Quick Study® ACADEMIC

Research Writing Papers, Theses & Dissertations

Defining goals, writing preparation, style guides, research, taking notes, crafting the paper, revising & editing, types of writing

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: *The information contained in this guide is presented as an academic aid, and is not an exhaustive examination of the topic. Each writer should tailor the information contained herein as appropriate to his/her academic level.*

WHAT IS ACADEMIC WRITING?

Academic writing can be defined as *writing done for scholars by other scholars.* Academic writing involves the *reading, thinking about, researching, discussing* and *writing of ideas.*

1. In academic writing, it is important to consider not only what you want to say, but also the audience to whom you're saying it. In other words, it's important to determine not only what *you* think about a topic, but also what *your readers* may think:
   a. What are their biases?
   b. What are their values?
   c. What are their expectations?
   d. What is their knowledge level?
   e. What effect do you hope to have on them through the writing?
2. Academic writing often begins with a **thesis** or idea about a certain topic (not just a description of the topic). Central to academic writing is the ability to use what is *known* about a topic via **existing research** and to develop whatever new ideas may emerge, or be *thought about* the topic, via the **author's logical, fact-based argument.**

Academic writing is:

Formal: The writing needs to be *clear, unambiguous, literal,* and *well structured.*

Logical: The writing *tests propositions* against one another to determine their *accuracy.*

Planned: The writing takes place after *research, deliberation, evaluation,* and according to a *specific plan* and *outline.*

Well Organized: The *writing* must flow from one point to another in a *logical* fashion. The ideas must be well thought out and the *research solid.*

Impersonal: The writing must *lessen the sense of emotional involvement* between the topic and the author that a reader might infer.

Objective: The writing must show an *unbiased presentation of facts.*

Types of Academic Writing

1. Academic writing takes many forms, including but not limited to: case study, review, technical report, lab report, critical analysis/critique, bibliography, annotated bibliography, literature review, term paper, research paper, statistical summary, journal article, book chapter, essay, thesis, conference paper.
2. Regardless of the form it takes, **academic writing** *relies on specific factual information presented in a pre-determined style.*

WHAT IS A TERM/RESEARCH PAPER?

A **term/research paper** is generally designed to *describe an event or concept,* or to *make a persuasive argument about a central thesis.* It is not simply a series of facts, a report of what has been stated previously, or a summary of information from a series of sources.

1. A term paper requires **drawing your own conclusions,** and then *presenting them in a creative fashion in an effort to persuade the reader and support your thesis.*
2. While generally utilized in high school and college, research papers are also utilized in business; primarily, in law, manufacturing, retail, security, computer technology, and finance.

Steps Involved in Writing a Term/ Research Paper

1. Select a **topic.**
   a. Often a term paper will be assigned by an instructor or professor. In such cases, it is always advisable to make sure you understand the topic and agree on any specific information the instructor may want you to cover.
   b. If you select your own topic, consult with the instructor to be certain the topic parameters are neither too broad nor too narrow.
2. Identify **source materials.**
3. Take **notes** and organize them for future reference.
4. Create an **outline** for the paper.
5. Write the **first draft.**
6. **Edit** and **refine** the paper.

WHAT IS A DISSERTATION?

A **dissertation** is generally written as part of the *requirement for a doctoral degree.*

1. It usually includes:
   a. Working with a **committee** and committee chair.
   b. **Reporting** on the **research.**
   c. Giving an **oral defense** of the **dissertation.**
2. The **doctoral candidate** is expected to "break new ground" and do *more than report on the research of others.* There will be an element of **original research** in the dissertation.
   a. A dissertation is more substantial than a master's thesis and can run approximately 80,000 words.
3. The framework for **researching** and **writing** the dissertation will be established *in consultation with the dissertation committee.*
   [**NOTE:** *At the beginning of the writing phase of the project, it is often helpful to begin by writing the chapters that describe your research.*]

