

# 12. Effective Thesis Statements

## What is a Thesis Statement?

- A thesis statement tells a reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion. Such a statement is also called an “argument,” a “main idea,” or a “controlling idea.”
- A good thesis has two parts. It should tell what you plan to argue, and it should “telegraph” how you plan to argue—that is, what particular support for your claim is going where in your essay
- A standard place for your thesis is at the end of the introductory paragraph.
- A thesis is an interpretation of a subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel that others might dispute.
- A strong thesis not only grabs the interest of your reader, who now wants to see you support your unique interpretation, it also provides a focus for your argument, one to which every part of your paper refers in the development of your position.
- A thesis keeps the writer centered on the matter at hand and reduces the risk of intellectual wandering. Likewise, a thesis provides the reader with a “road map,” clearly laying out the intellectual route ahead.
- A thesis statement avoids the first person (“I believe,” “In my opinion”).

## A simple equation for what a thesis might look like this:

What you plan to argue + How you plan to argue it = Thesis  
Specific Topic+ Attitude/Angle/Argument=Thesis

### Steps To Write Effective Thesis Statement

- Choose a prompt or, if appropriate, select a topic: *television violence and children*
- Read the prompt carefully or, if appropriate, ask an interesting question:
  - ***What are the effects of television violence on children?***
- Revise the prompt or question into a preliminary or “working” thesis:
  - ***Violence on television increases aggressive behavior in children.***
- Avoid general phrasing and/or sweeping words such as “all” or “none” or “every”.
- Lead the reader toward the topic sentences (the subtopics needed to prove the thesis).
- Anticipate the counter-arguments. Once you have a working thesis, you should think about what might be said against it. This will help you to refine your thesis, and it will also make you think of the arguments that you’ll need to refute later on in your essay. (Every argument has a counter-argument. If yours doesn’t, then it’s not an argument—it may be a fact, or an opinion, but it is not an argument.)
  - ***Violence on television increases aggressive behavior in children.***
- This statement is **on its way** to being a thesis. However, it is

too easy to imagine possible counter- arguments. For example, an observer of societal trends may believe that parenting or easy access to weapons are important factors in youth violence. If you *complicate* your thesis by anticipating the counter-argument, you'll strengthen your argument, as shown in the sentence below.

- ***While poor parenting and easy access to weapons may act as contributory factors, in fact when children are exposed to television violence they become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, are more fearful of the world around them, and are more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.***

## The Components of an Effective Thesis Statement

- You can't just pluck a thesis out of thin air. Even if you have a terrific insight concerning a topic, it won't be worth much unless you can logically and persuasively support it in the body of your essay. A thesis is the evolutionary result of a thinking process, not a miraculous creation. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment.
- An effective thesis statement fulfills the following criteria
  - **Substantial**– Your thesis should be a claim for which it is easy to answer every reader's question: "So what?"
  - **Supportable** – A thesis must be a claim that you can prove with the evidence at hand (e.g., evidence from your texts or from your research). Your claim should not be outlandish, nor should it be mere personal opinion or preference (e.g., "Frederick Douglass is my favorite historical figure.") It tackles a subject that could be adequately covered in the format of the project assigned.



- **Precise** – It is focused and specific. A strong thesis proves a point without discussing everything. It clearly asserts your own conclusion based on evidence. Note: Be flexible. It is perfectly okay to change your thesis!
- **Arguable** – It should be contestable, proposing an arguable point with which people could reasonably disagree.
- **Relevant** – If you are responding to an assignment, the thesis should answer the question your teacher has posed. In order to stay focused, pay attention to the task words in the assignment: summarize, argue, compare/contrast, etc.
- **Aware of Counters**– It anticipates and refutes the counter-arguments.

**The best thesis statement is a balance of specific details and concise language. Your goal is to articulate an argument in detail without burdening the reader with too much information.**

## Questions To Review Your Thesis

- “Do I answer the question?” This might seem obvious, but it’s worth asking. No matter how intriguing or dazzling, a thesis that doesn’t answer the question is not a good thesis!
- “Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?” If not, then you probably do not have a strong argument. Theses that are too vague often have this problem. If your thesis contains vague words like “good” or “successful,” see if you could be more specific: why is something “good”; what makes something “successful”?
- Would anyone possible care about this thesis? So What? Does your thesis present a position or an interpretation worth pursuing? If a reader’s first response is, “So what?” then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.

- “Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering?” Just as a thesis that doesn’t answer the question ultimately fails, so does a thesis that isn’t properly supported with evidence and reasoning.
- Does my thesis statement adequately address the direction words of the prompt: summarize, argue, compare/contrast, analyze, discuss, etc.?

## Myths about Thesis Statements

- Every paper requires one. Assignments that ask you to write personal responses or to explore a subject don’t want you to seem to pre-judge the issues. Essays of literary interpretation often want you to be aware of many effects rather than seeming to box yourself into one view of the text.
- A thesis statement must come at the end of the first paragraph. This is a natural position for a statement of focus, but it’s not the only one. Some theses can be stated in the opening sentences of an essay; others need a paragraph or two of introduction; others can’t be fully formulated until the end.
- A thesis statement must be one sentence in length, no matter how many clauses it contains. Clear writing is more important than rules like these. Use two or three sentences if you need them. A complex argument may require a whole tightly-knit paragraph to make its initial statement of position.
- You can’t start writing an essay until you have a perfect thesis statement. It may be advisable to draft a hypothesis or tentative thesis statement near the start of a big project, but changing and refining a thesis is a main task of thinking your way through your ideas as you write a paper. And some essay projects need to explore the question in depth without being locked in before they can provide even a tentative answer.
- A thesis statement must give three points of support. It should

indicate that the essay will explain and give evidence for its assertion, but points don't need to come in any specific number.

## Progressively Complex Thesis Statements

Thesis Statement	Evaluation
The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.	The worst thesis imaginable (other than non-existent). You've said nothing of value.
While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions.	A good pre-draft thesis. Not a bad start at all. Here's the catch, and the time consuming part of the process. As you write, your argument may become more refined or changed. When it does, so should the thesis.
While there were many underlying causes of the Civil War, three factors converged to make conflict inevitable: the issue of slavery, the idea of states' rights, and the fight to control the future of the West.	A solid preview of your argument and the main points you intend to make. This would be a strong approach for a persuasive or exemplification essay.
While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own rights to property and self-government.	Bien! The thesis statement is nuanced, recognizing the existence of an opposing point of view, while strongly defending your point. It is relatively specific, yet concise—and doesn't make the reader want to stop reading.

# 13. Incorporating Objections and Opposing Views

## The Importance of Addressing Opposing Views

When you consider and counteract opposing arguments, you strengthen your own argument.

### *Learning Objectives*

Match an argument to a corresponding counterargument

### *Key Takeaways*

#### *Key Points*

- An argument is a written or spoken form of defense. An argument should take a stance about a particular point of view, thesis, or claim.
- Try to anticipate what objections your readers might have to your argument, and try to understand why they might object.

- An academic argument supports its claim with sound reasoning, research, and evidence such as facts, statistics, and quoted opinions from authorities on both sides of the argument.
- A skeptical reader has a doubtful, questioning attitude, and expects a thorough presentation of logical reasoning and evidence. This can be a helpful audience to keep in mind when writing your paper.
- In the research phase, gathering evidence against your argument will help you refute counterarguments in the writing stage.

### *Key Terms*

- **counterargument:** An argument that is opposed to another argument.
- **argument:** An attempt to persuade someone of something, by giving reasons or evidence for accepting a particular conclusion.
- **refute:** To prove something (a statement, theory, claim, argument) or someone wrong.

An argument must, by definition, take a stance on an issue and provide evidence for a particular conclusion. However, writers may neglect the next step, which is just as important: discussing opposing viewpoints and providing counterarguments.

## Sincere Exploration of Counterarguments

Just as a criminal trial is ostensibly about finding out the truth of what happened during the crime, consider that the aim of your paper is to get to the truth of the issue you're addressing. There is far less satisfaction in making a convincing argument if objections are left unanswered and evidence is swept under the rug. You wouldn't want your verdict to be overturned on appeal!

## Research Both Sides

The best way to counteract an opposing viewpoint is to anticipate what an opponent might say. When researching the topic, then, don't limit yourself to sympathetic sources; find sources that disagree with your argument. Take note of their rationale and use of evidence. That way, you will be familiar enough with these opposing viewpoints to argue against them. When you encounter dissenting opinions, try to figure out why smart and rational people would hold those positions. What evidence do they look at? How do they interpret that evidence? Why might they disagree with your point of view?

When we're passionate about a topic, emotions can sometimes cloud our rationality. We tend to have disdain for opposing arguments and aren't open to even hearing what those on the other side have to say. To move yourself out of this emotional realm and back into the realm of the well-reasoned argument, try taking a strategy from debate tournaments. Debaters prepare for tournaments by gathering information on both sides of a topic. They actually don't know which side they'll be arguing until the debate begins, and so they must be just as prepared to argue the side they don't agree with as the one they believe in. As you're researching,

then, take the debater's approach to gathering information so you'll be very well-informed about the opposing views.



**Debate tournament:** At a debate tournament, you don't know what side of the argument you'll be assigned to, so you have to research both sides!

## Understand the Other Point of View

When you encounter these dissenting opinions, get curious. Try to figure out why smart and rational people would hold those positions. What evidence do they look at? How do they interpret that evidence? What life experiences might lead them to disagree with your point of view?

For example, a person who has grown up hunting in a community that has never experienced gun violence might have a very different perspective on gun control than someone whose child was the victim of a shooting. During the research phase, you'll want to have a respectful vision of both these people in your mind to build an

argument that might help increase the understanding of where the other is coming from.

Then, when you begin structuring your argument, imagine how your skeptical reader might react to your thesis statement and each of your claims. Imagine that this reader is smart, informed, has thought carefully about the issue, and has reached a totally different conclusion. Try to persuade this reader; work hard to demonstrate why your position is more convincing than the alternatives.

For example, to begin discussing the legalization of physician aid-in-dying with an audience that may be initially averse to the idea, you might begin with something like this: “The impending death of a loved one, particularly a person who can no longer communicate for herself, can

pose intense ethical and emotional questions for those designated to make medical decisions for the patient. Hastening death can seem antithetical to the goals of medicine, and the artificial extension of life through invasive and/or risky medical procedures often does not provide an easier alternative. So, how might one go about making such fundamental decisions?”



**Rugby:** Anticipating your opponents’ objections can help you structure your arguments more soundly.

## Prove Your Point

Introducing opposing viewpoints is necessary, but do not stop there. The burden of proof is on you, as the author of the argument. If you fail to neutralize a common objection, readers will have an excuse to reject your argument. Just as you built your own



argument, to refute opposing views, you'll need to include evidence from research studies, statistics, and quoted opinions from experts.

The strongest arguments are those which carefully consider all perspectives in an attempt to find the most reasonable view of the issue. Your readers will deeply appreciate your efforts because they show respect for both the seriousness of your mission and for the readers themselves. Enjoy the process!

## Techniques for Acknowledging Opposing Views

You can boost your credibility by acknowledging specific sources who disagree with your position, then effectively refuting their arguments.

### *Learning Objectives*

Modify language to be neutral in tone when presenting a counterargument

### *Key Takeaways*

#### *Key Points*

- If the opposing view that you are considering and

counteracting comes from another author, be sure to introduce the author and the point of view in a neutral way.

- Neutral language is not emotionally charged, biased, or polemical. Use neutral language when you present opposing viewpoints.
- Examples of neutral words are “contends,” “argues,” “suggests,” “admits,” “claims,” and “believes.”
- You can introduce counterarguments with direct quotations from an opposing expert by paraphrasing, by offering a rhetorical example, or by offering a conditional statement.
- Satire can be used in less formal essays to inject humor and relax the reader’s defenses.
- Using straw-man counterarguments and weakened oppositional statements, while somewhat tempting, will not serve to strengthen your own argument but will severely weaken it by causing the reader to lose respect for it.

### *Key Terms*

- **credibility:** Reputation impacting one’s ability to be believed.
- **neutral:** Favoring neither the supporting nor the opposing viewpoint of a topic of debate; unbiased.
- **opposition:** An opposite or contrasting position.
- **concession:** A literary device in which one acknowledges the merits of an opposing argument.
- **straw man:** An insubstantial concept, idea,

endeavor, or argument, particularly one deliberately set up to be weakly supported, so that it can be easily knocked down; especially to impugn the strength of any related thing or idea.

Making a strong argument includes answering any of the potential objections that may form in a reader's mind. Your job during the research phase is to find counterarguments and material to refute them, and in the drafting phase to construct your argument in a way that incorporates these objections and counterarguments. We'll examine both phases here.

## Finding Credible Sources for Counterarguments

You can boost your credibility by acknowledging specific sources who disagree with your position. If you summarize opposing views without attaching them to actual writers, it may appear as though you haven't done your research. However, if you cite counterarguments from experts in the field, and then work to refute those arguments effectively, you can lend authority to your own argument.

As you're researching, spend some time putting in search terms as if you were arguing for the opposition. If you consistently come from your side of the issue, you may miss articles by some of the stronger opponents. For example, if you're arguing for hate-crime legislation and your search terms use only language related to that, you may find counterarguments based on free speech, but you may exclude those that oppose legislation on religious grounds. Beginning your search can be as simple as putting the question

into a search engine: “Why would anyone oppose hate-crime legislation?”

Of course, you don’t want to stop there. Just as with your own argument, you’ll want to find the best thinkers on the opposing side of the argument. Follow the path of each objection to discover its roots. Gather quotes summarizing their viewpoints and then go digging to find statistics and other research that both back and counter their claims.

If your mind is changed in the process, so be it! You can change your thesis and claims and argue for the other side of the issue. Either way, you’ll be gathering the best information from both sides of the argument to present to your audience.

## Presenting Counterarguments in Your Paper

There are several ways to introduce to your reader the counterarguments you’ve uncovered: quoting a source for the counterargument, paraphrasing a source, or using your own words to offer a rhetorical example or conditional statement. Whichever way you choose to bring the counterargument into the discussion, however, you’ll want to use neutral language.

## Using Neutral Language

Make it clear that you are presenting someone else’s viewpoint, but don’t use emotionally charged, biased, or polemical language to summarize it. Don’t dismiss your opposition from the outset with language like this: “John Smith naively argues...” Instead, you could say, “John Smith contends,” and then summarize John Smith’s view. You can go on to explain exactly why Smith’s opinion is naive—but make sure you give it a fair shot first. Here are some examples of

neutral verbs you can use to introduce another author's opposing view: "contends," "argues," "suggests," "admits," "claims," "believes."

There are many valid ways to introduce an opposing view, but do try to present it in a neutral manner before you shoot it down. The more your readers believe that you are being fair to your opponents, the more likely they are to be open to your refutation.

## Quotations

You can quote an expert in the field who has publicly objected to the your thesis. Or you can quote a politician or another public figure who has recently brought up the issue (keeping in mind that this latter option dates your paper), as long as you do it respectfully. For example:

"Raymond Rodriguez, arguing in 'The Social Contract' (Summer, 1992) for closing the Mexican border to immigration, suggests that 'Regulating immigration is as important as enacting agreements to control trade and pollution of the environment—and for many of the same reasons. The violation of a nation's territorial integrity, its safety and well-being, cannot be tolerated.' Let's look at each of these concerns in turn."

You'll notice first that the author has an Hispanic surname, which lends ethos to his perspective. You'll also notice that the publication and date is included, so a reader can quickly and easily find the original source material. A reader might want to verify what you quote here and also see if you've manipulated the context in any way. (A reader might be wondering, "Did he really just compare immigrants to pollution?") You've presented his words respectfully, however, allowing them to speak for themselves. And the last sentence tells the reader you will deal with each of the concerns—violation of territorial integrity, safety, and well-being—in your refutation.

An advantage of using quotations is that you are allowing the

opposition to speak for itself. Your reader can't scoff that you're offering an inaccurate summary of the argument, because you are using the opposing expert's words.

## Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a similar approach but allows you to contextualize the comment. You will want to resist the temptation to skew the comment's meaning or to editorialize!

"Jones contends that Theseus serves as a counterpoint to Oberon and Titania, acting as a just and righteous monarch instead of falling sway to whims and personal desires."

The author of this paper has already introduced the referenced expert and is here introducing a new portion of Jones's counterargument. It's presented reasonably and respectfully.

"Of course, there is a point to be made that nuclear energy creates less pollution than using coal or oil."

This is called a concession. You are conceding that the opposing argument is not completely false. Of course, you will go on to explain why this counterargument is not conclusive, but as you introduce it, you show that you understand the logical and rational basis for the argument.

## Using a Rhetorical Example or Conditional Statement

Another way to present a counterargument is to introduce it in your own words in the form of an example. In doing this, you're acting as a proxy for your readers, voicing their potential objections, hopefully at just the moment those objections arise in their minds.

"All this talk about tolerance and the possibility of rehabilitation is

nice in theory, but what if it was your own parent or child who was killed? Wouldn't the meaning of a just society depend, then, on the court acting on your behalf?"

In this example, the writer is putting himself in his reader's place, voicing one of the most common and understandable objections to his thesis. He has placed this objection just after his claim that all people should be given the opportunity for redemption, because he knows that that's the claim that is most likely to ignite this counterargument in the reader's mind. It's a rhetorical example (someone killing a loved one) in the form of a series of questions.

A conditional statement (if x, then y) gives the reader's objections a voice in the context of the writer's argument

"If all people suddenly became vegan in order to save the planet, would that create an overpopulation of livestock that would then do even more damage to the planet?"

Here, the writer approaches concession by acknowledging that it makes sense to at least consider this counterargument. If *this* is true, then *that* may be true.

