The Basics of Writing in an American Classroom

Tips and Resources for Successful Writing
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Professors may ask you to write using different “styles” or “forms” throughout your academic career.

No matter what you are writing, there are some basic tips to keep in mind.

Grammar matters, but remember that the content, ideas, and organizational structure of your writing usually matter more to your professors. You want your ideas to be communicated clearly, and your sources to be cited appropriately.
Common Styles/Forms of Academic Writing

• **Summary**—meant to be concise/brief. The objective is to convey the most important point(s) of the topic(s) covered.

• **Reports**—usually has a formal style. The objective is typically to briefly summarize, then think analytically about a topic, and then state your (or others’) conclusions.

• **Literature Review**—the objective is to demonstrate your understanding of the reading(s), highlight the most important point(s), and compare and contrast readings where appropriate (e.g. A and B argue this, while X, Y, and Z argue this…).

• **Essay**—the objective is typically to convey your thoughts, conclusions, and additional points for discussion/exploration on a topic.
Common Styles/Forms of Academic Writing

- **Research Paper**— the research paper explores a “thesis” (i.e. a particular idea or argument) through careful examination drawing from a number of sources and viewpoints.

- **Thesis/Dissertation**— the BIG one. Thesis/dissertations share similarities in form with research papers, but are much more in-depth and should contribute a new or more nuanced perspective on a specific aspect of your field of study.

- **Abstract**— You may be asked to write an abstract, especially for a research paper. This is a brief summary of your paper and arguments. Think of it as like a roadmap for the reader, briefly charting what will be covered and your most important points.
Your Viewpoints Matter—Don’t Just Restate the Readings

- American instructors value individual thought and critical arguments.
- Your academic papers should not just be restating or outlining the assigned readings for the course. You should be adding something new or interesting to the discussion through your writing.
- While professors expect you to complete the readings, they also expect you to be thinking about the readings and reflecting, commenting, or making an argument about the topics covered.
- Academic writing should be ACTIVE, not just the passive restating of your coursework.
Step 1: Read the assigned readings for class and any outside sources relevant to your assignment.

Step 2: Think about the readings and your ideas, arguments, or unique perspective about the topic.

Step 3: Write your paper by connecting your ideas, arguments, and perspective with the readings while making appropriate citations.
Top 10 Tips
#1: Organization is Key

- Make an outline before you begin writing
- When constructing your outline, pay careful attention to the essay prompt
- Use the outline to clearly define what you want to say, and what evidence you have to say it
#2: Topic Sentences: Your Reader’s Roadmap

- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence
- This should be a statement that “introduces” the paragraph and its purpose
- Topic sentences keep your writing organized and help your reader follow along. They are like the directions on a road map.
- Once you have finished your essay, read through just the topic sentences. Well-written topic sentences allow you to still understand the general structure and argument of the paper, even when everything else is taken out.
#3: Move from general to specific

- Think of your essays, and each paragraph within them, as an upside down pyramid. You should begin with general information that helps to orient the reader. Then get more specific to show the nuances of your argument and your detailed understanding to the reader.

- Specificity is important in writing. When choosing a topic to write about, narrowing down the topic can lead to a stronger, tighter paper.
#4: Know Your Audience

- Before writing, read the essay prompt and identify who your audience is.
- For most assignments it is a formal audience.
- Most assignments require you to think of the audience generally, rather than the specific professor who will be reading your writing.
- This means that you should identify and define key terms and abbreviations for a general audience.
  - Example: Don’t just write “WHO,” write “World Health Organization (WHO)”
  - You do not have to define terms that most people already know. Only define terms that you expect your professor wants you to demonstrate your understanding of.
- Do not use text speak.
#5: Qualify your statements with “Medium Certainty”

- When making an academic argument, very few points are 100% true or 100% false.
- Make sure you qualify your arguments—think about other viewpoints and limitations.
- If you say something is absolutely true, it should be a verifiable fact that cannot be argued against.
- If something is a verifiable fact, it is probably not a good argument for most papers, because it does not provide any new or interesting information to the reader (note how my use of “probably” qualifies my statement, because it is not an absolute—there may be exceptions).
- Read more about this on Purdue Owl (more on this site later!)
#6: Your language should be sophisticated, but clear

- Longer is not necessarily better in writing.
- Sophisticated language indicates to your reader that you are comfortable with the topic and that you have a firm grasp on the nuances of your argument.
- However, your writing should always be clear. Sophisticated language and vocabulary should never take away from the reader’s ability to understand your argument clearly.
- When making complex arguments you may need to create complex sentences and use complex language. However, say what you need to say in as few words as possible without losing the true meaning or intention of your thoughts.
#7: Grammar

- The clarity of your thoughts and organization of your paper are key to good writing, and grammar is a part of this.
- If you are uncertain if your sentence is grammatically accurate, try Googling it. While Google is not 100% accurate, it can give you an overview of how sentences and phrases are typically structured.
- Try Grammarly, a free online grammar checker. It functions similar to Microsoft word spell-check.
#8: Write your introduction last

• Your introduction is one of the most important paragraphs in your paper. It should clearly articulate your central argument, and indicate to the reader what you will accomplish with the paper.

• When writing your first draft, it is okay to write a “shell” of an introduction first, but always go back and rewrite your introduction once finished.

• Why? Once you have written a draft of your paper, you will have a clearer idea of what you want to say. Use your most clear and “snappy” language in your introduction.
#9: Proofreading

• Before proofreading your paper, reread the assignment prompt. While reading your paper make sure everything connects back to that prompt in some way. If it doesn’t connect, it probably doesn’t belong in your paper.