Steps Involved in Writing a Dissertation

1. In its basic form, these steps include:
   a. Selecting an **advisor** and **dissertation committee.**
   b. Choosing a **topic.**
   c. Submitting a **dissertation proposal.** [**NOTE:** *As with a master's thesis proposal, this is essentially an outline of the research, but usually of broader scope.*]
   d. Working with the advisor.
   e. **Writing** and **defending** the dissertation.
2. A dissertation concentrates on **principles** and highlights the *lessons learned from the research,* ***not just the facts behind them.***
3. Every statement in a dissertation must be supported either by a **reference** to published scientific literature or by original work.
4. **Critical thinking** is crucial in the dissertation process, as the information is a **synthesis** *of existing research and the theories developed by the writer in the course of the research.*

TIME MANAGEMENT

The more involved the writing process, the more important the role of time management becomes. From the time the **research paper/thesis/dissertation** is assigned, the clock is ticking, and it is important to begin calculating how much time can be allotted to the project.

1. Some scholars find that making a list of the steps involved in the research paper/thesis/dissertation and working backwards from the due date is effective in creating a **workable timetable.**
2. *Plan for each day, but* **create a schedule *that works for you.***
   a. Do you like to read/research on the same day that you write?
   b. Or, are you more efficient if you research some days and write some days?
   c. **Find out how you work best and make an effort to work that way consistently.**
   d. Work at a time when you are most productive.
   e. Develop rituals in your day and make it a habit to spend time working on the project even when you may not feel like it.

   Remember: An important part of time management is learning to say "no" when appropriate.

   Also remember: Scheduling, setting goals, and using calendars are important in time management, but it is also important to take time for yourself on occasion, even if just for a bowl of ice cream, a music break, or whatever diversions help you relax and recharge.

WHAT IS A THESIS?

A **thesis** is generally written by *postgraduate students as part of the qualifications for master's or doctoral degrees.* A research paper can be a thesis, but a thesis may not require research. If a thesis does not require outside research (such as a summary of outside reading), it is not a research thesis.

1. The thesis *builds on the ideas and theories of previous and current researchers and thinkers,* and lays the foundation for future generations.
2. The process for writing a thesis is similar to that of a research paper.
   a. A master's thesis runs approximately 12,000–30,000 words.

Steps Involved in Writing a Master's Thesis

[**NOTE:** *When developing a thesis committee, be certain it is comprised of those who can be valuable to you in crafting the thesis.*]

1. Create a **thesis proposal;** a proposal for a master's thesis is essentially an outline of the research:
   a. **Identify** the *problem, hypothesis,* or *question.*
   b. Show the **importance** of the *research.*
   c. Describe **significant** *previous research.*
   d. Show the possible **research approach** or **methodology.**
   e. Show the **potential outcomes** of *research and importance of each one.*
2. Select a **topic.**
   a. Again, meetings with the thesis advisor are invaluable in determining the scope of the thesis.
3. Divide the topic into **manageable sections.**
4. Create a **process** for each section.
   a. **Research** the section topic.
   b. **Take notes** on the section.
   c. **Formulate opinions** on the research.
   d. **Write a draft** of the section.
5. **Refine** and **revise** the **thesis.**

   [**NOTE:** *The previous outline is intended to be a general representation of the process. A thesis is more involved than a research paper, so various departments will have various processes that can take an extended period of time to complete.*]

WHERE TO START?

Academic writing is an involved process, but it doesn't have to be insurmountable. Before beginning a project it is important to evaluate some important elements of the **writing process,** as described below.

Audience

Who is the **target** for the writing: instructor? professional journal? general readership?

1. Who will be the person or people reading the *finished product*?
2. What is the reader's *familiarity* with the subject?
3. How much *background information* will have to be presented in order for the reader to understand the text?

Purpose

What is the **overall aim** of the writing?