While all of the above examples use a serious and respectful tone to introduce counterarguments, there is another option that can be effective, depending on your audience and your intentions.

## Using Satire as a Refutation Strategy

Satire is a humorous tone that can be deployed in summarizing a position in order to not only draw out its shortcomings, but also to correct or change the shortcomings of the position. It is less likely to be used in academic writing.

For example, in a popular (as opposed to academic or professional) essay advocating for strictly enforced leash laws in cities, you might write something like this:

"While it may seem like an act of pet-friendly beneficence and trust to allow your mutt to roam free in the streets, exercising his

right to sniff and bite whomever he pleases, unrestrained animals in public places ultimately pose a potential threat to the safety of pedestrians.”

Well-done satire can make the reader smile, perhaps even if he or she is one of the pet-friendly owners referenced in the paragraph. It's good for us to laugh at ourselves, and when we do so, we can relax our defenses and open up to the opposing argument.

The trick is to use this technique without alienating readers, and that is not an easy balance. If your reader feels mocked, you've lost him. And even if your reader agrees with your thesis, she may be turned off completely by the lack of respect for other readers.

You can poke fun and be respectful at the same time. You'll just need to use this technique with caution and care.

## The Temptation to Weaken the Opposing Argument

You may be tempted to weaken an objection to your argument by turning it into a straw man, or a flimsy version of the original point. A straw-man argument can make a point overly simplistic, describe an incomplete concept or take a point out of context. You may have heard talk-radio hosts and opinion columnists employ this strategy. This tactic, however, results in the unfair labeling of others' arguments as uninformed, feeble, or otherwise unworthy of a considerate response. In truth, the straw man is a well-known tactic, and readers can detect it quite easily. If you shortchange the opposing viewpoint, your readers will suspect that you are trying to compensate for shortcomings in your own argument.

Your argument will be much stronger if you present opposing viewpoints in a sympathetic light. Compare the following examples:

“Students claim that they cheat on tests because they are too busy to study. In reality, students can find the time to study if they learn time-management skills.”



“Students face many time constraints: between work and family obligations, social responsibilities, sports, clubs, and the expectations of professors, who all think their class should be the top priority, students can have trouble finding time to study for all of their tests. Some students admit that they see cheating as the only way to reconcile their conflicting obligations. However, students can find the time to study if they work on their time-management skills.”

The second example presents the argument more sympathetically and realistically. It acknowledges that students may face legitimate difficulties as they try to find time to study for all of their classes. Clearly, in the second example, the writer has considered this issue from the students’ perspective, and has attempted to find a solution that takes their concerns into account.

You’ll want to present counterarguments to your thesis in ways that respect those who disagree. That includes researching to find the thought leaders on the opposing side of your topic, presenting their arguments in an honest light, and then moving into respectful refutation.

## Refuting Your Opposition

After you present the likely objections to your argument, you can show your readers why they should be willing to take your side.

### *Learning Objectives*

Outline the process for refuting an argument

## *Key Takeaways*

### *Key Points*

- Consider and counter opposing viewpoints in order to strengthen your own argument.
- Counter these objections by showing your reader that your position is more reasonable than the opposing position.
- It is important to clearly, completely, and respectfully state the opposing view.
- There are various ways to refute counterarguments in your paper, and selecting one will depend on your topic, your audience, and space/time limitations.
- In each refutation paragraph, you'll want to state your opponent's argument, clearly state your objection to that argument, support your objection with evidence and supportive statements, and then conclude with a comparison of the ideas.
- During the revision process, you'll need to look for redundancy of information in claim and refutation paragraphs and check the structure for flow.

### *Key Terms*

- **viewpoint:** The position from which something is observed or considered; an angle, outlook, or point of view.

Now that you've built a strong foundation of credibility by presenting the likely objections and reasoned opposition to your argument (respectfully, of course!), you can show your readers the flaws in these counterarguments. Remember, skeptical readers need to be convinced that your position is more reasonable than their own, and so your refutation will need to be both accurate and thorough. In the process, you'll win support from both sides of the argument for your reasonable approach.

## Where to Address Counterarguments

Depending on your writing style and material, your argument could follow various structural formats:

- Present your own argument first, and then present and counteract the opposing viewpoints.

This structure has the advantage of putting your argument in people's minds first, so it can be useful when you are space-limited or your audience is time-limited.

- Present the opposition's views first, and then prove that your argument is more reasonable than the opposing views.

This strategy gets objections out in the open right away, which can be especially useful for radical or unexpected thesis statements. The approach here is, "I know what you're thinking, but hang in there, and you'll see where I'm coming from."

- Alternate back and forth between your argument and opposing points.

Here, you acknowledge each objection as it's likely to arise in the reader's mind. You are anticipating what each claim might bring up

for the reader and handling it immediately, so he or she has no opportunity to get hung up on the objection.

## Structuring Your Refutation

There are four basic parts to a refutation of an opposing argument: you introduce the counterargument, state your objection to it, offer evidence to support your view, and draw a clear conclusion by comparing the viewpoints head to head.

### Introduction

“The opposition says ...”

Present the view accurately and fairly, and possibly concede that there is reason or merit to this perspective. For example: “Opponents of the Animal Welfare Act claimed that the use of animal subjects in drug testing was absolutely necessary to save human lives.”

### Objection

“However ...”

Here, you state your objection to the view—the reason the reader should not accept the opposition’s viewpoint. It may be in the form of a question or statement. For example: “Is it accurate, however, to say that intelligent people are not susceptible to brainwashing?” Notice the use of the word “accurate.” While the counterargument might make some rational sense, have research and experience validated the assumption? You could phrase it as a statement, as

opposed to a question. How are they different? Would the statement be more direct?

## Support for Objection

“Because ...”

Support your objection with high-quality evidence, expert opinion, and solid reasoning: “The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that in 2005, punitive damages were awarded to only 5 percent of plaintiffs in civil trials.” Here, the writer uses both a widely respected source and statistics that refute the counterclaim. Colorful language, appeals to emotion, and rhetorical devices hold little weight against a clearly fleshed-out position supported by appropriate examples and solid evidence offered by reputable sources.

## Conclusion

“Therefore ...”

In this fourth step, the conflict must be resolved. You’ve introduced two valid viewpoints. Why is yours the stronger one? “While job creation programs may indeed increase the nation’s short-term financial burden, the strategy of putting people back to work has consistently been proven to create a stronger economic and social fabric in the long run.” Concluding statements are not simply restatements of the claim but actual comparisons of the two approaches with a conclusion as to why one argument is superior.

## Revising Counterarguments and Refutations

In the revision stage, you'll want to look at the balance of the paper. Rather than addressing every possible objection to your thesis, you may decide at this point to eliminate the lesser objections, so as not to overload the paper with counterarguments.

You'll also need to look for redundancy. Make sure your claims and your refutations are not repetitive. If you have a refutation that simply repeats one of your claims, see if you can find a different way to refute the opposing argument. Your reader will lose interest the minute you get repetitive.

Finally, ensure that if your introduction and conclusion include counterargument scenarios (images, quotes, stories), they're consistent with what you've found in the research.



**Objection!** To be an ace arguer, you'll need to clearly state your objections to your opponent's arguments and support your objections with evidence.

# 14. Argument and persuasion

[Click here to view Chapter 13: Argument and Persuasion.](#)

# 15. Critical Thinking

Critical thinking helps readers evaluate the credibility of an argument.

## *LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how thinking critically about another author's work can improve your own
- Judge whether or not an author's argument is solid or in need of improvement using critical thinking

## *EXAMPLES*

- Critical thinking is a vital skill for students taking writing-intensive courses in unfamiliar disciplines. The humanities,



natural sciences, and social sciences all utilize an arsenal of critical thinking skills, analytical methods, and theoretical material; critical thinking enables you to apply theories or methods from your area of expertise to another, and vice versa. You may even find commonalities between your discipline and the unfamiliar subject that you can use to expand the scope of your work or add a fresh perspective.

- Discovering a flaw in another source's argument can inspire great paper ideas. An argument that directly engages with other writers in your discipline will make your work automatically relevant. This approach also demonstrates an active engagement with the current discourse surrounding your topic. As you read other sources, ask analytical questions to see if you can uncover any flaws or inconsistencies: Are key terms clearly defined, and do you agree with those definitions? Are the writers experts in their field? Upon what assumptions and theoretical frameworks do the argument rely? Are these assumptions and frameworks appropriate for the discipline? Is the methodology valid? Does the argument have consistent logic? Are the style and organization appropriate, or do they obscure certain details? What is the intended audience for this work? What is

the author's intent in writing this work?  
Does the author have any ulterior motives  
or conflicts of interest that might  
undermine credibility?

- French philosopher Michel Foucault based his famous book, *The History of Sexuality*, on his belief that the popular “repressive hypothesis” is a flawed. The repressive hypothesis suggests that the nineteenth century marked a rapid escalation in our centuries-old progression toward repressing sexual drives and discouraging conversations about sexuality. Foucault contends that, while references to sexuality became increasingly coded and symbolic in the nineteenth century, discussion of sexual matters actually increased. He cites examples of unprecedented expectations for official sexual disclosures in the nineteenth century, such as the Catholic Church's focus on increasing the frequency and formal importance of confession. Foucault mocks his contemporaries as the “Other Victorians,” unable to stop talking about how they cannot talk about sexuality.
- Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' research plays an important role in Jacques Derrida's landmark book *Of Grammatology*. The connection between the two thinkers is not immediately obvious: Derrida is primarily known for his theories about

literary interpretation and linguistics; Derrida finds common ground with Lévi-Strauss, however, in their shared interest in the relationship between speech and writing. When he discusses Lévi-Strauss' field research on native languages, Derrida reveals assumptions about the origin of language in a way that enriches his own text-based approach.

In researching the status quo, you will probably come across work by other writers that you would like to use in your own writing. This can be a very successful argument strategy when done properly. Using sources well means doing more than just repeating what other authors say; you need to engage with your source text – comment on it, argue with it, analyze it, expand upon it. To do any of those things, you need to start with a thorough and accurate understanding of the other authors' work.

This level of understanding begins with thinking critically about the texts you are reading. In this case, “critically” does not mean that you are looking for what is wrong with a work (although in the course of your critical process, you may well do that). Instead, thinking critically means approaching a work as if you were a critic or commentator. Your primary goal is to evaluate the text at hand.

This is an essential step in analyzing a text, and it requires you to consider many different aspects of a writer's work. Do not just consider what the text says. Think about what effect the author intended to produce in a reader. Look at the process through which the writer achieves (or does not achieve) the desired effect, and which rhetorical strategies are being used. If you disagree with a

text, what is the point of contention? If you agree with it, how do you think you can expand or build upon the argument put forth?

Critical thinking has many uses. If you apply it to a work of literature, for example, it can become the foundation of a detailed textual analysis. With scholarly articles, critical thinking can help you evaluate their potential reliability as future sources. Finding an error in someone else's argument can be the point of destabilization you need to make a worthy argument of your own. Critical thinking can even help you hone your own argumentation skills, since it requires you to think carefully about which strategies are effective for making arguments.

### *Key Points*

- Critical thinking is a method of approaching texts that calls for a reader to consider what the author is arguing and how he or she makes that argument.
- Critical thinking is one of the first essential steps in analyzing and writing about a text, topic, or argument.
- Thinking critically about other writers' work can help you improve your own. By applying the same critical standards you use when reading someone else's work to your own, you can greatly increase the clarity, accuracy, and value of your work.

## *Terms*

- status quo
  - The state of things; the way things are, as opposed to the way they could be; the existing state of affairs.
- critical thinking
  - A method of thinking involving analysis and evaluation. It questions assumptions with the goal of deciding whether a claim is always true, sometimes true, partly true, or false.

# 16. Critical Thinking in College Writing: From Personal to Academic

Click here to view the *Critical Thinking in College Writing: From Personal to Academic* chapter.

# 17. Writing Essays

[Click here to view Chapter 5: Writing Essays.](#)





PART IV

# DEVELOP STRATEGIES FOR GENERATING, DRAFTING, AND REVISING ESSAYS



# 18. Defining the Writing Process



On the surface, nothing could be simpler than writing: You sit down, you pick up a pen or open a document on your computer, and you write words. But anyone who has procrastinated or struggled with writer's block knows that the writing process is more arduous, if not somewhat mysterious and unpredictable.

People often think of writing in terms of its end product—the email, the report, the memo, essay, or research paper, all of which result from the time and effort spent in the act of writing. In this course, however, you will be introduced to writing as the recursive process of planning, drafting, and revising.

## Writing is Recursive

You will focus as much on the process of writing as you will on its end product (the writing you normally submit for feedback or a grade). *Recursive* means circling back; and, more often than not, the writing process will have you running in circles. You might be in the middle of your draft when you realize you need to do more brainstorming, so you return to the planning stage. Even when you have finished a draft, you may find changes you want to make to an introduction. In truth, every writer must develop his or her own process for getting the writing done, but there are some basic strategies and techniques you can adapt to make your work a little easier, more fulfilling and effective.

## Developing Your Writing Process

The final product of a piece of writing is undeniably important, but the emphasis of this course is on developing a writing process that works for you. Some of you may already know what strategies and techniques assist you in your writing. You may already be familiar with prewriting techniques, such as freewriting, clustering, and listing. You may already have a regular writing practice. But the rest of you may need to discover what works through trial and error. Developing individual strategies and techniques that promote painless and compelling writing can take some time. So, be patient.

## A Writer's Process: Ali Hale

Read and examine *The Writing Process* by Ali Hale. Think of this document as a framework for defining the process in distinct stages: Prewriting, Writing, Revising, Editing, and Publishing. You may

already be familiar with these terms. You may recall from past experiences that some resources refer to prewriting as planning and some texts refer to writing as drafting.

What is important to grasp early on is that the act of writing is more than sitting down and writing something. Please avoid the “one and done” attitude, something instructors see all too often in undergraduate writing courses. Use Hale’s essay as your starting point for defining your own process.

## A Writer’s Process: Anne Lamott

In the video below, Anne Lamott, a writer of both non-fiction and fiction works, as well as the instructional novel on writing *Bird by Bird: Instructions on Writing*, discusses her own journey as a writer, including the obstacles she has to overcome every time she sits down to begin her creative process. She will refer to terms such as “the down draft,” “the up draft,” and “the dental draft.”

As you watch, think about how her terms, “down draft,” “up draft,” “dental draft,” work with those presented by Hale’s *The Writing Process*. What does Lamott mean by these terms? Can you identify with her process or with the one Hale describes? How are they related?

Also, when viewing the interview, pay careful attention to the following timeframe: 11:23 to 27:27 minutes and make a list of tips and strategies you find particularly helpful. Think about how your own writing process fits with what Hale and Lamott have to say. Is yours similar? Different? Is there any new information you have learned that you did not know before exposure to these works?



*A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:*

*<https://library.achievingthedream.org/westhillscenglish1a/?p=38>*

# 19. Revising

## Reviewing, Editing, Proofreading, and Making an Overview

Every time you revise your work substantially, you will be conducting three distinct functions in the following order: reviewing for purpose, editing and proofreading, making a final overview.

### Reviewing for Purpose

#### *LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Understand why and when to review for purpose.
- Be prepared to use self-questioning in the purpose review process.

Although you will naturally be **reviewing for purpose** throughout the entire writing process, you should read through your first complete draft once you have finished it and carefully reconsider all aspects of your essay. As you review for purpose, keep in mind that your paper has to be clear to others, not just to you. Try to read through your paper from the point of view of a member of your

targeted audience who is reading your paper for the first time. Make sure you have neither failed to clarify the points your audience will need to have clarified nor overclarified the points your audience will already completely understand.



*Figure 8.1*



## Revisiting Your Statement of Purpose

**Self-questioning** is a useful tool when you are in the reviewing process. In anticipation of attaching a writer's memo to your draft as you send it out for peer or instructor review, reexamine the six elements of the triangle that made up your original statement of purpose (voice, audience, message, tone, attitude, and reception):

**Voice:** Does it sound like a real human being wrote this draft? Does my introduction project a clear sense of who I am? Honestly, would someone other than my paid instructor or assigned peer(s) read beyond the first paragraph of this essay?

**Audience:** Does my writing draw in a specific set of readers with a catchy hook? Do I address the same audience throughout the essay? If I don't, am I being intentional about shifting from one audience to another?

**Message:** Are my main points strong and clear? Do I have ample support for each of them? Do my supporting details clearly support my main points?

**Tone:** Am I using the proper tone given my audience? Is my language too casual or not professional enough? Or is it needlessly formal and stiff sounding? Does my tone stay consistent throughout the draft?

**Attitude:** Will my organization make sense to another reader? Does my stance toward the topic stay consistent throughout the draft? If it doesn't, do I explain the cause of the transformation in my attitude?

**Reception:** Is my goal or intent for writing clear? How is this essay likely to be received? What kind of motivation, ideas, or emotions will this draft draw out of my readers? What will my readers do, think, or feel immediately after finishing this essay?

### **Handling Peer and Instructor Reviews**

In many situations, you will be required to have at least one of your peers review your essay (and you will, in turn, review at least one peer's essay). Even if you're not required to exchange

drafts with a peer, it's simply essential at this point to have another pair of eyes, so find a classmate or friend and ask them to look over your draft. In other cases, your instructor may be intervening at this point with ungraded but evaluative commentary on your draft. Whatever the system, before you post or trade your draft for review, use your answers to the questions in "Reviewing for Purpose" to tweak your original statement of purpose, giving a clear statement of your desired voice, audience, message, tone, attitude, and reception. Also, consider preparing a **descriptive outline** showing how the essay actually turned out and comparing that with your original plan, or consider writing a brief narrative describing how the essay developed from idea to execution. Finally, include any other questions or concerns you have about your draft, so that your peer reader(s) or instructor can give you useful, tailored feedback. These reflective statements and documents could be attached with your draft as part of a writer's memo. Remember, the more guidance you give your readers, regardless of whether they are your peers or your instructor, the more they will be able to help you.

