

ON WRITING PAPERS

(Taken partly from a handout used by teaching assistants at Harvard University)

The developed capacity for clear, analytic writing is an absolute prerequisite for academic or professional success. One of the objectives of this course is to cultivate that capacity in you.

These notes present rules and suggestions to assist you in writing your paper. Followed faithfully, these admonitions will aid the development of your writing skills; but they will not in themselves make you a good writer. Only practicing repeatedly and analyzing carefully your failures can accomplish that goal.

Another important and frequently overlooked tool for improving your writing is talk. Talk with your instructor about the reasons behind the comments on your papers, about your specific strengths and problems, and about how to address the problems. Talk with your classmates about their writing and ask them to provide a critique of yours.

Unless you become a professional author, you will be dealing with the form of writing known as the analytical essay most frequently in the future. The ability to write analytical essays depends on skill, not on mere artistic talent. Certain rules and principles apply. These rules and principles fall into three general categories: the organization and construction of an essay around an argument; rhetoric and style; and grammar. The following sections of these notes address these categories in turn.

I. WHAT IS AN ESSAY?

An essay is a sustained attempt to prove a point; it is an argument. An argument must have a point, or it is only so many useless words, a random sampling from a dictionary. The point of an essay is announced in the thesis.

The Thesis

A thesis is usually a single sentence and is usually found at the beginning or end of the first paragraph, making the claim that the essayist desires to prove. The thesis is the core, the focus, the heart, the whole meaning of the essay. An essay without a thesis is nothing; it has no direction, no purpose. It would have been better had it remained unwritten.

Interesting theses are characterized by words like “because,” “since,” or “therefore.” Such words announce a discovery, linking a noncontroversial premise with a conclusion not yet known. They convey a sense of excitement and vitality.

Organization

The thesis defines the scope of the essay that follows. A competent essay has a place for everything and everything in its place. Anything without a necessary and logical place, anything that does not participate in the advance of the argument toward its conclusion, absolutely *must go*.

From the thesis, devise an outline. Your outline is the skeleton of your argument. It consists of the sub-points you must prove in order to demonstrate your thesis. An outline differs from a list in that it has a logical order: the sub-points are grouped under larger headings, and the order is dictated by the argument. Any observations, no matter how brilliant, that do not fit within this logical order *must go*.

The importance of getting right to the heart of the matter in a paper can hardly be overemphasized. You need to explain the issues involved and assess the relative strengths of the positions. You should avoid merely describing positions or summarizing readings. You should rather enter into the debate as a participant and use the essay to make the strongest contribution you can to understanding and resolving the issues at hand.

In addition to this logical or argumentative order, your essay will possess a rhetorical order, which it shares with all other essays. This rhetorical order is simple (beginning, middle, end), but ignoring it reduces an essay to confusion.

The Beginning

The beginning announces your essay to the world. It tells your readers what you are writing about and why they should pay attention. It culminates in the thesis.

The beginning is also where poor writing is most painfully apparent. Such phrases as “this paper will” or “my thesis is” weaken the essay before it has even begun, and therefore *must go*. The trick of the beginning is to find a way to start talking about your subject, without talking about your paper.

The Middle

The middle is where the real work of the paper is done: it proves what the thesis asserts. Its order is governed by the logic of your argument, by the outline that you devised from your thesis.

The Paragraph

The middle is made up of a succession of paragraphs, each of which is an essay in miniature. A paragraph either begins with or builds toward a topic sentence, which expresses the mini-thesis of the paragraph. A paragraph makes a single point; then a new paragraph begins. Any sentence that does not contribute to this point, and any paragraph that does not advance the larger argument, *must go*. No essay can tolerate unemployed sentences and paragraphs.

Evidence

An argument provides not merely assertion but proof. It proceeds from recognized facts or evidence to its conclusion. In order not to descend into mere assertion, an essay must document its facts; it must cite.

Citations are insurance in that they prove that what you say is really in the text. You can hardly have too many, and most essays have too few. Do not confuse citation with quotation. A good essayist paraphrases his or her sources, while giving them proper credit; a poor essayist settles for stringing together quotations without demonstrating that he or she understands them well enough to restate their ideas in his or her own words.

The End

Like the beginning, the end should be a full paragraph, one that drives the point and brings the reader to rest with a sense of completion. While it does reiterate and summarize, the best conclusions are those that do more, that push wide the implications of the thesis.