1. Is the purpose to instruct others or to display the writer's knowledge of the topic?
2. **Strategy** comes into play in the area of purpose. Once the purpose is established, the writer must think about the *best way to present the material.*
3. Is the writer an expert, or one who is evaluating the information of other experts? *Strategy can help the writer develop the thrust of his/her argument.*

Organization

Regardless of the length or complexity of the work, it must have a **structure.**

1. The writing must be *organized.* This makes the task of researching easier for the writer and makes the meat of the **thesis/argument** *more accessible* to the reader.
2. A brief organizational framework could consist of:
   a. Describing the situation
   b. Identifying a problem
   c. Describing a solution
   d. Evaluating the solution

Flow

The way one statement moves to the next, and the way one paragraph moves into the next, is called **flow.**

1. The choice of *linking words* and *phrases,* and the correct use of *punctuation,* are important elements of flow.
   a. Linking words include: *furthermore, in addition, therefore, however, in contrast, conversely, as a result of, although.*

Presentation

There is no room for **sloppy** or **inaccurate work** in academic writing. *That includes relying on spell check and grammar check programs to find all the mistakes.*

1. It is important for the work to look professional, use the correct style, and present itself as uniform.
   a. Use **standard fonts** in **standard sizes.**
   b. **Proofread for careless grammar mistakes:** Do the subjects and verbs agree?
   c. **Recheck spelling,** even after using spell check. It doesn't know if you meant *red/read, no/know, see/sea,* or *to/too/two.*

Style

It is important to make sure the work is written in the **proper style.** The style should be appropriate for both the message and the audience.

1. *There is no one particular style that covers all academic writing,* and some organizations, journals, and other outlets have their own individual style and **style manual.**
2. While **academic writing** is generally **more formal** than other types of writing, there are subtle exceptions.
   EX: Contractions (can't, won't) may be acceptable for use in the area of philosophy, but not other areas of study.

Style in Detail

The use of *language* and *grammatical devices* to express ideas—in this case, *written ideas*—is called **style.**

1. Whereas a novelist may use an informal style to convey his/her story, **academic writing** relies on a more *formal, linear use of language to express ideas.*
2. Academic writing has *one central point* or **theme.** *Every other part of the whole contributes to the main line of argument,* with no digressions or repetitions.

Effective Academic Writing Style Tips

1. **Limit run-on expressions,** such as *and so forth* or *etc.*
2. Avoid addressing the reader directly.
   EX: *The equation* can be seen *in Table 3,* as opposed to, You *can see the equation in Table 3.*
3. **Avoid using contractions** unless it is acceptable in the field in which you are writing.
4. Use **formal vocabulary**; for example, *discuss* rather than *talk about.*

5. Use tentative language instead of assertive language.
   EX 1: Use *possibly* and *probably* in front of verbs and noun phrases: *This is* possibly *caused by...,*
   EX 2: Use the modal verbs *may* and *might*: *This* may be *the main thrust of the argument ...*
   EX 3: Avoid the use of *always* and *every.* Use ***often*** and ***many/much*** instead.
6. **Avoid the use of rhetorical questions,** such as: *Did you know that the sightlines can vary depending on the atmospheric conditions?*
7. **Avoid using direct questions.**
   EX: *"It is necessary to consider what can be done to decrease the number of hours children watch television."* instead of "What can be done to decrease the number of hours children watch television?"
8. Place **adverbs** *within the verb phrase.*
   EX: In informal English, adverbs are generally used at the beginning or the end of a statement. In academic writing, adverbs are often placed in the body of a statement: *Very little is* ***actually*** *known about the base at Area 51.*
9. Use as many words as is necessary to express an idea, but use no more than is necessary. **Be succinct.**

ACADEMIC WRITING PREPARATION

What Are You Writing About?

1. **Subject:** The subject of a paper is the *general sense* of what you are writing about.
2. **Topic:** The topic of a paper is a *manageable portion of the subject.*
   EX: If the subject is the *Space Shuttle,* the topic could be design issues, the propulsion system, navigational system improvements, or stress tolerances in outer space.
3. **Thesis:** The *idea you have formulated about the topic after the requisite research* is the thesis. The **thesis statement** is the *beginning of the argument you are prepared to make throughout the paper.*

Preliminary Questions

As you proceed with the writing, ask yourself:

1. Do I have a **good grasp** of the *concept of the thesis*?
2. Does the **thesis** *support the main idea*?
3. Does the **information** relate to and *support the main idea*?
4. Does the **paper** *have a clear order*?
5. Are there enough **specifics and details** to *explain each main or topic sentence idea* fully?
6. Is the **documentation format** *standard* (MLA, APA or other style) and *correct*?