When you receive suggestions for content changes from your instructors, try to put aside any tendencies to react defensively, so that you can consider their ideas for revisions with an open mind. If you are accustomed only to getting feedback from instructors that is accompanied by a grade, you may need to get used to the difference between **evaluation** and **judgment**. In college settings, instructors often prefer to intervene most extensively after you have completed a first draft, with evaluative commentary that tends to be suggestive, forward-looking, and free of a final quantitative judgment (like a grade). If you read your instructors' feedback in those circumstances as final, you can miss the point of the exercise. You're supposed to do something with this sort of commentary, not just read it as the justification for a (nonexistent) grade.

Sometimes peers think they're supposed to "sound like an English teacher" so they fall into the trap of "correcting" your draft, but in most cases, the prompts used in college-level peer reviewing discourage that sort of thing. In many situations, your peers will give

you ideas that will add value to your paper, and you will want to include them. In other situations, your peers' ideas will not really work into the plan you have for your paper. It is not unusual for peers to offer ideas that you may not want to implement. Remember, your peers' ideas are only suggestions, and it is your essay, and you are the person who will make the final decisions. If your peers happen to be a part of the audience to which you are writing, they can sometimes give you invaluable ideas. And if they're not, take the initiative to find outside readers who might actually be a part of your audience.

When you are reviewing a peer's essay, keep in mind that the author likely knows more about the topic than you do, so don't question content unless you are certain of your facts. Also, do not suggest changes just because you would do it differently or because you want to give the impression that you are offering ideas. Only suggest changes that you seriously think would make the essay stronger.

### *Key Takeaways*

- You should review for purpose while you are writing, after you finish your first draft, and after you feel your essay is nearly complete.
- Use self-questioning to evaluate your essay as you are revising the purpose. Keep your voice, audience, message, tone, attitude, and reception in mind as you write and revise.
- When you are reviewing a peers' essay, make only suggestions that you think will make the essay stronger. When you receive reviews from instructors or peers, try to be open minded and consider the

value of the ideas to your essay.

## *Exercises*

1. Find multiple drafts of an essay you have recently completed. Write a descriptive outline of at least two distinct drafts you wrote during the process.
2. For a recently completed essay, discuss how at least one element of your statement of purpose (voice, audience, message, tone, attitude, or reception) changed over the course of the writing process.
3. With your writing group, develop five questions you think everyone in your class should have to answer about their essay drafts before submitting them for evaluation from a peer or your instructor.

## Editing and Proofreading

### *LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Understand why editing and proofreading is important even for careful writers.
- Recognize the benefits of peer editing and proofreading and the similarities between editing and proofreading your work and the work of others.
- Know how to edit and proofread for issues of both mechanics and style.

When you have made some revisions to your draft based on feedback and your recalibration of your purpose for writing, you may now feel your essay is nearly complete. However, you should plan to read through the entire final draft at least one additional time. During this stage of editing and proofreading your entire essay, you should be looking for general consistency and clarity. Also, pay particular attention to parts of the paper you have moved around or changed in other ways to make sure that your new versions still work smoothly.

Although you might think editing and proofreading isn't necessary since you were fairly careful when you were writing, the truth is that even the very brightest people and best writers make mistakes when they write. One of the main reasons that you are likely to make mistakes is that your mind and fingers are not always moving along at the same speed nor are they necessarily in sync. So what ends up on the page isn't always exactly what you intended. A second reason is that, as you make changes and adjustments, you might not totally match up the original parts and revised parts. Finally, a third key reason for proofreading is because you likely have errors you typically make and proofreading gives you a chance to correct those errors.

Figure 8.2



Editing and proofreading can work well with a partner. You can offer to be another pair of eyes for peers in exchange for their doing the same for you. Whether you are editing and proofreading your work or the work of a peer, the process is basically the same. Although the rest of this section assumes you are editing and proofreading your work, you can simply shift the personal issues, such as “Am I...” to a viewpoint that will work with a peer, such as “Is she...”

As you edit and proofread, you should look for common problem areas that stick out. There are certain writing rules that you must

follow, but other more stylistic writing elements are more subjective and will require judgment calls on your part.

Be proactive in evaluating these subjective, stylistic issues since failure to do so can weaken the potential impact of your essay. Keeping the following questions in mind as you edit and proofread will help you notice and consider some of those subjective issues:

- **At the word level:** Am I using descriptive words? Am I varying my word choices rather than using the same words over and over? Am I using active verbs? Am I writing concisely? Does every word in each sentence perform a function?
- **At the sentence level:** Am I using a variety of sentence beginnings? Am I using a variety of sentence formats? Am I using ample and varied transitions? Does every sentence advance the value of the essay?
- **At the paragraph and essay level:** How does this essay look? Am I using paragraphing and paragraph breaks to my advantage? Are there opportunities to make this essay work better visually? Are the visuals I'm already using necessary? Am I using the required formatting (or, if there's room for creativity, am I using the optimal formatting)? Is my essay the proper length?

### *Key Takeaways*

- Edit and proofread your work since it is easy to make mistakes between your mind and your typing fingers, as well as when you are moving around parts of your essay.
- Trading a nearly final version of a draft with peers is a valuable exercise since others can often more

easily see your mistakes than you can. When you edit and proofread for a peer, you use the same process as when you edit and proofread for yourself.

- As you are editing and proofreading, you will encounter some issues that are either right or wrong and you simply have to correct them when they are wrong. Other more stylistic issues, such as using adequate transitions, ample descriptive words, and enough variety in sentence formats, are subjective. Besides dealing with matters of correctness, you will have to make choices about subjective and stylistic issues while you proofread.

## *Exercises*

1. Write a one-page piece about how you decided which college to attend. Give a copy of your file (or a hard copy) to three different peers to edit and proofread. Then edit and proofread your page yourself. Finally, compare your editing and proofreading results to those of your three peers. Categorize the suggested revisions and corrections as objective standards of correctness or subjective matters of style.
2. Create a “personal editing and proofreading guide” that includes an overview of both objective and subjective issues covered in this book that are common problems for you in your writing. In your



guide, include tips from this book and self-questions that can help you with your problem writing areas.

## Making a Final Overview

### *LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Understand the types of problems that might recur throughout your work.
- Know when you should conduct isolated checks during a final overview.
- Understand how to conduct isolated checks.

While you are managing the content of your essay and moving things around in it, you are likely to notice isolated issues that could recur throughout your work. To verify that these issues are satisfactorily dealt with from the beginning to the end of your essay, make a checklist of the issues as you go along. Conduct isolated checks of the whole paper after you are finished editing and proofreading. You might conduct some checks by flipping through the hard-copy pages, some by clicking through the pages on your computer, and some by conducting “computer finds” (good for cases when you want to make sure you’ve used the same proper noun correctly and consistently). Remember to take advantage of all

the editing features of the word processing program you're using, such as spell check and grammar check. In most versions of Word, for instance, you'll see red squiggly lines underneath misspelled words and green squiggly lines underneath misuses of grammar. Right click on those underlined words to examine your options for revision.

Figure 8.3



The following checklist shows examples of the types of things that you might look for as you make a final pass (or final passes) through

your paper. It often works best to make a separate pass for each issue because you are less likely to miss an issue and you will probably be able to make multiple, single-issue passes more quickly than you can make one multiple-issue pass.

- All subheadings are placed correctly (such as in the center or at the beginning of a page).
- All the text is the same size and font throughout.
- The page numbers are all formatted and appearing as intended.
- All image and picture captions are appearing correctly.
- All spellings of proper nouns have been corrected.
- The words “there” and “their” and “they’re” are spelled correctly. (Or you can insert your top recurring error here.)
- References are all included in the citation list.
- Within the citation list, references are all in a single, required format (no moving back and forth between Modern Language Association [MLA] and American Psychological Association [APA], for instance).
- All the formatting conventions for the final manuscript follow the style sheet assigned by the instructor (e.g., MLA, APA, Chicago Manual of Style [CMS], or other).

This isn’t intended to be an all-inclusive checklist. Rather, it simply gives you an idea of the types of things for which you might look as you conduct your final check. You should develop your unique list that might or might not include these same items.

### *Key Takeaways*

- Often a good way to make sure you do not miss any

details you want to change is to make a separate pass through your essay for each area of concern. You can conduct passes by flipping through hard copies, clicking through pages on a computer, or using the “find” feature on a computer.

- You should conduct a final overview with isolated checks after you are finished editing and proofreading the final draft.
- As you are writing, make a checklist of recurring isolated issues that you notice in your work. Use this list to conduct isolated checks on the final draft of your paper.

## *Exercise*

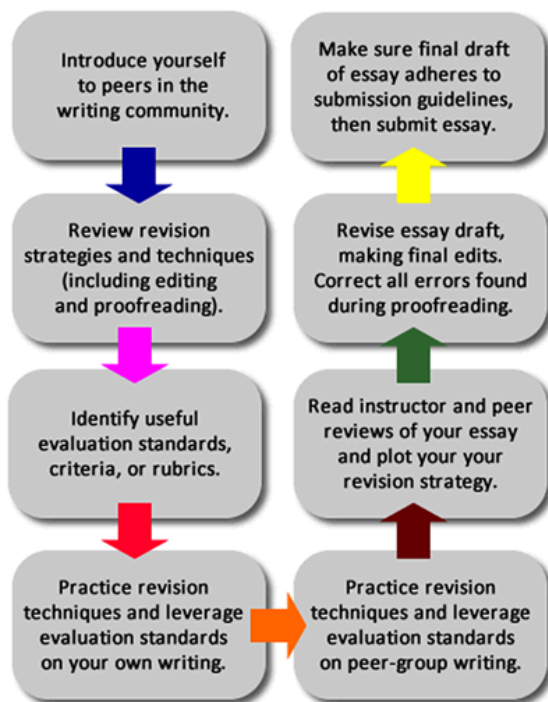
Complete each sentence to create a logical item for a list to use for a final isolated check. Do not use any of the examples given in the text.

1. All the subheadings are...
2. The spacing between paragraphs...
3. Each page includes...
4. I have correctly spelled...
5. The photos are all placed...
6. The words in the flow charts and diagrams...

## 20. Editing and Proofreading

When revising written work within a writing community, it is a good idea to visualize the process and workflow before you get started in earnest. While revision is a recursive (circling back) practice and writers frequently move back and forth between editorial stages, the flowchart below is designed to help you follow and appreciate the general progression of revision.

### **Revision Practices within a Writing Community** *Process and Workflow*



## Revising After Writing Community Feedback

After submitting and receiving your peer reviews in your writing community, return to your own work and take a long, hard look at the recommendations your instructor and classmates have made regarding your draft. Remember that you are seeking ways to make the meaning clear in your essay. Do not be afraid of changing the essay in radical ways, especially if the ideas and organization haven't conveyed the meaning you intended. Build on the strengths and add, cut, reorder, or start over where needed.

## Use a Writing Rubric

After you have incorporated some of the recommendations into your revision, review the 6+1 Traits Rubric, which features the five areas (below) by which the final draft of your essay will be graded. Make sure that you are fully editing and proofreading your draft.

By *editing*, you are reviewing and revising the big picture items:

### **1. Ideas—Are my ideas and content developed?**

You are looking for ideas to be clear and focused, remaining on topic throughout the essay. Make sure your details support the central focus of the narrative.

### **2. Organization—Does my essay provide a logical organization, demonstrating an order or structure that supports the ideas clearly?**

Give your narrative a creative title and provide an inviting introduction. Craft thoughtful transitions as the the essay progresses, making sure that the structure is logical.

### **3. Word Choice—Have I provided language that sounds natural and conveys the intended message of the essay?**

Your essay should flow naturally from your own choice of words and

phrases. Use action verbs and avoid linking verbs. Don't forget to read aloud to see if your voice comes through in this essay.

#### **4. Sentence Fluency—Are my sentences well-built, demonstrating a strong sense of varied structure?**

One quick editing technique you can use to test for fluency is to circle the first word of every sentence. Do you see initial words repeating? Do you start sentences with articles (a, an, the) or with pronouns (or names of characters)? If so, try to incorporate some prepositional phrases and introductory clauses so you incorporate sentence variety and create a rhythm to your sentences that avoid choppiness.

By *proofreading*, you are taking into consideration standard writing conventions:

**5. Conventions—Have I demonstrated a good grasp of standard writing conventions?** Have I checked the essay for any misspellings? Is my punctuation accurate? Have I avoided the pitfalls of many common grammar errors? Did I meet the word counts required for this essay? Do I have proper paragraph structure? Have I made sure that what I mean to say is not undermined or impeded by grammatical, mechanical, or stylistic errors?

## Proofread Your Writing Backward

While there are a number of ways to proofread written content for errors, it is often useful to review your writing “backward.” That is, you read the last sentence of the essay first, then backward, sentence by sentence, until you finish your proofreading with the first sentence. This kind of reading isolates individual sentences from the essay's context, so that you are not reading for meaning within a paragraph but for errors that may appear in individual sentences.

Apply the backward review to the *Revision Practices within a Writing Community* flowchart above: did you find the error?

## Writing to the Final Version: Suit Up!

Writing a polished paper is, in and of itself, an intellectual challenge and following formatting guidelines in this and other college courses signals to your readers that your paper should be taken seriously as a contribution to a particular course or a given academic or professional field. Think of presenting your essay in the correct format like wearing a tailored suit to a job interview.

Of course, there's more to making a narrative presentable than its format. The narrative should be presentable in terms of its grammar, mechanics, and style. If you would like to get a little practice with sentence-by-sentence proofreading, feel free to try either of the proofreading exercises made available by Pen and Page:

- Proofreading Exercise 1
- Proofreading Exercise 2

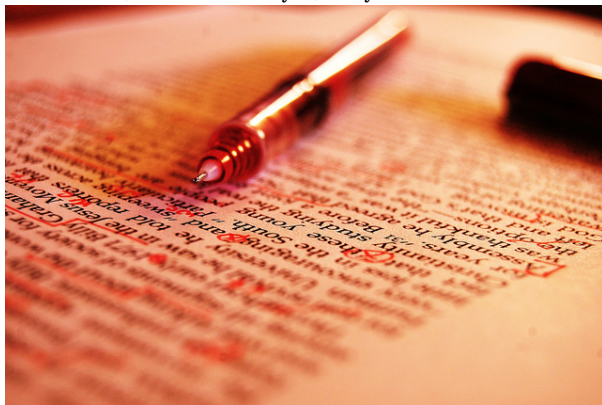


## 2I. Matters of Grammar, Mechanics, and Style

For many students, the discussion of grammar, mechanics, and style is intimidating. There are rules, and lots of them. And when rules are broken, some kind of inquisition or punishment is bound to follow. Any student who has experienced an instructor's editorial comments (also known as the red pen "blood" in the margins of a paper) knows what it feels like to be a hapless violator of the rules.

### Rules Matter

Despite your gut reactions to learning certain rules for grammar, mechanics, and style, you have to acknowledge



that the rules matter. People communicate daily in written forms, such as emails, letters, reports, and essays. And many of them need to communicate in such a way that they are taken seriously.

In academic writing, it is your job to make sure that the people who read what you write (your instructor and classmates) understand what you are trying to say. If your thoughts are not

arranged appropriately, your readers may get confused. If you do not acknowledge and employ the rules of grammar, mechanics, and style, you are at a distinct disadvantage as a communicator.

## The Grammar Report

Being able to identify grammatical, mechanical, or stylistic problems that exist in your writing is one way to improve your writing. These problems may have been with you for some time, failing to be identified, researched, and remedied.

The Grammar Report assignments will assist you in not only identifying your problem, but also you help you seek out examples of the problem, research the rules related to the problem, and finally “reporting” on your experience to your classmates. Indeed, the process is not just about you addressing a writing problem; it is about sharing your experience and remedies, so that you can teach others to avoid writing errors.

## Improving Grammar, Mechanics, and Style

There are a wide variety of resources to support your research. A good place to start is the free online textbook, *Successful Writing*. You can use the find/search feature of your browser to look up particular topics and use the practice exercises to work through the process of identifying and correcting errors.

Here are some online resources that you may find useful, as well:

- Capital Community College’s Guide to Grammar and Writing
- Grammar Book
- Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)
- Grammar Girl

At some point, you may find that you share the same grammatical, mechanical, or stylistic problems with others in this course. Take a moment to look at the most commonly occurring grammar errors listed in the “Attending to Grammar” materials developed by the Dartmouth Writing Program. Of the top 20 grammar errors listed, consider which ones are common to you. Then make sure you make every effort to eradicate them from your writing.

## 22. Composition as a Write of Passage

[Click here to view the \*Composition as a Write of Passage\* chapter.](#)

## 23. Looking for Trouble: Finding Your Way Into a Writing Assignment

Click [here](#) to view the *Looking for Trouble: Finding Your Way Into a Writing Assignment* chapter.

## 24. The Complexity of Simplicity: Invention Potentials for Writing Students

Click here to view *The Complexity of Simplicity: Invention Potentials for Writing Students* chapter.

PART V

# ANALYZE STYLISTIC CHOICE





# 25. Introduction to College-Level Writing

## Basic Principles of Academic Writing

Academic writing presents thoroughly investigated ideas to an informed audience.

### *Learning Objectives*

Contrast academic and popular writing

### *Key Takeaways*

#### *Key Points*

- Academic writing makes a claim or an argument, and uses a combination of evidence (details and facts ) and clear explanations of logical reasoning to support that claim in order to persuade the reader.
- Good academic writing is concise; rather than using flowery language and overly complex sentence

structures, which can distract from an argument, writers should use the simplest language possible to let their ideas shine through.