II. RHETORIC AND STYLE

Good writing is concise, forceful, and parallel. These virtues are not the only ones of good writing, but they are the most important, and a writer who can handle them generally does well in the other aspects.

Concision

Wordiness is the most common fault in writing. It has two common causes: either the writer has no clear point in mind, or he or she does not know how to make it. The writer then tries to hide the

problem by throwing words at it, thinking no one will dare to ask questions if only the essay contains enough impressive words.

A good sentence, however, conveys its meaning simply and directly, with a minimum of words. The words themselves are chosen for their clarity, not their length. Sentences stop after a reasonable number of words, for they contain a single clear notion. As a result, the sentence says what the essayist means.

The guiding rule is simple: shorter is better. If you can cut a word, a phrase, a sentence, a whole paragraph, you should do so. This rule has many corollaries. Some of the more common are as follows:

- (1) Flowery adjectives and fancy descriptive phrases that really do nothing but take up space *must go*.
- (2) Unsubstantiated praise, deprecation, or other assertions *must go*.
- (3) Editorial remarks *must go*.
- (4) Catch-phrases without any real meaning (for example, “idealistic,” “pragmatic”) *must go*.
- (5) Unnecessary technical terms, jargon, and bureaucratic language *must go*.

Force

Good essay writing is active and forceful. It shows in its choice of verbs. It relies on short and dynamic verbs and prefers simpler forms to more complex. It avoids forms of “to be,” trafficking in them only when necessary. Good writing takes responsibility for what it says, instead of hiding behind subjective or impersonal expressions and the passive voice.

Parallelism

Good writing is parallel. In a sentence, or a set of related sentences, it makes the same type of point in the same sort of way with the same part of speech. For example:

NOT: Lincoln was tall, thin, and talked a lot.

BUT: Lincoln was tall, thin, and talkative.

NOT: Lincoln was tall and thin. Douglas was short and putting on weight.

BUT: Lincoln was tall and thin. Douglas was short and fat.

Still more concise and forceful: Lincoln was tall and thin; Douglas, short and fat.

In both of the negative cases, the final verb phrase jars with the preceding string of adjectives; as a result, they are less forceful. Parallel writing is praiseworthy because it is both forceful and precise; it emphasizes what you are saying.

III. WHAT TO DO AND WHAT NOT TO DO

1. Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
2. Never use no double negatives.
3. Use the semicolon properly, always where it is appropriate; and never where it is not.
4. Reserve the apostrophe for its proper use and omit it where its not needed.
5. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
6. No sentence fragments.
7. Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.
8. Avoid commas, that are unnecessary.
9. If you reread your work, you will find on rereading that a great deal of repetition can be avoided by rereading and editing.
10. A writer must not shift your point of view.

11. Do not overuse exclamation marks!!!
12. Place pronouns as closely as possible, especially in long sentences, as of ten or more words, to their antecedents.
13. Hyphenate only between syllables and avoid un-necessary hyphens.
14. Write all adverbial forms correct.
15. Don't use contractions.
16. Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided.
17. It is incumbent on us to avoid archaisms.
18. If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.
19. Steer clear of incorrect verb forms that have snuck into the language.
20. Take the bull by the hand and avoid mixed metaphors.
21. Avoid modernisms that sound flaky.
22. Avoid barbarisms; they impact too forcefully.
23. Never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
24. Everyone should be careful to use singular pronouns with singular nouns in their writing.
25. If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times: avoid hyperbole.
26. Also, avoid awkward or affected alliteration.
27. Do not string a large number of prepositional phrases together unless you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death.
28. Always pick on the correct idiom.
29. "Avoid overuse of 'quotation 'marks.'""
30. Never use more words than are necessary in order to get your point across; be concise.
31. Always chek you're spilling.
32. Always be avoided by the passive voice.
33. Every sentence a verb.
34. Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague. Seek viable alternatives.

IV. ANALYSIS OF AN ESSAY

The following is a sketch of the individual components that, when combined effectively, constitute a good essay.

I. General Questions

- A. What is the *subject* of the essay? Is the author addressing the question?
- B. Is the *thesis* stated clearly in the first paragraph? Does the rest of the essay follow through on the thesis?
- C. Does the essay present an *argument* that is the author's own, or does it rely on regurgitation of others' thoughts?
- D. Does the essay penetrate below the surface of the texts, displaying underlying assumptions and so *genuine understanding*?