STYLE GUIDES

Style guides were developed as a **set of standards** for design and writing of documents. Some are for *general use* while others are developed for a *specific publication.* Examples of style guides are described below.

APA

1. **APA style** *is editorial in nature and* **does not** *refer to a writing style.*
2. It is the *editorial style* developed by the **American Psychological Association** for use in all of the books and journals it publishes.
3. Other social and behavioral sciences have also adopted the APA style for their own written material.

MLA

1. **MLA style** *is based on the consensus of teachers, librarians and scholars in the fields of language and literature on the preferred way to document research.*
2. It is the *editorial style* developed by the **Modern Language Association,** and has been in use by students and scholars since 1951 (originally published as the *MLA Style Sheet*).
3. MLA style addresses not only punctuation and the technical aspects of writing and documenting sources, but also covers how to work with them in the writing process, including:
   a. **Plagiarism**
   b. Evaluating the **authority of sources**
   c. Determining the **reliability of Web-related sources**

CMS or CMOS (Chicago Manual of Style)

1. The *Chicago Manual of Style* originated in the 1890s as a single sheet of typographic fundamentals drawn up by a University of Chicago Press proofreader. It was first published for the general public in 1906.
2. CMS was one of the first editorial style guides published in the United States, and is largely responsible for *research methodology standardization,* most specifically about *citation style.*
3. CMS utilizes two different types of **reference styles:** the *Author-Date System* and the *Notes-Bibliography (NB)/ Documentary-Note* (or *Humanities*) *Style.*
   a. Traditionally, the *Documentary-Note Style* is utilized by those in the **humanities** and **social sciences.**
   b. The *Author-Date System* is utilized by those in the **natural** and/or **physical sciences.**
4. Properly using the NB system builds credibility by demonstrating accountability to source material.

AAA (American Anthropological Association)

1. The **American Anthropological Association** format is derived from the *Chicago Manual of Style* and *Webster's Tenth New Collegiate Dictionary.*
2. This guide is an *outline of style rules* basic to **AAA journal editing.** Where no rule is present in this guide, the rule is to follow the *Chicago Manual of Style.*
3. In *Webster's Tenth New Collegiate Dictionary,* writers should use the first spelling, if there is a choice, and use American (not British) spellings.

ASA (American Sociological Association)

1. This guide was developed for use by authors preparing manuscripts for the **American Sociological Association** *journals.*
2. The *ASA Style Guide* is less complicated than many other guides (it is similar in scope to the *APA Style Guide*).
   a. For example, footnotes are to be used sparingly in order to either cite material that has a limited availability, or to add information presented in a table.
3. Like the APA, the general format for citing ASA references is *parenthetical referencing.*

CSE (Council of Science Editors)

1. The CSE was formerly the CBE (Council of Biology Editors).
2. **CSE style** provides two different **citation systems:** the *Name-Year System* and the *Citation-Sequence System* (sometimes called the *Superscript System*).
3. The *CSE Manual* does not include style guidelines for electronic journals. In the case of such references, the Council of Science Editors recommends using the National Library of Medicine Recommended Formats for Bibliographic Citation. (http://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/formats/recommendedformats.html)

Turabian

1. The *Turabian Style Manual* (*A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*) is based on the *Chicago Manual of Style.*
2. *Turabian* utilizes two basic **documentation systems:** *Notes-Bibliography Style* (or *Bibliography Style*) and *Parenthetical Citations-Reference List Style* (or *Reference List Style*). These styles are essentially the same as those presented in the *Chicago Manual of Style,* with slight modifications for the needs of **student writers.**
3. The link between the *Chicago Manual of Style* and *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* is:
   a. Kate L. Turabian was the graduate school dissertation secretary at the University of Chicago from 1930 to 1958. She was also the editor of official publications for the university.
   b. In 1930, she wrote a small pamphlet describing the correct style for writing college dissertations. That pamphlet evolved into the current *Turabian* style manual, which has sold over 8 million copies worldwide.