- Academic writing usually uses objective language, which allows writers to convince the reader that their argument is true, rather than just subjective opinions.
- A good academic writer is able to see both sides of the argument, or claim, and counter it with supporting evidence.

### *Key Terms*

- **analysis:** A critical examination by the writer which draws connections (or notes disconnections) between points of evidence.
- **counter-arguments:** Ideas and evidence which refute or oppose the original claim.
- **claim:** An assertion, used as the basis for an academic piece of writing, that must be proven with evidence.
- **academic writing:** Writing that is published or presented to a specialized audience in order to inform, persuade, demonstrate, explore, or achieve some other specific purpose.
- **genre:** A category or type of writing, usually in reference to different academic disciplines.

“Academic writing” is a broad term that covers a wide variety of genres across disciplines. While its features will vary, academic (or

scholarly) writing in general tries to maintain a professional tone while defending a specific position or idea.

There are many different approaches to academic research, since each discipline has its own conventions that dictate what kinds of texts and evidence are permissible. Scholarly writing typically takes an objective tone, even though it argues in favor of a specific position or stance. Academic writing can reach a broader audience through more informal venues, such as journalism and public speaking.

## Overarching Principles of Academic Writing

Academic writing comes in many forms and can cover a wide range of subject matter; however, successful writing will demonstrate certain conventions, no matter what is being written about.

### The Thesis Statement: Making and Supporting a Claim

Strong academic writing takes a stance on the topic it is covering—it tries to convince the reader of a certain perspective or claim. This claim is known as the “thesis statement.” The majority of an academic paper will be spent using facts and details to “prove” to the reader that the claim is true. How this is done depends on the discipline: in the sciences, a research paper will present an original experiment and data to support the claim; in a literature class, an essay will cite quotations from a text that weave into the larger argument. Regardless of discipline, the overarching goal of most academic writing is to persuade the reader to agree with the claim.

## Concision

Concision is the art of using the fewest words possible to convey an idea. Some students mistakenly think that longer words and more complicated sentence structures make their writing “better” or more sophisticated. In reality, the longer and more complicated a sentence gets, the harder it is for a reader to interpret that sentence and stay engaged with your argument. For example, if you find yourself using a phrase like “due to the fact that,” you can simplify your wording and make your sentence more powerful by saying “because” instead. Similarly, say “now” or “currently” rather than “at this point in time.” Unnecessarily complicated wording distracts your reader from your argument; simpler sentence structures let your ideas shine through.

## Objectivity

Most academic writing uses objective language. That is, rather than presenting the argument as the writer’s opinion (“I believe that...”, “I think this means...”), it tries to convince the reader that the argument is *necessarily true* based on the supporting facts: “this evidence reveals that...”

## Breaking the Rules

There are countless examples of respected scholarly pieces that bend these principles—for instance, the “reader response” school of literary criticism abandons the objective stance altogether. However, you have to know the rules before you can break them successfully.

Think of a chef putting chili powder in hot chocolate, a delicious

but unexpected bending of a rule: typically, desserts are not spicy. In order to successfully break that rule, the chef first had to understand all the flavors at work in both ingredients, and make the choice knowing that it would improve the recipe. It's only a good idea to break these rules and principles if there is a specific, good reason to do so. Therefore, if you plan to dispense with one of the conventions of academic writing, it is a good idea to make sure your instructor approves of your stylistic choice.

## Building Academic Writing Skills

Academic work is an excellent way to develop strong research and writing skills. Try to use your undergraduate assignments to build your reading comprehension, critical and creative thinking, research and analytical skills. Having a specific, “real” audience will help you engage more directly with the reader and adapt to the conventions of writing in any given genre.



**The original Dallas Public Library:** Across many academic disciplines, research is often required for writing assignments.

## Developing Your Voice as a Writer

Develop and showcase your unique voice while adhering to the rules of writing content and style.

### *Learning Objectives*

Differentiate between voice and style

## *Key Takeaways*

### *Key Points*

- While academic writing stresses formal conventions, opportunities exist to experiment with a wide range of styles and voices.
- A more casual writing style might include contractions, humor, exclamations, and/or familiar vocabulary. Others writings may include clause-heavy sentences, esoteric terminology, and formal language. Still others favor analogies, idioms, metaphors, and colorful imagery.
- “Authorial voice” is a characteristic of a writer’s distinctive style. It is an important element of academic writing, fiction, and nonfiction.
- Voice is developed over time and through experience.

### *Key Terms*

- **format:** The arrangement of images, titles, headers, content, and other formal elements of writing within a work.
- **style:** An author’s unique method of putting together words, phrases, sentences, analogies, metaphors, idioms, and expressions.
- **voice:** The distinct personality that comes through

in a writer's work which may convey the author's attitude and character. It may represent the characteristic speech and thought patterns of the writer.

You've probably heard that one quality found in good writing is voice. "Voice" refers to elements of the author's tone, phrasing, and style that are recognizably unique to her or him. A distinctive, persuasive voice will successfully engage your audience — without it, your writing risks losing your reader despite your top notch research or how well you adhered to sound writing practices. Yes, academic writing has rules about format, style, and objectivity that you must follow, but these will not rescue boring, impersonal prose. Whatever you choose to write about, be certain to develop an authorial voice!

Having a "unique voice" does not translate into having a radically different style from others. In academic writing, voice boils down to seemingly insignificant small habits and personal preferences. But they matter! If each student in your class was told to explain a complex concept, not one would do it in the same way. Each would use different language and syntax to say the same basic thing. Over time, each student would continue to make similar choices in language and syntax, and readers would eventually associate those choices with particular writers — each student would have developed an authorial voice.

Keep in mind that voice is not something you can automatically create. It may be tempting to use unusual syntax or fancy vocabulary hoping to make your writing stand out. Be forewarned — that would not be your genuine style. There is no quick way to create a recognizable voice, as it can only be developed over time. The key to developing your voice is to keep writing and to think about what specific types of writing excite you. Pay attention to



how you say things — what words you use, what sorts of phrases and sentence structures you favor, even what kind of punctuation appears in your work frequently. These are the choices that will eventually become markers of your authorial voice.



**Individual style at the Ohio Renaissance Festival:** Much like the people shown above dressed in different costumes, every writer has a distinct style. You should maintain the distinctive elements of your voice and style in the academic context. Even when you're outside your comfortable, everyday environment, you can still find ways to express your unique style.

## Getting Help Meeting College Writing Expectations

Your university can provide several resources to help you through the process of planning and drafting an academic paper.

## *Learning Objectives*

Give examples of places to find campus resources for writing

## *Key Takeaways*

### *Key Points*

- The conventions of academic writing can be confusing at first, but there is no need to struggle alone.
- Colleges provide students with a variety of resources and advisers to help students adjust to writing at the collegiate level. Take advantage of whatever resources your college offers.
- Taking advantage of these resources has the added benefit of pushing you to begin the process early so you will have enough time to write and revise several drafts.
- Some colleges publish outstanding student work, which can provide valuable examples for you as you get used to academic writing.

## *Key Terms*

- **writing center:** A space (often both physical and online) that provides students with free assistance on papers, projects, reports, multimodal documents, web pages, etc. from instructor and peer consultants.
- **workshop:** A gathering of students who share brainstorming, research, drafting, revision, and editing tips by reading and responding to each other's papers.
- **drafting:** The process of beginning to write and revise a paper, with the understanding that no one else will see it.

The typical student enters college with a wealth of experience writing five- paragraph essays, book reports, and lab reports. Even the best students, however, need to make big adjustments to learn the conventions of academic writing. College-level writing obeys different rules, and learning them will help you hone your writing skills. Think of it as ascending another step up the writing ladder.

Many students feel intimidated asking for help with academic writing; after all, it's something you've been doing your entire life in school. However, there's no need to feel like it's a sign of your lack of ability; on the contrary, many of the strongest student writers regularly get help and support with their writing (that's why they're so strong). College instructors are very familiar with the ups and downs of writing, and most universities have support systems in place to help students learn how to write for an academic audience. The following sections discuss common on-campus writing services, what to expect from them, and how they can help you.

## Writing Mentors

Learning to write for an academic audience is challenging, but universities offer various resources to guide students through the process. Most instructors will be happy to meet with you during office hours to discuss guidelines for writing about their particular discipline. If you have any doubts about research methods, paper structure, writing style, etc., address these uncertainties with the instructor before you hand in your paper, rather than waiting to see the critiques they write in the margins afterward. You are not bothering your instructor by showing up for office hours; they'll be glad to see you.



**Kings College, Cambridge:** College writing can seem daunting at first, but there are methods to help you master it.

## Writing Centers

Most colleges have writing centers that are designed to help students meet college-level expectations. These centers usually offer one-on-one advisory meetings or group sessions that cover topics ranging from conducting research to conquering procrastination. Many writing centers employ student mentors from a wide range of disciplines, so try to work with one who deeply understands the field you're writing in.

## Learning by Example

Many students like to learn by example, and find it very helpful to read other students' academic writing. Some universities publish outstanding student essays. Some professors keep copies of student papers, and they may be willing to show you examples of writing that meets their expectations. Genuine student papers are universally better models to follow than any of the "sample essays" on the Internet.

## Student-Led Workshops

Some courses encourage students to share their research and writing with each other, and even offer workshops where students can present their own writing and offer constructive comments to their classmates. Independent paper-writing workshops provide a space for peers with varying interests, work styles, and areas of expertise to brainstorm. If you want to improve your writing, organizing a workshop session with your classmates is a great strategy. You can also ask your writing center to help you organize a workshop for a specific class or subject. In high school, students submit their work in multiple stages, from the thesis statement to the outline to a draft of the paper; finally, after receiving feedback on each preliminary piece, they submit a completed project. This format teaches students how to divide writing assignments into smaller tasks and schedule these tasks over an extended period of time, instead of scrambling through the entire process right before the deadline. Some college courses build this kind of writing schedule into major assignments. Even if your course does not, you can master the skill of breaking large assignments down into smaller projects instead of leaving an unmanageable amount of work until the last minute. Academic writing can, at times, feel overwhelming.

You can waste a great deal of time staring at a blank screen or a troublesome paragraph, when it would be more productive to move on to drafting other parts of your paper. When you return to the problem section a few hours later (or, even better, the next day), the solution may be obvious.

Writing in drafts makes academic work more manageable. Drafting gets your ideas onto paper, which gives you more to work with than the perfectionist's daunting blank screen. You can always return later to fix the problems that bother you.

## Scheduling the Stages of Your Writing Process

Time management, not talent, has been the secret to a lot of great writing through the ages. Not even a “great” writer can produce a masterpiece the night before it's due. Breaking a large writing task into smaller pieces will not only save your sanity, but will also result in a more thoughtful, polished final draft.

Sample schedule:

- Monday: Visit your instructor's office hours to discuss ideas, sources, and structure for the essay.
- Tuesday: Do research at the library from 5:00 to 9:00, taking detailed notes and planning how each piece of research will fit into your paper.
- Wednesday: Do research at the library from 2:00 to 6:00, take detailed notes, and give yourself permission to write an imperfect draft.
- Thursday: Begin a first draft of the essay.
- Friday: Continue expanding/editing the first draft.
- Saturday: Look again at the draft and continue to make changes/additions/deletions.
- Sunday: Write a final draft. Print out your paper for proofreading (it's worth it).

- Monday: Don't look at the essay. However, if there are any remaining questions, go to your instructor's office hours.
- Tuesday: Revise, edit and proofread the essay one more time. Relax while everyone else in your class is panicking.
- Wednesday morning: Give the essay a final read and proofread, and print it out.
- Wednesday afternoon: Turn in your essay.

## Emailing Your Instructor

### Example Email

Subject: Expository Writing 101: Office hours on Tuesday

Dear/Hello Professor [Last name],

I have a few questions about the next essay assignment for Expository Writing 101. Would it be convenient to discuss them during your office hours on Tuesday? Let me know if there is a specific time when I should stop by. Thank you for your help with these assignments.

Many thanks,

[First name] [Last name]

Expository Writing 101; T, Th, 10:00

### Tips for Emailing Your Instructor

- Be polite: Address your professor formally, using the title “Professor” with their last name. Depending on how formal your professor seems, use the salutation “Dear,” or a more informal “Hello” or “Hi.” Don't drop the salutation altogether, though.

- Be concise. Instructors are busy people, and although they are typically more than happy to help you, do them the favor of getting to your point quickly. Sign off with your first and last name, the course number, and the class time. This will make it easy for your professor to identify you.
- Do not ever ask, “When will you return our papers?” If you MUST ask, make it specific and realistic (e.g., “Will we get our papers back by the end of next week?”).

## Discussing Writing in Class

Class discussion is an essential part of the feedback and revision process, since it provides a space for students to communicate differing views.

### *Learning Objectives*

Identify techniques for discussing writing in class effectively



## *Key Takeaways*

### *Key Points*

- The goal of classroom discussion is not only to promote comprehension of a shared text, but also to encourage students to listen to, understand, and exchange their assessments of a text.
- As a learning method, classroom discussions are generally more fun and interactive than simply listening to a teacher lecture or taking a written test.
- Class discussions encourage learning through active participation, comprehension, and listening. They help students to think, solve problems, listen to others, and analyze the ideas of other students, all while backing up their own thoughts with evidence from past class teachings.
- Incorporating perspectives and ideas from class discussion into your paper allows you to strengthen connections between course concepts and demonstrate your engagement in what others have to say.
- In-class workshops can provide you with valuable feedback from your peers about how to improve your paper, and also teach you to be a more careful and critical reader of your own and others' work.

### *Key Terms*

- **workshop:** A discussion in which people can give one another feedback on each other's writing.

## Classroom Discussions

Classroom discussion isn't simply a way of gaining points; it's an essential part of learning, comprehending, and sharing knowledge. Class discussion is often used together with other forms of assessment to calculate your grade, even if there are no points expressly awarded. Together with lectures and individual study, discussing course readings and materials with your peers and the instructor can open up new insights that are impossible to achieve on your own. In order to get the most out of class discussion, the instructor and all students should engage in an actual conversation, not simply question -and-answer.



**Classroom discussion:** *This class discussion is engaging.*

As a learning method, classroom discussions are generally more fun and interactive than simply listening to a teacher lecture or doing written work. When presenting a question to a class of students, teachers open up the classroom discussion to different ideas, opinions, and questions, and can mediate while students come up with their own conclusions. Class discussions encourage learning through active participation, comprehension, and listening. They help students to think, solve problems, listen to others, and analyze the ideas of other students, all while backing up their own thoughts with evidence from past class teachings. Discussions also encourage the practice of informal oral communication, which is a much-needed skill later in life.

When participating in a class discussion, the following strategies are effective:

- Try to stay on topic. Outside references are often good for context, but remember that the focus here is on learning.
- Try to use relevant vocabulary from the lesson to confirm your

understanding of new concepts and demonstrate your authority.

- Try to build upon the ideas of others; listen and respond as much as you speak.
- Always be respectful to others, especially if someone in the discussion offers an opinion that differs from your own.
- Try to provide constructive criticism to others regarding their thoughts, comments, or work: “I think you’re on the right track here, but this point doesn’t seem to be supported with direct evidence.”
- Don’t get too worked up if you disagree with the instructor or another student. A strong emotional response is good, since it indicates you’re engaged with the topic, but always keep a calm demeanor to show your classmates your ability to work in this setting without getting angry or flustered.

## Writing Workshops

A workshop is a special kind of classroom discussion in which students discuss each other’s work. The advice given above on class discussions also applies when you and your peers are given time in class (or in a group study session, in the writing center, etc.) to workshop drafts of each other’s papers. A writing workshop is an excellent way to get suggestions from peers that help you improve your paper, since fellow students may be able to offer a perspective your instructor cannot. Constructive, focused workshop critiquing also allows you to become a more critical reader and writer. Here are some questions that might be helpful for class discussions about student writing:

- What is the author saying in this text?
- Use three words to describe the tone and style the author uses in his/her argument. Is this the best tone and style to achieve

the author's purpose?

- Where does the author present rhetoric that is based on emotion? On facts? Which of these seem to be most prevalent in the argument?
- Why does the author think this argument matters? Have they convinced you that it matters? How might the “so what” factor be raised?
- What special terminology does (or should) the author use?
- How does this text relate to other things that have been read in this class?
- Give the author two positive comments, and three suggestions for improvement in the next draft.

## 26. Storytelling, Narration, and the Who I am Story

Click [here](#) to view the *Storytelling, Narration, and the Who I am Story* chapter.

## 27. Purpose, Audience, Tone and Content

[Click here to view Chapter 3: Purpose, Audience, Tone and Content.](#)





PART VI

TIMED ESSAYS



# 28. Discussion Board: Academic Writing

For this discussion, review “What is Academic Writing” by L. L. Irvine, then

## Directions

1. Print and annotate the chapter “What is Academic Writing” by L. L. Irvine.
2. Develop first in a new Google Doc a discussion post that addresses:
  - What are your thoughts about the essay “Writing Spaces” by L. Levin Irvine?
  - What did you learn about the nature of argument and analysis in college writing tasks?
  - What do you think about Irvine’s advice about the common types of writing assignments college writers might expect to encounter?
  - What are your personal writing experiences with academic writing? Tell us about a positive academic writing experience and a negative academic writing experience that stand out for you.
3. Copy and paste your post in the discussion.
4. Review your classmates’ posts.
5. Respond to your classmates’ posts about what they thought about Irvine’s chapter as well as the writing experiences they’ve accrued thus far.