II. Constant Problems

- A. *Clarity*: Does the essay present its case clearly? Are there any words, phrases, or ideas that require further revision or clarification?
- B. *Rationality*: Are the basic assumptions of the essay sound? Is the author aware of these assumptions? Is there sufficient and appropriate evidence for debatable statements? Have all the major issues been covered? Is material slanted unfairly?

C. *Citations*: Does the author refer explicitly to the text, paraphrasing rather than stringing quotations together? Are the citations and quotations correct? Do they support the author's point?

III. Rhetoric and Style

A. *Unity*: Are there serious digressions? Are tone and point of view consistent?

B. *Development*: What mode of development is used? Is it consistent? Are there gaps? Is it too abstract?

C. *Organization*: Does the essay have a logical progression of ideas? Is the organization apparent? Does each paragraph follow naturally from the one before?

D. *Paragraphs*: Are the paragraphs unified? Does each develop its dominant idea sufficiently?

E. *Sentences*: Do they vary in length and kind? Is the syntax clear and appropriate?

F. *Diction*: Is the diction appropriate and exact? Does it try to impress the reader artificially? Does it descend into cliché or jargon? Does it avoid ambiguity? Is there variety and life?

G. *Grammar*: Is it proper?

Students often ask how important the elements under Rhetoric and Style, especially grammar, are to the grades their papers receive. Substance is more important than grammar; but the two cannot be completely separated because grammar consists of the rules we use to communicate substance to one another. Adequate grammar does not exclude the possibility of a few errors, but it does avoid a consistent pattern or multitude of errors. Normally a paper that is inadequate in terms of grammar will not receive a grade as high as the grade point average needed to graduate (i.e., 2.5, or midway between B- and C+, in the College of Liberal Arts); of course, the same is true for substance. Normally, an adequate paper is adequate in terms of substance as well as grammar.

In general a grade in the A range shows excellent work; B+ shows very good work; B shows good work; and B- shows adequate work for graduation. A grade in the C range shows work that falls just short of a satisfactory level. A grade in the D range shows a slight degree of competence in responding to the assignment, but it may reflect one or more of the following: poor understanding of the assignment and failure to respond completely to it; inadequate explanation of key texts or concepts; incoherent organization; a pattern or multitude of errors of grammar, diction, or spelling. A grade of F shows an incoherent or illogical response to the assignment, or no apparent response at all; it may contain a pattern or multitude of errors of grammar, diction, or spelling. A paper that is extremely bad in terms of grammar may receive an F on that basis alone. Conversely, a paper with a brilliantly original argument may receive an A even with inadequate grammar; but brilliantly original arguments are rare.

V. CITATION

Whenever you use the words of another person in your writing, you must use quotation marks. Whenever you use the thought or writing of another person—whether or not you quote directly from that person—you must give credit. Failure to give credit results in the serious academic offense of plagiarism (which can lead to a penalty as great as expulsion from the university). You give credit by means of a citation to the person or writing from which you borrowed. When you make a claim about an author's work (e.g., "Locke maintains that consent is the basis of legitimate government") you must provide a citation of the specific place in the work (usually a page) on which you base your claim—whether you are quoting or paraphrasing the author.

You may use any one of a number of ways of citation. Here is one method:

Sample text:

As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “One cannot say it too often: There is nothing more prolific in marvels than the art of being free; but there is nothing harder than the apprenticeship of freedom” (Tocqueville 2000, 229).

That quotation is from page 229 of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, published in 2000 by the University of Chicago Press. When I use the parenthetical reference at the end of the sentence above, I must include a list of references, with complete bibliographic information, at the end of my paper. Such a list would include the following item:

Tocqueville, Alexis de. 2000. *Democracy in America*. Edited and translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Two other acceptable methods of citation are footnotes and endnotes. Whatever method you use, you must provide the following information: author, title, place of publication, publisher, year of publication, page number. You must provide all of that information even if the only book you use is one from the class.

The most complete, authoritative manual on the subject of citation (and other stylistic matters) is *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th ed. (University of Chicago Press). Students may want to consult an abridgement of that book: Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7th ed. (University of Chicago Press).

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