RESEARCH

Types of Sources

Primary

Primary sources are sources of **original information.** Such sources were *created either during the time period being studied* or at a later date by a *participant in the events in question.* They represent the **individual viewpoint** of a participant or observer.

EX: letters, diaries, posters, newspapers, magazines/journals, photographs, speeches, books, memoirs, public opinion polls, documentaries, documents produced by government agencies (congressional hearings, census records, etc.)

Secondary

Secondary sources **interpret** and **analyze** *primary sources.* These sources are one or more steps removed from the event. Since secondary sources provide *interpretations of the primary data,* the interpretation is generally **influenced by the author's context.**

EX: textbooks, magazine articles, histories, criticisms, commentaries, encyclopedias, monographs (other than fiction and autobiography), Web sites, dictionaries, bibliographies

Tertiary

Tertiary sources consist of information that is a **distillation** and **collection** of *primary and secondary sources.*

EX: almanacs, bibliographies*, chronologies, dictionaries*, encyclopedias*, directories, fact books, guidebooks, indexes, abstracts, manuals, textbooks*

[* can also be considered secondary, but bibliographies used to locate primary and/or secondary sources are always tertiary]

How Many Sources Are Needed?

1. **When in doubt, ask.** If a topic has been assigned, the person who made the assignment may have an idea about the number of sources required.
2. When no number of sources has been assigned, it is up to the writer to use his/her best judgment. **A good rule of thumb is:** The more complex the idea, the more sources that may be necessary.
3. It is never a bad idea to opt for using more sources. Research is not one of the areas where "less is more." You need enough sources to support your argument, and should include a variety of viewpoints and materials.

Where to Find Source Material

Books

1. It is important to remember that books take a long time to produce, so *some data may already be outdated by the time the book is published.*
2. The most recent research or information may not be found in books from traditional publishers.

Magazines & Journals

1. Magazines/journals are published on a regular schedule, so the *information is often more timely* than that found in books. Magazines/journals also publish a variety of writers, which offers more options for source material.
2. **Not all magazines use fact checkers,** however, so it is always best to **double-check** the information **before including it in the paper.** Generally, scholarly journals' information is reliable.

Newspapers

1. Daily newspapers are good for finding *current eyewitness accounts* and information not available anywhere else. Daily newspapers are also good sources for *current statistics, policies,* and *current events.*
2. However, in the case of an error (they do happen), unless the paper prints a second daily edition, corrections will not be available until the next day. *So, reading an article on any given day may not be sufficient without* **follow-up research.**

Government Reports

1. There are government reports available on thousands of topics.
   EX: crime and justice, education, elections, employment, energy, environment, family issues, government, health, intelligence, transportation, world population, and many others
2. While government reports are part of the *public domain,* they **must still be cited with your other sources.**

Electronic Sources

1. Electronic sources are becoming *widely accepted as viable source material* in academic writing and should be included in lists of sources cited in a written text.
   EX: Web sites, electronic magazines and journals, online databases, listservers, blog postings, email interviews

[**NOTE:** *Information on the Internet is generally* **NOT vetted or evaluated** *before it appears, so the quality of the information should always be questioned.* **It is the writer's responsibility to ensure that only reliable information is used.** *When dealing with Web-related sources, it is important to discern where the information comes from. For example, Is the author named? Does the author belong to a credible organization or have some verifiable expertise? Looking for these clues early on can prevent a lot of trouble later.*]

Evaluating the Sources/Research

1. Once you have discovered a source, part of the task is to evaluate the text to determine the objectivity of the author and the credibility of the work. **Remember:** *Academic writing relies on objectivity, accuracy, and an elimination of bias.*
2. Does the author, or **source of the information,** show some evidence of being *knowledgeable, reliable,* and *truthful*? **When in doubt, look for biographical information.**
3. **Is the source reputable?** Does the information come from a well-known organization, publisher, or journal?
4. Is the publication geared toward a specialized or a general audience? A source can be perfectly legitimate, but still not right for your **target audience.**
5. **Is the source current or out-of-date for your topic?** Information that was current when an article was published five years ago may be sorely out of date today, especially in the areas of technology and science.
6. **Clues to spotting less than adequate sources:**
   a. Anonymity
   b. Lack of quality control
   c. Negative metainformation (*see* #9 in this list)
   d. Bad grammar or misspelled words
7. Most **scholarly journal articles** go through a *peer review process.* Several readers must examine and **approve content before it is published.**
8. If the source is published by a **university press,** it is likely to be scholarly and the *information of high quality.*
9. Summary **metainformation** includes all the shortened forms of information, such as *abstracts, content summaries,* or even *tables of contents.* This type of information shows what a work is about, allowing the writer to consider many different sources without having to go through them completely.