# Grading

Academic Writing KEEP				
Criteria	Ratings			Points
Primary Post	Student addresses all directions; meets the 200 word count; and posts on time 10 pts	Student addresses some of the directions, and/or posts under 200 words 5 pts	Student does not post 0 pts	10 pts
Secondary Post	Student thoughtfully responds to 2 classmates' primary posts, meets the 100 word count for each response, and posts on time 10 pts	Student thoughtfully responds to 1 classmate's primary posts, and/or does not meet 100 word count 5 pts	Student does not post 0 pts	10 pts
Apply reading strategies when reading difficult material.	Exceeds expectations 5 pts	Meets expectations 3 pts	Does not meet expectations 0 pts	5 pts
TOTAL POINTS				25 pts

## 29. Discussion Board: Reading Difficult Material

After reviewing the study strategies about reading difficult material, engage in a discussion with your classmates about reading strategies.

### Directions

1. Review the material in the Study Guides and Strategies for Reading Difficult Material page.
2. Develop first in a new Google Doc a discussion post that addresses:
  - the ways the reading strategies you have used before worked for you and/or didn't work for you,
  - which new reading strategies you learned about that you might use to help you understand difficult text,
  - why you think the new strategy will assist you,
  - which reading strategies you learned about that you might recommend to a friend, and
  - how you might change a reading strategy you learned about to better fit your needs.
3. Copy and paste your post in the discussion.
4. Review your classmates' posts.
5. Respond to your classmates' posts about the strategies they found useful and whether or not you might use those strategies to understand difficult material.

# Grading

Reading Difficult Material KEEP				
Criteria	Ratings			Points
Primary Post	Student addresses all directions; meets the 200 word count; and posts on time 10 pts	Student addresses some of the directions, and/or posts under 200 words 5 pts	Student does not post 0 pts	10 pts
Secondary Post	Student thoughtfully responds to 2 classmates' primary posts, meets the 100 word count for each response, and posts on time 10 pts	Student thoughtfully responds to 1 classmate's primary posts, and/or does not meet 100 word count 5 pts	Student does not post 0 pts	10 pts
Apply reading strategies when reading difficult material.	Exceeds expectations 5 pts	Meets expectations 3 pts	Does not meet expectations 0 pts	5 pts
TOTAL POINTS				25 pts

# 30. Writing Summaries and Responses

[Click here to view Chapter 4: Writing Summaries and Responses.](#)





PART VII

# INTEGRATING OTHERS' IDEAS



# 31. Evidence

## WHAT THIS HANDOUT IS ABOUT

This handout will provide a broad overview of gathering and using evidence. It will help you decide what counts as evidence, put evidence to work in your writing, and determine whether you have enough evidence. It will also offer links to additional resources.

## INTRODUCTION

Many papers that you write in college will require you to make an argument; this means that you must take a position on the subject you are discussing and support that position with evidence. It's important that you use the right kind of evidence, that you use it effectively, and that you have an appropriate amount of it. If, for example, your philosophy professor didn't like it that you used a survey of public opinion as your primary evidence in your ethics paper, you need to find out more about what philosophers count as good evidence. If your instructor has told you that you need more analysis, suggested that you're "just listing" points or giving a "laundry list," or asked you how certain points are related to your argument, it may mean that you can do more to fully incorporate your evidence into your argument. Comments like "for example?," "proof?," "go deeper," or "expand" in the margins of your graded paper suggest that you may need more evidence. Let's take a look at each of these issues—understanding what counts as evidence, using evidence in your argument, and deciding whether you need more evidence.

## WHAT COUNTS AS EVIDENCE?

Before you begin gathering information for possible use as evidence in your argument, you need to be sure that you understand the purpose of your assignment. If you are working on a project for a class, look carefully at the assignment prompt. It may give you clues about what sorts of evidence you will need. Does the instructor mention any particular books you should use in writing your paper or the names of any authors who have written about your topic? How long should your paper be (longer works may require more, or more varied, evidence)? What themes or topics come up in the text of the prompt? Our handout on understanding writing assignments can help you interpret your assignment. It's also a good idea to think over what has been said about the assignment in class and to talk with your instructor if you need clarification or guidance.

## WHAT MATTERS TO INSTRUCTORS?

Instructors in different academic fields expect different kinds of arguments and evidence—your chemistry paper might include graphs, charts, statistics, and other quantitative data as evidence, whereas your English paper might include passages from a novel, examples of recurring symbols, or discussions of characterization in the novel. Consider what kinds of sources and evidence you have seen in course readings and lectures. You may wish to see whether the Writing Center has a handout regarding the specific academic field you're working in—for example, literature, sociology, or history.

## WHAT ARE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES?

A note on terminology: many researchers distinguish between primary and secondary sources of evidence (in this case, “primary” means “first” or “original,” not “most important”). Primary sources include original documents, photographs, interviews, and so forth. Secondary sources present information that has already been processed or interpreted by someone else. For example, if you are writing a paper about the movie “The Matrix,” the movie itself, an interview with the director, and production photos could serve as primary sources of evidence. A movie review from a magazine or a collection of essays about the film would be secondary sources. Depending on the context, the same item could be either a primary or a secondary source: if I am writing about people’s relationships with animals, a collection of stories about animals might be a secondary source; if I am writing about how editors gather diverse stories into collections, the same book might now function as a primary source.

## WHERE CAN I FIND EVIDENCE?

Here are some examples of sources of information and tips about how to use them in gathering evidence. Ask your instructor if you aren’t sure whether a certain source would be appropriate for your paper.

### Print and electronic sources

Books, journals, websites, newspapers, magazines, and

documentary films are some of the most common sources of evidence for academic writing. Our handout on evaluating print sources will help you choose your print sources wisely, and the library has a tutorial on evaluating both print sources and websites. A librarian can help you find sources that are appropriate for the type of assignment you are completing. Just visit the reference desk at Davis or the Undergraduate Library or chat with a librarian online (the library's IM screen name is [undergradref](#)).

## Observation

Sometimes you can directly observe the thing you are interested in, by watching, listening to, touching, tasting, or smelling it. For example, if you were asked to write about Mozart's music, you could listen to it; if your topic was how businesses attract traffic, you might go and look at window displays at the mall.

## Interviews

An interview is a good way to collect information that you can't find through any other type of research. An interview can provide an expert's opinion, biographical or first-hand experiences, and suggestions for further research.

## Surveys

Surveys allow you to find out some of what a group of people thinks about a topic. Designing an effective survey and interpreting the

data you get can be challenging, so it's a good idea to check with your instructor before creating or administering a survey.

## Experiments

Experimental data serve as the primary form of scientific evidence. For scientific experiments, you should follow the specific guidelines of the discipline you are studying. For writing in other fields, more informal experiments might be acceptable as evidence. For example, if you want to prove that food choices in a cafeteria are affected by gender norms, you might ask classmates to undermine those norms on purpose and observe how others react. What would happen if a football player were eating dinner with his teammates and he brought a small salad and diet drink to the table, all the while murmuring about his waistline and wondering how many fat grams the salad dressing contained?

## Personal experience

Using your own experiences can be a powerful way to appeal to your readers. You should, however, use personal experience only when it is appropriate to your topic, your writing goals, and your audience. Personal experience should not be your only form of evidence in most papers, and some disciplines frown on using personal experience at all. For example, a story about the microscope you received as a Christmas gift when you were nine years old is probably not applicable to your biology lab report.

## USING EVIDENCE IN AN ARGUMENT

### Does evidence speak for itself?

Absolutely not. After you introduce evidence into your writing, you must say *why* and *how* this evidence supports your argument. In other words, you have to explain the significance of the evidence and its function in your paper. What turns a fact or piece of information into evidence is the connection it has with a larger claim or argument: evidence is always evidence *for* or *against* something, and you have to make that link clear.

As writers, we sometimes assume that our readers already know what we are talking about; we may be wary of elaborating too much because we think the point is obvious. But readers can't read our minds: although they may be familiar with many of the ideas we are discussing, they don't know what we are trying to do with those ideas unless we indicate it through explanations, organization, transitions, and so forth. Try to spell out the connections that you were making in your mind when you chose your evidence, decided where to place it in your paper, and drew conclusions based on it. Remember, you can always cut prose from your paper later if you decide that you are stating the obvious.

**Here are some questions you can ask yourself about a particular bit of evidence:**

1. O.k., I've just stated this point, but so what? Why is it interesting? Why should anyone care?
2. What does this information imply?
3. What are the consequences of thinking this way or looking at a problem this way?
4. I've just described what something is like or how I see it, but why is it like that?
5. I've just said that something happens-so how does it happen?



How does it come to be the way it is?

6. Why is this information important? Why does it matter?
7. How is this idea related to my thesis? What connections exist between them? Does it support my thesis? If so, how does it do that?
8. Can I give an example to illustrate this point?

Answering these questions may help you explain how your evidence is related to your overall argument.

## HOW CAN I INCORPORATE EVIDENCE INTO MY PAPER?

There are many ways to present your evidence. Often, your evidence will be included as text in the body of your paper, as a quotation, paraphrase, or summary. Sometimes you might include graphs, charts, or tables; excerpts from an interview; or photographs or illustrations with accompanying captions.

### Quotations

When you quote, you are reproducing another writer's words exactly as they appear on the page. Here are some tips to help you decide when to use quotations:

1. Quote if you can't say it any better and the author's words are particularly brilliant, witty, edgy, distinctive, a good illustration of a point you're making, or otherwise interesting.
2. Quote if you are using a particularly authoritative source and you need the author's expertise to back up your point.
3. Quote if you are analyzing diction, tone, or a writer's use of a

specific word or phrase.

4. Quote if you are taking a position that relies on the reader's understanding exactly what another writer says about the topic.

Be sure to introduce each quotation you use, and always cite your sources. See our handout on quotations for more details on when to quote and how to format quotations.

Like all pieces of evidence, a quotation can't speak for itself. If you end a paragraph with a quotation, that may be a sign that you have neglected to discuss the importance of the quotation in terms of your argument. It's important to avoid "plop quotations," that is, quotations that are just dropped into your paper without any introduction, discussion, or follow-up.

## Paraphrasing

When you paraphrase, you take a specific section of a text and put it into your own words. Putting it into your own words doesn't mean just changing or rearranging a few of the author's words: to paraphrase well and avoid plagiarism, try setting your source aside and restating the sentence or paragraph you have just read, as though you were describing it to another person. Paraphrasing is different than summary because a paraphrase focuses on a particular, fairly short bit of text (like a phrase, sentence, or paragraph). You'll need to indicate when you are paraphrasing someone else's text by citing your source correctly, just as you would with a quotation.

When might you want to paraphrase?

1. Paraphrase when you want to introduce a writer's position, but his or her original words aren't special enough to quote.
2. Paraphrase when you are supporting a particular point and

need to draw on a certain place in a text that supports your point—for example, when one paragraph in a source is especially relevant.

3. Paraphrase when you want to present a writer's view on a topic that differs from your position or that of another writer; you can then refute writer's specific points in your own words after you paraphrase.
4. Paraphrase when you want to comment on a particular example that another writer uses.
5. Paraphrase when you need to present information that's unlikely to be questioned.

## Summary

When you summarize, you are offering an overview of an entire text, or at least a lengthy section of a text. Summary is useful when you are providing background information, grounding your own argument, or mentioning a source as a counter-argument. A summary is less nuanced than paraphrased material. It can be the most effective way to incorporate a large number of sources when you don't have a lot of space. When you are summarizing someone else's argument or ideas, be sure this is clear to the reader and cite your source appropriately.

## Statistics, data, charts, graphs, photographs, illustrations

Sometimes the best evidence for your argument is a hard fact or visual representation of a fact. This type of evidence can be a solid backbone for your argument, but you still need to create context for your reader and draw the connections you want him or her to

make. Remember that statistics, data, charts, graph, photographs, and illustrations are all open to interpretation. Guide the reader through the interpretation process. Again, always, cite the origin of your evidence if you didn't produce the material you are using yourself.

## DO I NEED MORE EVIDENCE?

Let's say that you've identified some appropriate sources, found some evidence, explained to the reader how it fits into your overall argument, incorporated it into your draft effectively, and cited your sources. How do you tell whether you've got enough evidence and whether it's working well in the service of a strong argument or analysis? Here are some techniques you can use to review your draft and assess your use of evidence.

### Make a reverse outline

A reverse outline is a great technique for helping you see how each paragraph contributes to proving your thesis. When you make a reverse outline, you record the main ideas in each paragraph in a shorter (outline-like) form so that you can see at a glance what is in your paper. The reverse outline is helpful in at least three ways. First, it lets you see where you have dealt with too many topics in one paragraph (in general, you should have one main idea per paragraph). Second, the reverse outline can help you see where you need more evidence to prove your point or more analysis of that evidence. Third, the reverse outline can help you write your topic sentences: once you have decided what you want each paragraph to be about, you can write topic sentences that explain the topics of

the paragraphs and state the relationship of each topic to the overall thesis of the paper.

For tips on making a reverse outline, see our handout on organization.

## Color code your paper

You will need three highlighters or colored pencils for this exercise. Use one color to highlight general assertions. These will typically be the topic sentences in your paper. Next, use another color to highlight the specific evidence you provide for each assertion (including quotations, paraphrased or summarized material, statistics, examples, and your own ideas). Lastly, use another color to highlight analysis of your evidence. Which assertions are key to your overall argument? Which ones are especially contestable? How much evidence do you have for each assertion? How much analysis? In general, you should have at least as much analysis as you do evidence, or your paper runs the risk of being more summary than argument. The more controversial an assertion is, the more evidence you may need to provide in order to persuade your reader.

## Play devil's advocate, act like a child, or doubt everything

This technique may be easiest to use with a partner. Ask your friend to take on one of the roles above, then read your paper aloud to him/her. After each section, pause and let your friend interrogate you. If your friend is playing devil's advocate, he or she will always take the opposing viewpoint and force you to keep defending yourself. If your friend is acting like a child, he or she will question every sentence, even seemingly self-explanatory ones. If your friend

is a doubter, he or she won't believe anything you say. Justifying your position verbally or explaining yourself will force you to strengthen the evidence in your paper. If you already have enough evidence but haven't connected it clearly enough to your main argument, explaining to your friend how the evidence is relevant or what it proves may help you to do so.

## COMMON QUESTIONS AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- I have a general topic in mind; how can I develop it so I'll know what evidence I need? And how can I get ideas for more evidence? See our handout on brainstorming.
- Who can help me find evidence on my topic? Check out UNC Libraries.
- I'm writing for a specific purpose; how can I tell what kind of evidence my audience wants? See our handouts on audience, writing for specific disciplines, and particular writing assignments.
- How should I read materials to gather evidence? See our handout on reading to write.
- How can I make a good argument? Check out our handouts on argument and thesis statements.
- How do I tell if my paragraphs and my paper are well-organized? Review our handouts on paragraph development, transitions, and reorganizing drafts.
- How do I quote my sources and incorporate those quotes into my text? Our handouts on quotations and avoiding plagiarism offer useful tips.
- How do I cite my evidence? See the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.
- I think that I'm giving evidence, but my instructor says I'm using too much summary. How can I tell? Check out our

handout on using summary wisely.

- I want to use personal experience as evidence, but can I say “I”? We have a handout on when to use “I.”

## WORKS CONSULTED

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Lunsford, Andrea A., and John J. Ruszkiewicz, John J. Everything’s an argument. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999

Miller, Richard E., and Kurt Spellmeyer. The New Humanities Reader Home Page. 22 Feb. 2005 [http://www.newhum.com/for\\_students/tutorama/index.html](http://www.newhum.com/for_students/tutorama/index.html).

[http://www.lib.umd.edu/UES/library\\_guides\\_subject.html](http://www.lib.umd.edu/UES/library_guides_subject.html)

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## 32. Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Avoiding Plagiarism

- How to Summarize: An Overview
- How to Quote and Paraphrase: An Overview
- When to Quote, When to Paraphrase
- Four Examples of Quotes and Paraphrases
- How to Avoid Plagiarism in the Research Process
- Plagiarism and the Internet

Learning how to effectively quote and paraphrase research can be difficult and it certainly takes practice. Hopefully, your abilities to make good use of your research will improve as you work through the exercises in part two and three of *The Process of Research Writing*, not to mention as you take on other research writing experiences beyond this class. The goal of this chapter is to introduce some basic strategies for summarizing, quoting and paraphrasing research in your writing and to explain how to avoid plagiarizing your research.

### How to Summarize: An Overview

A summary is a brief explanation of a longer text. Some summaries, such as the ones that accompany annotated bibliographies, are very short, just a sentence or two. Others are much longer, though summaries are always much shorter than the text being summarized in the first place.

Summaries of different lengths are useful in research writing because you often need to provide your readers with an explanation of the text you are discussing. This is especially true when you are going to quote or paraphrase from a source.



Of course, the first step in writing a good summary is to do a thorough reading of the text you are going to summarize in the first place. Beyond that important start, there are a few basic guidelines you should follow when you write summary material:

- Stay “neutral” in your summarizing. Summaries provide “just the facts” and are not the place where you offer your opinions about the text you are summarizing. Save your opinions and evaluation of the evidence you are summarizing for other parts of your writing.
- Don’t quote from what you are summarizing. Summaries will be more useful to you and your colleagues if you write them in your own words.
- Don’t “cut and paste” from database abstracts. Many of the periodical indexes that are available as part of your library’s computer system include abstracts of articles. Do not “cut” this abstract material and then “paste” it into your own annotated bibliography. For one thing, this is plagiarism. Second, “cutting and pasting” from the abstract defeats one of the purposes of writing summaries and creating an annotated bibliography in the first place, which is to help you understand and explain your research.

## How to Quote and Paraphrase: An Overview

Writers quote and paraphrase from research in order to support their points and to persuade their readers. A quote or a paraphrase from a piece of evidence in support of a point answers the reader’s question, “says who?”