• Try writing a note next to every paragraph about what it does.

• Read through the notes and make sure the paper proceeds in a logical order.

• You aren’t just editing for grammar— you’re editing for content and organization! Don’t be afraid to move or adjust entire sentences or even paragraphs to rework the structure of your paper.

• Don’t be afraid to cut. If a word or sentence are not necessary, delete them. Don’t worry about page counts yet— find other spots in your paper where you could say more and have it be substantial/useful.
#10: Cite Your Sources!

- Citation is arguably the most important aspect of academic writing.
- Failure to properly cite sources is VERY serious. Students who are found to have improperly cited sources, or not cited sources at all, may be accused of academic dishonesty. Violations of the University’s academic integrity policies could result in serious consequences, including expulsion.
- Cite often! Make careful notes about where your ideas and information comes from. Remember, even if it is not a direct quote, if you are paraphrasing the work of someone else, or you thought of an idea while reading the work of someone else, you must cite that work.
- Even if you don’t want to make the full citation while writing your first draft, leave a mark or note to return to that section later to properly cite.
- **Attend a library workshop!!!** More information to follow.
What is academic integrity?

• “As a community of scholars, the University at Albany has a special responsibility to integrity and truth. By testing, analyzing, and scrutinizing ideas and assumptions, scholarly inquiry produces the timely and valuable bodies of knowledge that guide and inform important and significant decisions, policies, and choices. Our duty to be honest, methodical and careful in the attribution of data and ideas to their sources establishes the foundations of our work. Misrepresenting or falsifying scholarship undermines the essential trust on which our community depends. Every member of the community, including both faculty and students, shares an interest in maintaining academic integrity.”

• http://www.albany.edu/eltl/academic_integrity.php
Examples of Academic Dishonesty

- Plagiarism—presenting as one’s work the work of another person (including words, ideas, information, data, evidence, organizing principles, or style of presentation. Plagiarism is not just direct lifted of words, but also ideas.
- Cheating on exams: Giving or receiving unauthorized help before, during, or after an exam.
- Multiple submissions: Students may not submit substantial portions of the same work more than once without explicit approval. In other words, you cannot reuse papers (or parts of papers) for multiple courses.
- Unauthorized Collaboration: working with others on your academic assignments when it has been forbidden by the instructor.
- Falsification: misrepresenting materials or fabricating information.
What is Turn it in (or other online assignment submission software)?

- Many professors will ask you to submit your papers on Turn It In or through other digital software.
- This software will compare your paper to others in the course, as well as online sources.
- If you do not properly cite, or plagiarize from someone else, the software can detect it.
Resources on Campus

• Campus libraries—the library can help you with your research, citations, and other relevant academic integrity issues. Attend a workshop!

• Writing Center— the Writing Center on campus can help with the organization and structure of your papers. Please note, they are not proofreaders or editors, and they will not simply proofread your paper for grammar issues.

• Student Success Center and AdvisingPLUSOnline Tutoring and AdvisingPLUS: AdvisingPLUS helps connect students to SUNY-wide tutors online, including tutoring in writing (http://www.albany.edu/advisingplus/50962.php)
Resources on Campus

• Take a course:
  • ETAP 500: Academic Writing for English as a Second Language
  • UNI 110: Writing and Critical Inquiry, International Sections
  • IELP (Intensive English Language Program)

• Find a writing peer or partner in your class. Ask if you can read each other’s papers and provide feedback.
Online Resources

- Purdue Owl: Comprehensive online guide, including specific information for international students: [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/5/25/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/5/25/)
- Purdue Owl also has citation guides for a number of citation styles: [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/)
- Youtube: There are a number of Youtube channels devoted to explaining the mechanics of writing, and many are intended for international audiences. Just do a quick search!
- Grammarly: a free grammar checker online: [https://www.grammarly.com/1](https://www.grammarly.com/1)
Let’s Practice!

• Exercise 1: Think of any topic you are interested in and pretend you need to write a 5-7 page paper about it.
  • Think of an example of a strong focus for the paper
    • What makes this focus strong?
  • Think of an example of a weak focus for the paper
    • What makes this focus weak?
Let’s Practice!

• Exercise 2: What do you think could be improved in this introductory paragraph?

Lots of people don’t wear sunscreen. 2.3% will develop a melanoma. This is bad & something we should talk more about. In this paper, i will tell u why it is bad and what we should do about it.
Let’s Practice!

• Exercise 3: Make an outline based on this prompt (taken from a University of Chicago Application, https://collegeadmissions.uchicago.edu/apply/uchicago-supplemental-essay-questions)

In French, there is no difference between “conscience” and “consciousness.” In Japanese, there is a word that specifically refers to the splittable wooden chopsticks you get at restaurants. The German word “fremdschämen” encapsulates the feeling you get when you’re embarrassed on behalf of someone else. All of these require explanation in order to properly communicate their meaning, and are, to varying degrees, untranslatable. Choose a word, tell us what it means, and then explain why it cannot (or should not) be translated from its original language.
The best way to improve your writing?

Read

and

Write!

The more you read and the more you write the more comfortable you will be with the mechanics of American academic writing. Think of your mistakes as a learning experience for future writing. Practice reading, writing and speaking in English, even when it may not be required.
Questions? Comments? Concerns?

Thank you for attending this workshop!