TAKING NOTES

1. The first rule of thumb for **taking notes** is simple: **Do it. Don't rely on your memory.**
2. Note taking is an **ongoing process** *as both the thesis statement and the paper itself take shape.* As the project develops, notes should become narrower in focus and more useful.
3. Note taking prior to developing a thesis statement covers a wide variety of data that can serve as background information. *After the thesis statement takes shape,* **narrow the focus** *to those sources that help make the* **case for the thesis.**
4. Remember that notes are not the final destination. They are a *road map to* the destination.

5. Make a list of personal abbreviations used. It is not uncommon to forget an abbreviation created in the "heat of the moment," while trying to capture all the information quickly.

Handwritten vs. Computer Notes

1. This is a matter of personal preference. Some writers find that having their notes on index cards (which can be moved around to create various outlines) helps them organize their thoughts. Other writers are able to get the same results using a computer.
2. There are advantages to both methods, but the bottom line is this: **Notes must help you keep track of vital information.** Whichever method is most comfortable for you is probably the best for your particular needs.

Notes on Index Cards

1. Assign **each source** a *number* or other *code.* This can save time when you are referring to various sources during the **research phase.**
   EX: books (B1, B2, B3); electronic sources (E1, E2)
2. Create a **bibliography card** that contains the bibliographical information for each source. This will be invaluable when it is time to create a **list of sources.**
3. Begin notes on a blank card. Put the source code and page number in the upper left hand corner, and write one fact or quote on each card.
4. Put the source code and page number on each card.
5. **Color-code** cards based on **topic** or **subtopic.**
6. When you have completed your notes, the cards can be rearranged for different outline variations.

Notes on Computer

1. Notes and sources can be kept either in **various files** developed with word processing/note taking programs, or in a database program.
2. Regardless of the method used, remember to **save and back up information** on a regular basis.
3. Give each new source a number and keep a **separate master list** of sources and their corresponding numbers in another file.
4. Download information from Web sites or other electronic sources directly into your notes file.
5. Using **hyperlinks** during the preliminary phase of note taking will allow you to go back and pull up the full reference at a later date.

CRAFTING THE PAPER

Thesis Statements

A **thesis statement** is usually a *single sentence somewhere in the first paragraph* of an essay or a similar document that **presents the writer's argument to the reader.** The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence intended to "make the case" to the reader.

1. A **thesis statement** is often *provocative*; it takes a stand and justifies the discussion that will be presented. It states the conclusions reached about the topic and makes a promise to the reader about the scope, purpose, and direction of the paper.
2. **The thesis is the answer to the question the paper explores.** Instead of being a launching point for the writing project, a thesis is developed after the writer has collected and organized evidence while looking for possible relationships between known facts.

Subtopics

Subtopics are topics that are *related to the main points of the writing.* The body of the paper contains supporting paragraphs that serve to develop each of the subtopics in an effort to support the thesis or main topic.

The Outline

In its simplest sense, an **outline** *helps the writer break up the main topic into manageable sections.* It breaks down the parts of the thesis in a clear, hierarchical manner.

1. An outline gives **structure** to the writer's *thought process* and **streamlines** the *writing* by helping to *avoid repetitions* and *omissions.*
2. For instance, an outline serves as the basic skeleton of an article, allowing the writer to *flesh out ideas in a logical order.* It also provides a **visible reference** for when and where they will *insert certain data.*
3. The basic format for an outline uses an alternating series of numbers and letters, indented accordingly, to indicate **levels of importance**.

The Opening Paragraph

In any academic writing endeavor, the **opening paragraph** *sets the tone* for the rest of the project.