This is especially true in academic writing since scholarly readers are most persuaded by effective research and evidence. For example, readers of an article about a new cancer medication published in a medical journal will be most interested in the

scholar's research and statistics that demonstrate the effectiveness of the treatment. Conversely, they will not be as persuaded by emotional stories from individual patients about how a new cancer medication improved the quality of their lives. While this appeal to emotion can be effective and is common in popular sources, these individual anecdotes do not carry the same sort of "scholarly" or scientific value as well-reasoned research and evidence.

Of course, your instructor is not expecting you to be an expert on the topic of your research paper. While you might conduct some primary research, it's a good bet that you'll be relying on secondary sources such as books, articles, and Web sites to inform and persuade your readers. You'll present this research to your readers in the form of quotes and paraphrases.

A "quote" is a direct restatement of the exact words from the original source. The general rule of thumb is any time you use three or more words as they appeared in the original source, you should treat it as a quote. A "paraphrase" is a restatement of the information or point of the original source in your own words.

While quotes and paraphrases are different and should be used in different ways in your research writing (as the examples in this section suggest), they do have a number of things in common.

Both quotes and paraphrases should:

- be "introduced" to the reader, particularly the first time you mention a source;
- include an explanation of the evidence which explains to the reader why you think the evidence is important, especially if it is not apparent from the context of the quote or paraphrase; and
- include a proper citation of the source.

The method you should follow to properly quote or paraphrase depends on the style guide you are following in your academic writing. The two most common style guides used in academic writing are the Modern Language Association (MLA), and the

American Psychological Association (APA). I discuss both of these different style guides in some detail in the Appendix of this book.

Your instructor will probably assign one of these styles before you begin working on your project, however, if he/she doesn't mention this, be sure to ask.

## When to Quote, When to Paraphrase

The real “art” to research writing is using quotes and paraphrases from evidence effectively in order to support your point. There are certain “rules,” dictated by the rules of style you are following, such as the ones presented by the MLA or the ones presented by the APA. There are certain “guidelines” and suggestions, like the ones I offer in the previous section and the ones you will learn from your teacher and colleagues.

But when all is said and done, the question of when to quote and when to paraphrase depends a great deal on the specific context of the writing and the effect you are trying to achieve. Learning the best times to quote and paraphrase takes practice and experience.

In general, **it is best to use a quote when:**

- **The exact words of your source are important for the point you are trying to make.** This is especially true if you are quoting technical language, terms, or very specific word choices.
- **You want to highlight your *agreement* with the author's words.** If you agree with the point the author of the evidence makes and you like their exact words, use them as a quote.
- **You want to highlight your *disagreement* with the author's words.** In other words, you may sometimes want to use a direct quote to indicate exactly what it is you disagree about. This might be particularly true when you are considering the antithetical positions in your research writing projects.

In general, **it is best to paraphrase when:**

- **There is no good reason to use a quote to refer to your evidence.** If the author's exact words are not especially important to the point you are trying to make, you are usually better off paraphrasing the evidence.
- **You are trying to explain a particular a piece of evidence in order to explain or interpret it in more detail.** This might be particularly true in writing projects like critiques.
- **You need to balance a direct quote in your writing.** You need to be careful about directly quoting your research too much because it can sometimes make for awkward and difficult to read prose. So, one of the reasons to use a paraphrase instead of a quote is to create balance within your writing.

## Tips for Quoting and Paraphrasing

- **Introduce** your quotes and paraphrases to your reader, especially on first reference.
- **Explain** the significance of the quote or paraphrase to your reader.
- **Cite** your quote or paraphrase properly according to the rules of style you are following in your essay.
- **Quote when** the exact words are important, when you want to highlight your agreement or your disagreement.
- **Paraphrase when** the exact words aren't important, when you want to explain the point of your evidence, or when you need to balance the direct quotes in your writing.

## Four Examples of Quotes and Paraphrases

Here are four examples of what I mean about properly quoting and paraphrasing evidence in your research essays. In each case, I begin with a **BAD** example, or the way **NOT** to quote or paraphrase.

## Quoting in MLA Style

Here's the first **BAD** example, where the writer is trying to follow the rules of MLA style:

There are many positive effects for advertising prescription drugs on television. "African-American physicians regard direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription medicines as one way to educate minority patients about needed treatment and healthcare options" (Wechsler, Internet).

This is a potentially good piece of information to support a research writer's claim, but the researcher hasn't done any of the necessary work to explain where this quote comes from or to explain why it is important for supporting her point. Rather, she has simply "dropped in" the quote, leaving the interpretation of its significance up to the reader.

Now consider this revised **GOOD** (or at least **BETTER**) example of how this quote might be better introduced into the essay:

In her *Pharmaceutical Executive* article available through the Wilson Select Internet database, Jill Wechsler writes about one of the positive effects of advertising prescription drugs on television. "African-American physicians regard direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription medicines as one way to educate minority patients about needed treatment and healthcare options."

In this revision, it's much more clear what point the writer is trying to make with this evidence and where this evidence comes from. In this particular example, the passage is from a traditional print journal called *Pharmaceutical Executive*. However, the writer needs to indicate that she actually found and read this article through

Wilson Select, an Internet database which reproduces the “full text” of articles from periodicals without any graphics, charts, or page numbers.

When you use a direct quote in your research, you need to the indicate page number of that direct quote or you need to indicate that the evidence has no specific page numbers. While it can be a bit awkward to indicate within the text how the writer found this information if it's from the Internet, it's important to do so on the first reference of a piece of evidence in your writing. On references to this piece of evidence after the first reference, you can use just the last name of the writer. For example:

Wechsler also reports on the positive effects of advertising prescription drugs on television. She writes...

## Paraphrasing in MLA Style

In this example, the writer is using MLA style to write a research essay for a Literature class. Here is a **BAD** example of a paraphrase:

While Gatsby is deeply in love with Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*, his love for her is indistinguishable from his love of his possessions (Callahan).

There are two problems with this paraphrase. First, if this is the first or only reference to this particular piece of evidence in the research essay, the writer should include more information about the source of this paraphrase in order to properly introduce it.

Second, this paraphrase is actually not of the entire article but rather of a specific passage. The writer has neglected to note the page number within the parenthetical citation.

A **GOOD** or at least **BETTER** revision of this paraphrase might look like this:

John F. Callahan suggests in his article “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Evolving American Dream” that while Gatsby is deeply in love with Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*, his love for her is

indistinguishable from his love of his possessions (381). By incorporating the name of the author of the evidence the research writer is referring to here, the source of this paraphrase is now clear to the reader. Furthermore, because there is a page number at the end of this sentence, the reader understands that this passage is a paraphrase of a particular part of Callahan's essay and not a summary of the entire essay. Again, if the research writer had introduced this source to his readers earlier, he could have started with a phrase like "Callahan suggests..." and then continued on with his paraphrase. If the research writer were offering a brief summary of the entire essay following MLA style, he wouldn't include a page number in parentheses. For example:

John F. Callahan's article "F. Scott Fitzgerald's Evolving American Dream" examines Fitzgerald's fascination with the elusiveness of the American Dream in the novels *The Great Gatsby*, *Tender is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon*.

## Quoting in APA Style

Consider this **BAD** example in APA style, of what **NOT** to do when quoting evidence:

"If the U.S. scallop fishery were a business, its management would surely be fired, because its revenues could readily be increased by at least 50 percent while its costs were being reduced by an equal percentage." (Repetto, 2001, p. 84).

Again, this is a potentially valuable piece of evidence, but it simply isn't clear what point the research writer is trying to make with it.

Further, it doesn't follow the preferred method of citation with APA style.

Here is a revision that is a **GOOD** or at least **BETTER** example:

Repetto (2001) concludes that in the case of the scallop industry, those running the industry should be held

responsible for not considering methods that would curtail the problems of over-fishing. “If the U.S. scallop fishery were a business, its management would surely be fired, because its revenues could readily be increased by at least 50 percent while its costs were being reduced by an equal percentage” (p. 84).

This revision is improved because the research writer has introduced and explained the point of the evidence with the addition of a clarifying sentence. It also follows the rules of APA style. Generally, APA style prefers that the research writer refer to the author only by last name followed immediately by the year of publication. Whenever possible, you should begin your citation with the author’s last name and the year of publication, and, in the case of a direct quote like this passage, the page number (including the “p.”) in parentheses at the end.

## Paraphrasing in APA Style

Paraphrasing in APA style is slightly different from MLA style as well. Consider first this **BAD** example of what NOT to do in paraphrasing from a source in APA style:

Computer criminals have lots of ways to get away with credit card fraud (Cameron, 2002).

The main problem with this paraphrase is there isn’t enough here to adequately explain to the reader what the point of the evidence really is. Remember: your readers have no way of automatically knowing why you as a research writer think that a particular piece of evidence is useful in supporting your point. This is why it is key that you introduce and explain your evidence.

Here is a revision that is **GOOD** or at least **BETTER**:

Cameron (2002) points out that computer criminals intent on committing credit card fraud are able to take advantage of the fact that there aren’t enough officials working to enforce



computer crimes. Criminals are also able to use the technology to their advantage by communicating via email and chat rooms with other criminals.

Again, this revision is better because the additional information introduces and explains the point of the evidence. In this particular example, the author's name is also incorporated into the explanation of the evidence as well. In APA, it is preferable to weave in the author's name into your essay, usually at the beginning of a sentence. However, it would also have been acceptable to end an improved paraphrase with just the author's last name and the date of publication in parentheses.

## How to Avoid Plagiarism in the Research Process

Plagiarism is the unauthorized or uncredited use of the writings or ideas of another in your writing. While it might not be as tangible as auto theft or burglary, plagiarism is still a form of theft.

In the academic world, plagiarism is a serious matter because ideas in the forms of research, creative work, and original thought are highly valued. Chances are, your school has strict rules about what happens when someone is caught plagiarizing. The penalty for plagiarism is severe, everything from a failing grade for the plagiarized work, a failing grade for the class, or expulsion from the institution.

You might not be aware that plagiarism can take several different forms. The most well known, **purposeful plagiarism**, is handing in an essay written by someone else and representing it as your own, copying your essay word for word from a magazine or journal, or downloading an essay from the Internet.

A much more common and less understood phenomenon is what I call **accidental plagiarism**. Accidental plagiarism is the result of improperly paraphrasing, summarizing, quoting, or citing your evidence in your academic writing. Generally, writers accidentally

plagiarize because they simply don't know or they fail to follow the rules for giving credit to the ideas of others in their writing. Both purposeful and accidental plagiarism are wrong, against the rules, and can result in harsh punishments. Ignoring or not knowing the rules of how to not plagiarize and properly cite evidence might be an *explanation*, but it is not an excuse. To exemplify what I'm getting at, consider the examples below that use quotations and paraphrases from this brief passage:

Those who denounce cyberculture today strangely resemble those who criticized rock music during the fifties and sixties. Rock started out as an Anglo-American phenomenon and has become an industry. Nonetheless, it was able to capture the hopes of young people around the world and provided enjoyment to those of us who listened to or played rock. Sixties pop was the conscience of one or two generations that helped bring the war in Vietnam to a close. Obviously, neither rock nor pop has solved global poverty or hunger. But is this a reason to be "against" them? (ix).

And just to make it clear that I'm not plagiarizing this passage, here is the citation in MLA style:

Lévy, Pierre. *Cyberculture*. Trans. Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.

Here's an obvious example of plagiarism:

Those who denounce cyberculture today strangely resemble those who criticized rock music during the fifties and sixties.

In this case, the writer has literally taken one of Lévy's sentences and represented it as her own. That's clearly against the rules.

Here's another example of plagiarism, perhaps less obvious:

The same kind of people who criticize cyberculture are the same kind of people who criticized rock and roll music back in the fifties and sixties. But both cyberculture and rock music inspire and entertain young people.

While these aren't Lévy's exact words, they are certainly close enough to constitute a form of plagiarism. And again, even though

you might think that this is a “lesser” form of plagiarism, it’s still plagiarism.

Both of these passages can easily be corrected to make them acceptable quotations or paraphrases.

**In the introduction of his book *Cyberculture*, Pierre Lévy observes that** “Those who denounce cyberculture today strangely resemble those who criticized rock music during the fifties and sixties” **(ix).**

**Pierre Lévy suggests** that the same kind of people who criticize cyberculture are the same kind of people who criticized rock and roll music back in the fifties and sixties. But both cyberculture and rock music inspire and entertain young people **(ix).**

Note that changing these passages from examples of plagiarism to acceptable examples of a quotation and a paraphrase is extremely easy: properly cite your sources.

This leads to the “golden rule” of avoiding plagiarism:

Always cite your sources. If you are unsure as to whether you should or should not cite a particular claim or reference, you should probably cite your source.

Often, students are unclear as to whether or not they need to cite a piece of evidence because they believe it to be “common knowledge” or because they are not sure about the source of information. When in doubt about whether or not to cite evidence in order to give credit to a source (“common knowledge” or not), you should cite the evidence.

## Plagiarism and the Internet

Sometimes, I think the ease of finding and retrieving information on the World Wide Web makes readers think that this information does not need to be cited. After all, it isn’t a traditional source like

a book or a journal; it is available for “free.” All a research writer needs to do with a web site is “cut and paste” whatever he needs into his essay, right? Wrong!

**You need to cite the evidence you find from the Internet or the World Wide Web the same way you cite evidence from other sources.** To not do this is plagiarism, or, more bluntly, cheating.

Just because the information is “freely” available on the Internet does not mean you can use this information in your academic writing without properly citing it, much in the same way that the information from library journals and books “freely” available to you needs to be cited in order to give credit where credit is due.

It is also not acceptable to simply download graphics from the World Wide Web. Images found on the Internet are protected by copyright laws. Quite literally, taking images from the Web (particularly from commercial sources) is an offense that could lead to legal action. There are places where you can find graphics and clip art that Web publishers have made publicly available for anyone to use, but be sure that the Web site where you find the graphics makes this explicit before you take graphics as your own. In short, you can use evidence from the Web as long as you don’t plagiarize and as long as you properly cite it; don’t take graphics from the Web unless you know the images are in the public domain.

# 33. Research Strategies

[Click here to view Chapter 14: Research Strategies.](#)

# 34. Googlepedia: Turning Information Behaviors into Research Skills

Click [here](#) to view the *Googlepedia: Turning Information Behaviors into Research Skills* chapter.

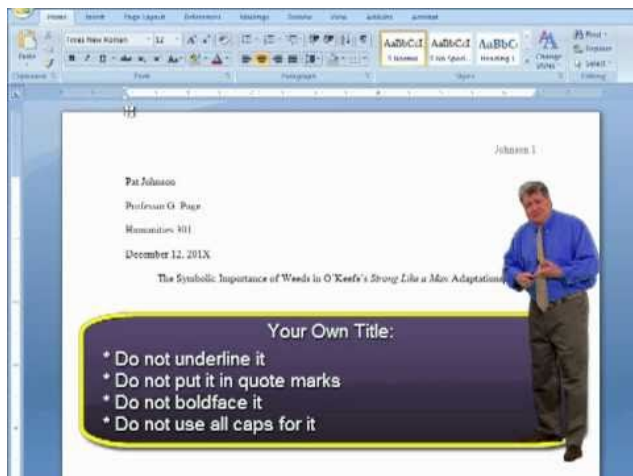
PART VIII

USING PRIMARY AND  
SECONDARY SOURCES





## 35. MLA Format



A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://library.achievingthedream.org/westhillsscenglish1a/?p=59>

### Formatting the Works Cited Page (MLA)

Whenever you incorporate outside sources into your own writing, you must provide both in-text citations (within the body of the paper) and full citations (in the works cited page). The in-text citations point your reader toward the full citations in the works cited page.

That's why the first bit of information in your in-text citation (generally, the author's name; if no name is provided, the title of the article/book/webpage) should directly match up with the beginning of your works cited entry for that source. For further information about in-text citations, please read "Formatting In-Text Citations."

For example, let's say I have a quote from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* in my research paper. Within the body of the paper, following the quote, I include the following in-text citation: (Anderson 56). This information points to the book's entry in my works cited page:

Anderson, Benedict.  
*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006. Print.

[Read more...](#)

## Formatting In-text Citations (MLA)

*How might you format your in-text citations so that they're more compliant with MLA guidelines?*

You already know why MLA formatting guidelines are an important part of an academic paper, but let's face it—who can remember all those rules about when and where certain citation information is requisite and when and where particular punctuation is appropriate? Thankfully, memorizing all of MLA's formatting guidelines is not necessary! MLA style guides can be found easily online or in texts like

*The MLA Handbook*, and writers can refer to these resources when they are unclear about a particular MLA style guideline.

Nonetheless, as you create multiple drafts of your composition papers, there are some MLA conventions that you will need to call

on time and time again. In particular, as you integrate source material masterfully into your work, you will be required to call on proper in-text citation guidelines repeatedly. It is therefore important that you take the time to memorize the MLA guidelines for in-text citations.

[Read more...](#)

## MLA Checklist

- Is the heading in the upper left-hand corner of the first page?
- Does the heading include:
  - Your name?
  - Your instructor's name?
  - The course name?
  - The date?
- Does the paper have an original title (other than something like "Final Paper")?
  - Is the title presented without being bolded, italicized, or placed in quotation marks
- [Read more...](#)

## MLA Template

[Read more...](#)

## Exercise: In-text Citations (MLA)

Look at the sentences below, each of which contains an incorrectly formatted in-text citation. Specify the error made in each sentence;

then, write a new sentence in which the in-text citation is correctly formatted.

1. The parlor metaphor of writing describes writing as entering into a conversation, as in arriving late and a parlor and talking to guests who have been there long before you have (7).

2. In “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love,” Jim Corder explains that “Everyone is an argument.” (1)

3. David Sedaris’s  
*Me Talk Pretty One Day* takes place at a school in Paris (Sedaris 1).  
Read more...

## 36. Formatting the Works Cited Page (MLA)

Whenever you incorporate outside sources into your own writing, you must provide both in-text citations (within the body of the paper) and full citations (in the works cited page). The in-text citations point your reader toward the full citations in the works cited page.

That's why the first bit of information in your in-text citation (generally, the author's name; if no name is provided, the title of the article/book/webpage) should directly match up with the beginning of your works cited entry for that source.

For example, let's say I have a quote from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* in my research paper. Within the body of the paper, following the quote, I include the following in-text citation: (Anderson 56). This information points to the book's entry in my works cited page:

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006. Print.

When your reader sees the in-text citation in your essay, she may decide that the source might be valuable for her own research. When she looks at the works cited page, she can easily locate the source (because the works cited page is alphabetized and because she has the in-text citation as her referent) and then can use the full citation to retrieve a copy of the source for her own research. But aside from providing the reader with resources for her own research, the works cited page serves another function: it establishes the writer's credibility. If a writer fails to include in-text citations and/or a works cited page, that writer has plagiarized because he or she has neglected to provide the publication information of the source. In addition, when a reader locates undocumented information in an essay, she will likely think that the

information was made up by the writer or that the information was stolen from a source, or plagiarized. And when a reader peruses a writer's works cited page, she can see the types of sources used by the writer, assessing those sources in terms of their credibility. For instance, if a reader reads my works cited page and sees I cite sources from university presses such as Oxford UP and Cambridge UP, she will know that I've incorporated credible sources into my research paper. Thus, including both in-text citations and a works cited page in a research paper provides the writer with ethos, or credibility.

Now let's take a look at how to properly format a works cited page according to MLA guidelines:

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Yirinec 38

#### Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Boucicault, Dion. "Jessie Brown; or, The Relief of Lucknow." *Plays by Dion Boucicault*. Ed Peter Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. Print.
- Bratlinger, Patrick. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988. Print.
- Carens, Timothy. *Outlandish English Subjects in the Victorian Domestic Novel*. Cambridge: Palgrave, 2005. Print.
- Collins, Wilkie. *The Moonstone*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002. Print.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Voyage of the Beagle*. New York: Modern Library, 2001. Print.
- Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. *The Sign of the Four*. London: Aziloth Books, 2010. Print.
- Haggard, H. Rider. *She*. Breinigsville, PA: Dodo, 2011. Print.
- Herbert, Christopher. *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008. Print.

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## Placement

According to MLA guidelines, the works cited page should appear after the body of your paper and any accompanying endnotes. It should begin on a new page, and the pagination should continue from the body of the paper. In the above example, the works cited page begins on page 38, which means that the essay concluded on page 37.

## General Format

The works cited page should be double-spaced throughout. The first line of each entry should be flush with the left margin; if the entry extends more than one line, ensuing lines should be indented 1/2 inch from the left margin. The first page of the works cited list should have the title “Works Cited,” not “Bibliography.” The works cited title should appear in the same manner as the paper’s title: capitalized and centered—not bolded, within quotation marks, italicized, underlined, or in a larger font.

## Entries

The entries should be alphabetized based on the author’s last name. According to MLA guidelines, author names come first in an entry, then titles, then the publication information (city of publication, publisher, and date of publication), and then the type of media—the details for different types of sources vary, but this is the general structure followed. Note that if the city is not “well-known” and

there is more than one city with that name, unlike New York and London, then the state or territory should be included after the city, e.g., “Roswell, GA: 2006.” If no name is provided for a given source, the title of the work/webpage will take the place of the author’s last name and should still be placed in its proper alphabetical location. Also note that “university” and “press” are always abbreviated “U” and “P” in works cited entries.

Here are some guidelines for commonly used sources:

## Single-Authored Book

Last Name, First Name. *Title of Book*. Place of Publication: Publisher, Date of Publication. Type of media.

Example:

Bratlinger, Patrick. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988. Print.

## Book with Multiple Authors

Last Name, First Name (of first author listed), and First Name Last Name (of second author, etc.).

*Title of Book*. Place of Publication: Publisher, Date of Publication. Type of media.

Example:

Sabherhagen, Fred, and James V. Hart. *Bram Stoker’s Dracula: A Francis Ford Coppola Film*. New York: Signet, 1992. Print.



## Article or Chapter in an Edited Collection (or Textbook)

Last Name, First Name. "Article Title." *Title of Book*. Ed. First Name Last Name (of Editor). Place of Publication: Publisher, Date of Publication. Page Range of Article. Type of Media.

Example:

Vieregge, Quentin. "Writing as Process." *Negotiating Writing Spaces*. Ed. Jennifer Yirinec and Lauren Cutlip. Plymouth, MI: Hayden-McNeil, 2011. 57–59. Print.

## Article in a Print Journal

Last Name, First Name. "Article Title." *Title of Journal*. Volume #.Issue # (Date of publication): Page Range of Article. Print.

Example:

Rogers, Pat. "Crusoe's Home." *Essays in Criticism* 24.4 (Oct. 1974): 375–90. Print.

## Journal Article Accessed Using an Electronic Database

Last Name, First Name. "Article Title." *Journal Name* Volume #.Issue # (Date of publication): Page Range of Article. Database. Web. Date of Access.

Example:

Lamont, Rose C. "Coma versus Comma: John Donne's Holy Sonnets in Edson's WIT." *The Massachusetts Review* 40.4 (Winter 1999–2000): 569–75. JSTOR. Web. 30 April 2012.

## Article Accessed from an Online Journal

Last Name, First Name. "Article Title." *Journal Name* Volume #.Issue # (Date of publication): n.pag. Web. Date of Access.

Example:

Haynsworth, Leslie. "All the Detective's Men: Binary Coding of Masculine Identity in the Sherlock Holmes Stories." *Victorians Institute Journal* 38 (2010): n.pag. Web. 16 May 2012.

## Article from a Webpage

Last Name, First Name (if given). "Title of Webpage." *Website Title*. Publisher of website (often found at the bottom of the page), date of last update. Web. Date of Access. See (URL is only necessary if you think your reader won't easily be able to locate the webpage).

Example:

"Opening Night: Wit Starring Cynthia Nixon." *Broadway.com*. Broadway.com, Inc., 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2012.

## Entire Website

*Website Title*. Publisher of website, date of last update. Date of Access. See (URL is only necessary if you think your reader won't easily be able to locate the webpage).

Example:

*Broadway.com*. Broadway.com, Inc., 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2012.

For information about how to format the works cited entries for different sources, consult *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th edition). Or, consult the Purdue OWL.

# 37. Quoting and Paraphrasing

## The Basics of Quotations

When you're writing a paper, it is important to avoid vague generalizations, especially when it comes to paraphrasing other authors.

### *Learning Objectives*

Identify problematic generalizations

### *Key Takeaways*

#### *Key Points*

- Vague terms like “critics say” or “is widely regarded as” that attempt to take the place of particular examples weaken evidence by not citing specific sources.
- Quoting and paraphrasing the ideas and knowledge others have set forth is a way to show your reader how you arrived at your conclusions.

- You must always cite ideas, as well as any other information other than commonly known and accepted facts.
- Quotations are most appropriate when the author is particularly well-known, when you want to add an air of authority to the information, and when the exact words are particularly eloquent.
- Paraphrasing gives you more flexibility with sentence structure and allows the reader to hear your unique voice and reasoning in the paper.

### *Key Terms*

- **quote:** To repeat the exact words of another with the acknowledgement of the source.
- **quotation:** A fragment of a human expression that is being referred to by somebody else.
- **paraphrase:** To restate another's thoughts or ideas in different words.

## Avoiding Generalities

When writing a paper, it is important to avoid vague generalizations, especially when it comes to characterizing the thoughts of others, whether they hold similar or contrary positions to your own. Catch-all phrases such as “critics say” or “is widely regarded as” are vague and unconvincing because they have no basis for verification. These types of phrases might *seem* useful to condense research where

you've discovered ubiquitous agreement on a particular position, but in those cases, it would be better to cite a series of authors or quote a particular instance rather than make a sweeping generalization. A properly placed quotation can articulate your position and provide substantiation at the same time. Most often a quotation is taken from the literature, but also sentences from a speech, scenes from a movie, elements of a painting, etc. may be quoted if they further the argument you're trying to make.

Did it drive you crazy as a kid when an adult in your life told you you had to do something "Because I said so!" and offered no other justification? Think of that when you're about to write, "They say that..." or "Most people agree..." You're not giving the reader any reason to believe you. They're going to furrow their brows just as you did as a child, and your trust with your reader will be compromised.

## Collecting Quotations

While you're researching your topic, when a brilliantly worded sentence catches your eye, save it. When you find a statement summarizing evidence you plan to use or evidence you think you might use, save it. Look for statements that concur with your argument, but also for assertions that contradict your claims, as you'll use these for refutation purposes.

You can use programs like Zotero or EndNote, or simply drag the quotation into a document. Just make sure you're also saving the complete source material (for both in-text citations and the reference page), so you won't have to go searching for it later. If you can organize your quotations by topic, so much the better. They'll be much easier to find when you need them.

## When to Quote, Paraphrase, and Cite

It's important first to recognize when citations are required. In the U.S., ideas are always attributed to the thinker or writer, as are any facts discovered through research. If you find information at a particular source, you'll usually need to cite that source, though commonly known and accepted facts (such as the undisputed dates of a particular war, for example, or the pound equivalent of 32 ounces) need not be cited.

There are times when a quotation will give you maximum impact and times when paraphrasing is more effective. Look at the following alternatives in a paper about transforming cultural mores.

- “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong,” (Gandhi, 1931).
- In fact, as Gandhi said in 1931, offering forgiveness is not a display of weakness, but indeed, its opposite.

In this case, while the second sentence isn't a bad summary of the idea, both the syntax of the direct quote and the reputation of the speaker make the quotation far more powerful than the paraphrased reference. Quotations are useful when the author is particularly well-known, when you want to add an air of authority to the information, and when the exact words are particularly eloquent or historically significant. This one meets all the criteria.

Here's one from an essay about the use of alternative medicine:

- One bright spot in the ongoing campaign against human trafficking has been the United Nations, founded after the World War II.

In this case, there's no need to quote or paraphrase. The first part of the sentence is your opinion, and the second part is general and undisputed knowledge. Widely accepted facts like when the UN was founded needn't be paraphrased or cited. If you were to then

go on to tell us what exactly the UN has done to combat human trafficking, you'd need to cite your sources.

Here's an example of paraphrasing:

- There are actually 69,436,660 registered Catholics in the United States (22% of the U.S. population) according to the American bishops' count in their Official Catholic Directory 2013.

You wouldn't need to quote the directory, because there's no more power in the quote than in your summary of it. But since it is a precise number that isn't common knowledge, you do need to cite it. Notice that the word "actually" is coloring the phrase. It's the author's way of disputing a possible perception that the religion is in decline. This is how using your own words gives the option of contextualizing. Paraphrasing gives you more flexibility with sentence structure and allows the reader to hear your unique voice and reasoning in the paper.

The catch with paraphrasing is that you need to be sure that all the words you're using are actually your own, other than conventional terms and designations (like "registered Catholics"). If there are particular phrases within a work you're paraphrasing that you'd like to quote directly, you'll want to put quotes around those phrases, like this:

In *Democracy Matters*, for example, West advocates revisiting the foundation of the U.S. Constitution to recognize and counter "free market fundamentalism" which he believes, among other policies, has undercut the document's intention (West, 2004).

Here, the phrase "free market fundamentalism" is clearly a phrase unique to West's work and must be recognized as such by using the quotation marks.

## To Quote or to Paraphrase?

Consider whether you should quote, paraphrase, or simply state the following examples:

1. On life: “90 percent of it is half mental.”
2. About 68 percent [of people over age 25 in the U.S.] do not have a bachelor’s degree.
3. Fewer homes were lost to fires in San Diego County last year than this year.
4. Bitter herb combinations have been used for centuries to stimulate the digestive system.
5. “[The disappearance of honeybees] is the biggest general threat to our food supply.”

The first sentence is a good example of something you should quote. Knowing who said it (Yogi Berra) is important, because it’s an original thought, and because knowing the speaker is one reason why it’s funny. You wouldn’t want to paraphrase it because the exact words are important to the humor and the wording is unique to the speaker.

Number 2 could be paraphrased or quoted, but paraphrasing might be the better choice because you could leave out the brackets and put the statistic in context of whatever you’re writing about—for example, “In fact, despite the assumptions of many middle class parents, only about 32 percent of people living in the United States have completed a bachelor’s degree,” (2015, Politifact.com).

Number 3 is a bit of a gray area as far as citation is concerned. You might assume that it’s a common fact that could be found anywhere, and so you wouldn’t need to cite it. That said, it may depend on the context of the quote, and whether it’s a disputed idea. If your reader questions it, you’re going to lose credibility without a citation that he or she can follow up on. If it is disputed, you’ll want to paraphrase and cite the source. It’s not likely that



quoting directly would provide more credibility, so it is therefore unnecessary.

Number 4 would generally not need to be cited, though you'll likely be following it up with more specific information that will. You might consider that a quote from an herbalist or doctor offering the same information might give the skeptical reader a feeling of being on more solid ground.

Number 5 is one you'll want to quote directly, as the person who said it (Kevin Hackett, of the USDA) is a key person in the debate about honeybee colony collapse and what to do about it. You'll note that there's no question about whether or not to cite the source, because it's an original thought, not a common fact.

You see, then, that while the issue of citation is relatively straightforward—when in doubt, cite—the question of quotation versus paraphrase is subtler. It's a decision based both on the needs of the argument and artistic sensibility.

The revision process will be helpful in this regard. You'll notice if your paper plods from one quote to another, overwhelming the reader with other people's words. You'll also notice whether it seems less than authoritative and needs the backing of direct quotes. The citations, throughout, are a foundational element, showing the reader how your argument developed and why you think as you do about the subject. Let those whose shoulders you're standing on support you, but don't let them take over. It's your paper, after all.

## Introducing and Formatting Quotations

To quote an author, copy the author's exact language and use quotation marks to show you are reproducing language from another source.

## *Learning Objectives*

Apply formatting rules for using quotations

## *Key Takeaways*

### *Key Points*

- Use quotation marks around a statement to give the original writer or speaker credit.
- When you introduce a quote, pay close attention to the proper use of quotation marks and related punctuation.
- To paraphrase is to restate another author's point in your own words. When you paraphrase, you don't need to use quotation marks, but you still need to give credit to the author and provide a citation. Otherwise, you are committing plagiarism.

### *Key Terms*

- **paraphrase:** A restatement of a text in different words, often to clarify meaning.
- **quotation marks:** Symbols used to denote a

quotation in writing, written at the beginning and end of the quotation.

- **quotation:** A fragment of a human expression that is being referred to by somebody else.

## Quoting versus Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is using a particular idea that you took from another author and putting it in your own words. Quoting is using the exact words of another author. Both methods help you introduce another author's work as a means of strategically improving the persuasiveness of your paper. Generally, you will choose a quotation rather than paraphrasing when you want to add an air of authority to the information you're presenting, when the words you're using are offered by a source important to your particular topic, or when the exact words have historical relevance or are particularly eloquent.

To quote an author, you should copy the author's exact language and frame the words with quotation marks, which signals that you are reproducing exact language from another source. Quotation marks give full credit to the original author, so you'll need to make it clear whose words they are.

## Introducing a Quotation

An introductory tag is one way to effectively introduce quotations. This is also known as a "signal phrase." An introductory tag is a

phrase that introduces a quote by providing the authority's name and a strong verb. For example:

Desmond Tutu counters, "Racism, xenophobia and unfair discrimination have spawned slavery, when human beings have bought and sold and owned and branded fellow human beings as if they were so many beasts of burden."

This is only one way to introduce a quotation, however, and if it's the only method you use, your paper could begin to sound stilted. Consider incorporating the quote into a sentence in other ways, as well. You may, for example, explain the quote before offering it:

Thousands of years ago, Gautama Buddha was offering teachings on how not to hold on to hostilities, saying: "You will not be punished for your anger, you will be punished by your anger." This is by no means a new problem.

## Formatting and Punctuating Quotations

Quotations call for special rules regarding punctuation:

If a quotation is introduced formally, use a colon.

- The author explicitly states: "Socrates was only a figment of Plato's imagination."

If a quotation is set off with "he said" or "she said" (or the implication of it), use a comma preceding the quotation.

Use an ellipsis (...) to indicate that there is more to the quote than you offer here.

- He brought listeners to tears when he ended his last broadcast with his familiar, "And that's the way it is..."

If your quotation has a quotation within it, the inner quotation needs a pair of single quotation marks and the outer needs a pair of double quotation marks.

- This is the pivotal part of the story: “The doorman cried out, ‘You forgot your coat!’ as he ran after the cab.”

If you choose to break up a single-sentence quotation with your own words, use commas to offset the quotation from your explanation.

- “In the middle of the novel,” the critic claims, “the main character’s reflections are restricted by his sense of impending change.”

Periods and commas should be placed inside the quotation marks. Colons, semicolons, and dashes should be placed outside the quotation marks. Question marks and exclamation points should be placed inside the quotation marks, unless the punctuation applies to the whole sentence (not just the quote).

- When the team’s best player said, “We’re in for a bad season,” it became clear that the team’s morale was flagging.
- Was America really listening when President Kennedy said, “Ask what you can do for your country”?

## When to Use Brackets Within Quotations

When using quotations, you need to be very careful to copy the words as they appear in the source text. However, you may find that a quotation does not grammatically align with the way you want to use it, or that the relevance of the quotation may not be readily apparent to a reader. When that happens, you might want to change it slightly in order to make it fit your essay. In such cases, square brackets should be used around words not contained in the original quote.

Brackets can be used to do the following:

Clarify meaning:

- “[Fiestas] are the lifeblood of this region. We need to honor our traditions even, and especially, after tragedy.” Sr. Gomez told reporters. (The original quotation used the pronoun “They,” in answer to a reporter’s question about a fiesta.)

Enclose a change in verb tense to better flow with your sentence:

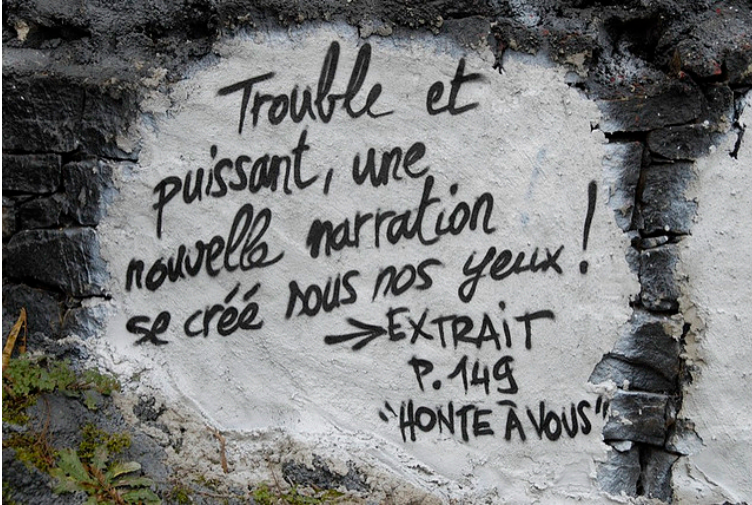
- Silven maintained the assertion throughout his life: “It seems unlikely that this pairing [was] due to a human need for companionship.”

Enclose an explanatory phrase if a word isn’t clear:

- Renowned family therapist Virginia Satir once mused, “I have often thought had there been somebody like me around, something might have been able to be done [about her own divorce].”

## Block Quotations

If you are using a long quotation (four or more typed lines), instead of quotation marks, you should indent the entire quotation five spaces. If the quote is two or more paragraphs, indent the first line of each paragraph an additional five spaces (maintaining the indent of the rest of the quote). When using this format, you do not need to use quotation marks.



**Quotation on a rock:** A quote on the wall of Thierry Ehrmann's "Abode of Chaos." This graffiti-style quotation cites its source text and page number.

## Paraphrasing

Appropriately paraphrasing the ideas of researchers and authors can add strength to your argument.

### *Learning Objectives*

Distinguish between paraphrasing and summarizing

## *Key Takeaways*

### *Key Points*

- When using your own words to discuss someone else's work, you are paraphrasing; when you use the words of someone else, you are quoting.
- Both methods help you to introduce another author's work as a means of strategically improving the persuasiveness of your paper, by providing an example or evidence relevant to a claim that you have made.
- Arguments are more powerful when source material is woven through the paper with paraphrasing, saving quotations for moments of impact, authority, and eloquence.
- If a quotation needs to be substantially changed, it may be better to simply paraphrase the author's ideas in your own words.
- Fully understanding the context of the words you're paraphrasing, and citing the source completely, gives an authentic representation of the source and strengthens your argument.

### *Key Terms*

- **context:** The surroundings, circumstances, environment, or background that determine, specify,



or clarify the meaning of a piece of writing.

- **quotation:** A fragment of a human expression that is being referred to by somebody else.
- **citation:** A paraphrase of a passage from a book, or from another person, for the purposes of a scholarly paper.

As you're writing your paper, you'll want to bring in evidence to support your claims. You'll generally do this through paraphrasing and quoting what you've discovered in the research phase of your writing process. Here, we'll focus on paraphrasing, noting its appropriate use and differentiating it from other forms of citations.

## Paraphrasing Is Different from Summarizing

When you summarize an article or book, you're providing an overview of the work, highlighting its major findings or themes. A summary is like looking at a distant source through a telescope: the general shape and ideas are clear, but the details are fuzzy. You may need to offer a summary if your topic is a book or a study potentially unknown to your reader, so that he or she has a basis for understanding the argument to come, but when offering evidence, you'll usually be choosing to paraphrase rather than summarize.

You want to lead your reader, in your paper, along the path that brought you to your intellectual conclusion: the thesis statement you set out in the introduction. That means you'll be presenting the reader with the research that convinced you of this statement, including statistics that impressed you, others' arguments for or against a particular position, facts you encountered that shifted your perspective, and even stories or examples that touched you

emotionally. These all came from somewhere, and you'll want to share their origins with your readers. There are a couple reasons for this:

- Readers like to be able to check things out for themselves. You may tell them that 39.4% of adults in the U.S. are obese, but they may find that hard to believe. When they check out the source (the Centers for Disease Control), however, they'll likely be convinced and more willing to accept the premise you're building on.
- Citing sources makes you credible with both your audience and with those you're paraphrasing. It shows you're not pretending that the information you've gathered is solely from your own mind, but you're building on what others have said, observed, and experienced. That's what research is all about.

Paraphrasing will be the most common way to share with your readers what you've found. When you paraphrase, you're maintaining the same level of detail as the original source (unlike summarizing), but you're synthesizing what you've read to create a seamless argument.

## Why Not Just Use Quotations?

Imagine how choppy a paper would be, jumping from one person's words to another, to another, and another with only transition sentences in between. It would be very difficult to follow, and your own voice would be drowned out by all the "experts." Expository writing isn't about giving us other people's opinions—it's about giving us your own. Those other voices are there to support you and your argument.

What you'll be doing, then, is writing what you think and weaving

in evidence to support your thinking. For example, look at the following paragraph:

“An ethical approach, while both admirable and arguably an improvement in today’s educational system, does not go far enough as a method of truly connecting human beings to one another and to their true nature. In her book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Nel Noddings offers a more feminine approach to education—one based on receptivity—that prioritizes caring over justice.”

You see here that the writer has a firm grasp of both the topic and the approach Nel Noddings describes. Even though he is citing evidence and even a specific source, the voice is still his, weaving Dr. Noddings’s thoughts into his own. This kind of weaving is the primary reason to use paraphrasing.

Another reason is to save direct quotations for impact. If you quote only when the source will offer an air of authority to your argument, when the exact words are either historically important or particularly eloquent, or when the source is of primary importance to your topic, the quotes will carry much more weight. In all other instances, paraphrasing will move the narrative along much more smoothly, tying it to your own style along the way.

Even when you want to use a quote, it sometimes needs to be changed so substantially to fit your narrative that it may be better to simply cite the author’s ideas in your own words.

## Authenticity in Paraphrasing

As with any instance of appealing to another author’s work within your own, whether you use paraphrasing or quotation, the primary criterion for use should always be its relevance to your thesis and claims. However, you’ll need to be sure that you’re not twisting or manipulating another author’s words to match your own purposes.

Make notes during the research phase on the context of each

piece of evidence you find, and double-check that context for relevance to your own claim. This will ensure that you have not misused another author's work for your own purposes.

If you find an article that quotes a book, an interview, or another article, do your best to track down the original source so you can be sure of its context. For example, people sometimes quote Robert Frost as saying, "Good fences make good neighbors." If you read the poem, however, you'll find that the sentence is ironic: it's a sad quip offered by the neighbor of the narrator in the poem, not a maxim for how to live well.

## Forms of Citation

Another part of authenticity, of course, is citing your sources correctly and completely. The form of citation within the text will vary based on the style you're asked to use, but you will need, at a minimum, the title of the work and the name of the collection (if any) it is in, the publication date, the author's or authors' name(s), the editor's name, if any, and the page number(s) of the material you're paraphrasing. All of this helps your reader find the source material.



**Interlocking architectural components:** *Paraphrasing links your own thinking with the ideas and research of others, creating a strong and engaging argument.*

# 38. Compare and Contrast

[Click here to view Chapter 10: Compare and Contrast.](#)

# 39. Beyond Black and White: Document Design and Formatting in the Writing Classroom

Click [here](#) to view the *Beyond Black and White: Document Design and Formatting in the Writing Classroom* chapter.

# 40. Introduction to Primary Research: Observations, Surveys and Interviews

Click [here](#) to view the *Introduction to Primary Research: Observations, Surveys and Interviews* chapter.



# 41. Everything Changes, or Why MLA Isn't (Always) Right

Click here to view the *Everything Changes, or Why MLA Isn't (Always) Right* chapter.



PART IX

# GRAMMAR



## 42. Grammar/Mechanics

### Mini-lessons

Use these mini-lessons on grammar and writing mechanics to develop your writing skills based on feedback from the instructor and Writing Community Reviews. They include:

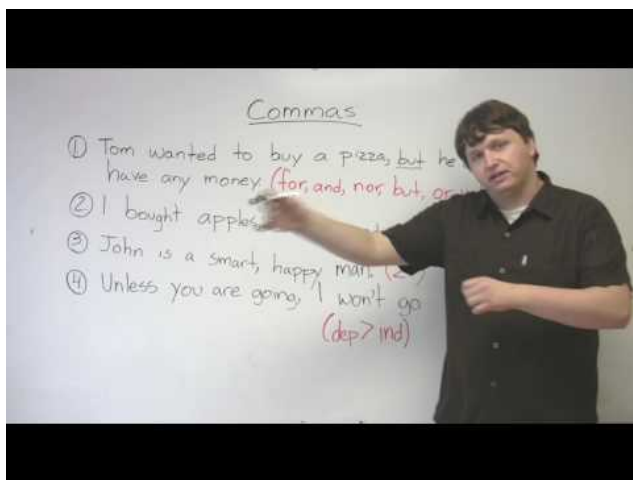
- Subjects and Verbs, Irregular Verbs, and Subject-Verb Agreement
- Sentence Types
- Fragments I
- Run-ons and Comma Splices I
- Comma Usage
- Parallelism
- The Apostrophe
- Capital Letters

Each lesson contains brief videos to teach you or refresh your understanding of proper grammar, punctuation and usage.

## 43. Mini-lesson: Comma Usage

To refresh your understanding of how to correctly use commas, review the videos below:

*How to Use Commas – Overview*



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<https://library.achievingthedream.org/westhillscenglish1a/?p=68>

*Using Commas Correctly*



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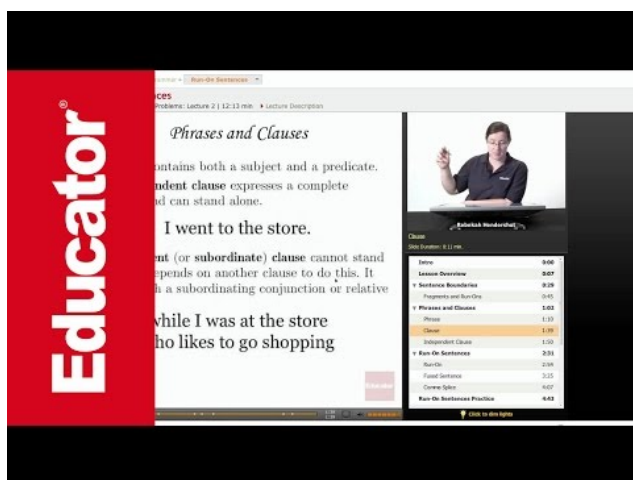
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*<https://library.achievingthedream.org/westhillscenglish1a/?p=68>*

# 44. Mini-lesson: Run-ons and Comma Splices

To refresh your understanding of run-on sentences and comma splice sentences, review the videos below:

## *Run-on Sentences*



The screenshot shows a video player interface for Educator.com. On the left is a red vertical banner with the word "Educator" in white. The main video area displays a slide titled "Phrases and Clauses" with text explaining independent clauses and providing examples like "I went to the store." and "while I was at the store". A small inset video shows a male instructor. On the right side of the player is a table of contents.

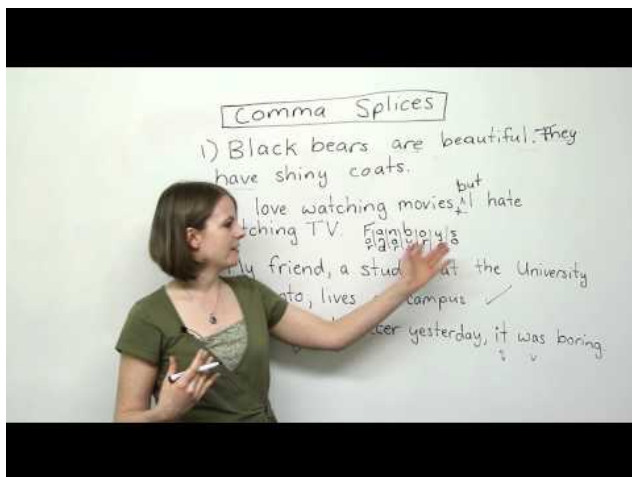
Item	Time
Lesson Overview	0:07
✓ Sentence Boundaries	0:20
Phrases and Clauses	0:45
✓ Phrases and Clauses	1:03
Phrase	1:10
Clause	1:25
Independent Clause	1:39
✓ Run-On Sentences	2:31
Run-On	2:36
Fused Sentence	2:25
Comma Splice	4:07
Run-On Sentences Practice	4:43

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## *Comma Splices and How to Fix Them*

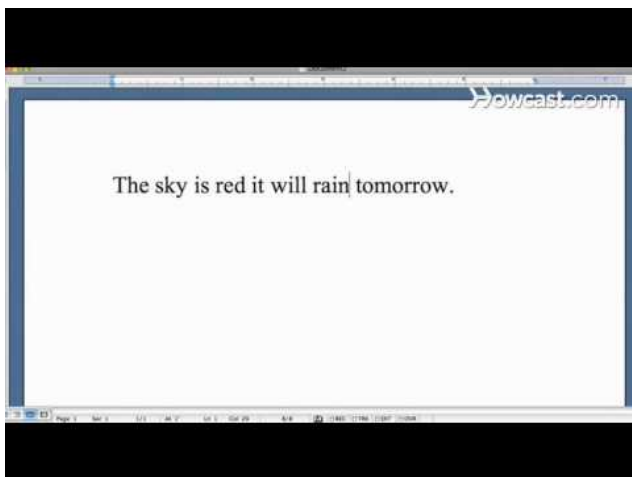




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## How to Avoid Run-on Sentences



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*<https://library.achievingthedream.org/westhillscenglish1a/?p=69>*

### *Identify and Fix Comma Splices*

**FIX YOUR FELONY:  
MAKE TWO SENTENCES**

I see you ride a  
motorcycle without a  
helmet, you'll make a  
great organ donor.

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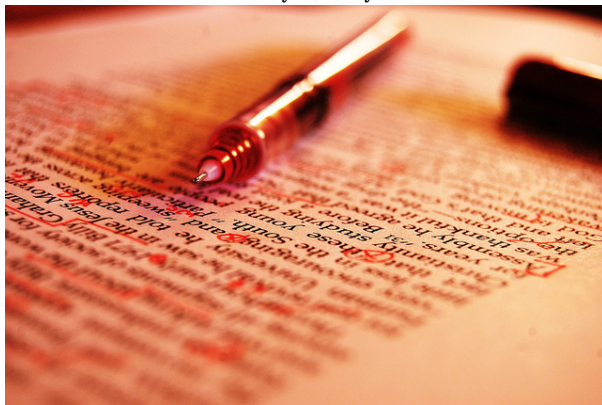
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westhillscenglish1a/?p=69](https://library.achievingthedream.org/westhillscenglish1a/?p=69)*

# 45. Matters of Grammar, Mechanics and Style

For many students, the discussion of grammar, mechanics, and style is intimidating. There are rules, and lots of them. And when rules are broken, some kind of inquisition or punishment is bound to follow. Any student who has experienced an instructor's editorial comments (also known as the red pen "blood" in the margins of a paper) knows what it feels like to be a hapless violator of the rules.

## Rules Matter

Despite your gut reactions to learning certain rules for grammar, mechanics, and style, you have to acknowledge



that the rules matter. People communicate daily in written forms, such as emails, letters, reports, and essays. And many of them need to communicate in such a way that they are taken seriously.

In academic writing, it is your job to make sure that the people who read what you write (your instructor and classmates) understand what you are trying to say. If your thoughts are not

arranged appropriately, your readers may get confused. If you do not acknowledge and employ the rules of grammar, mechanics, and style, you are at a distinct disadvantage as a communicator.

## The Grammar Report

Being able to identify grammatical, mechanical, or stylistic problems that exist in your writing is one way to improve your writing. These problems may have been with you for some time, failing to be identified, researched, and remedied.

The Grammar Report assignments will assist you in not only identifying your problem, but also you help you seek out examples of the problem, research the rules related to the problem, and finally “reporting” on your experience to your classmates. Indeed, the process is not just about you addressing a writing problem; it is about sharing your experience and remedies, so that you can teach others to avoid writing errors.

## Improving Grammar, Mechanics, and Style

There are a wide variety of resources to support your research. A good place to start is the free online textbook, *Successful Writing*. You can use the find/search feature of your browser to look up particular topics and use the practice exercises to work through the process of identifying and correcting errors.

Here are some online resources that you may find useful, as well:

- Capital Community College’s Guide to Grammar and Writing
- Grammar Book
- Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)
- Grammar Girl

At some point, you may find that you share the same grammatical, mechanical, or stylistic problems with others in this course. Take a moment to look at the most commonly occurring grammar errors listed in the “Attending to Grammar” materials developed by the Dartmouth Writing Program. Of the top 20 grammar errors listed, consider which ones are common to you. Then make sure you make every effort to eradicate them from your writing.