1. That being said, the first sentence is in some ways the most important.
2. The **first sentence** *must grab the readers' attention and make them want to continue.*

A good opening paragraph should:

1. *Introduce* the topic
2. *Inform* the reader of your (the writer's) point of view
3. *Entice* the reader to continue reading
4. *Focus* on main points of the essay, etc.

Types of Openings

1. **Humorous:** Humor, if handled correctly, is an effective way to open a subject, but it is not the same as inserting a joke. Humor in this case should be in the form of a question or a humorous statement.
2. **Startling:** Sometimes a surprising fact, statistic or statement arrests our attention. This, too, works best as a single statement or question.
3. **Anecdotal:** Stories have always captured readers' attention, and a good anecdote is often the most effective opening.
4. **Metaphorical:** Similes and metaphors can be used effectively, but the danger lies in going "over the top" with the image constructed. It is also possible to make the opening sound like a tired cliché, so care must be taken in how the metaphorical opening is used.

REVISING & EDITING

An important step in effective academic writing is **revising/editing** the work.

1. Reading the paper aloud (and slowly) can help you make sure you haven't missed or repeated any words.
2. This is also a good way to catch lack of agreement in tense, subject/verb, and pronoun/antecedent; it helps in spotting awkward language, too.

Key Questions for the Writer

As the project progresses, it is important to ask:

1. Have I *fulfilled* the *intent* of the project?
2. Is the *introduction clear* and does it indicate where the rest of the paper is headed?
3. Is each section in the appropriate place to *fulfill* the paper's *purpose*?
4. Have I drawn *connections* between the sections and used effective *transitions*?
5. Does the *conclusion* make *clear* what question I asked and how I arrived at the answer?
6. Are there any issues with *word choice, sentence structure, grammar, punctuation,* and/or *spelling*?

Bias in Language

1. **Avoid using adjectives as collective nouns:** females, natives, gays, Orientals, the blind, etc. Use nouns instead (e.g., *women* or *blind people*).
2. **Avoid terms that label people** simply on the basis of their sex.
3. Any adjective used as a noun (e.g., *a black* or *a diabetic*) acts to reduce people to one characteristic and should be avoided.

TYPES OF WRITING

Argumentative Writing

In academic writing, an **argument** *consists of a main idea* (the **claim** or **thesis statement**), which is *backed up with evidence that supports the idea.* It is not an argument in the sense of two sides disagreeing. As such, this is *argument* in the classical sense: *The writer attempts to* ***convince*** *the* ***reader*** *of his/her point.*

1. **Argumentative writing** should be the *product of careful research and thoughtful consideration of all the facts* that the writer can obtain about the issue.
2. Good argumentative writing:
   a. **Establishes facts** *to support an argument.*
   b. **Clarifies** relevant values for the reader.
   c. **Prioritizes** facts and values in order of importance *to build the argument.*
   d. Forms **conclusions.**
   e. **Persuades the reader** *that those conclusions are based on agreed-upon facts and shared values.*

Descriptive Writing

In descriptive writing, the writer's task is to provide a **vivid picture** of a person, location, object, event, or debate that will *enable the reader to imagine the item described.*

1. In this type of writing, it is important to *work from the most important detail to the least important.* Each lesser detail serves to enhance what has already been said in the major detail.
2. As with the use of metaphors in opening paragraphs, it is important to avoid clichés and overused phrases (e.g., "pretty as a picture"). Such phrases may be more distracting than illuminating, often causing the reader to lose interest.

Explanatory Writing

Explanatory (or *process*) writing **informs** and **explains** an idea, event, or process, and can be used to describe both technical and non-technical information—from how to use a computer program to how a network of canals helped communication in colonial America.

1. The most effective explanatory writing relies on **simple words** and **short sentences.** The writer utilizes the *clearest, most direct language possible in order to explain the process one step at a time.*
2. After the opening paragraph, each subsequent paragraph should represent a separate step in the process described. This helps **keep the idea clear** and the **reader on track.**
3. The closing paragraph should be brief (one or two sentences), and provide closure to the process described.
   EX: *Now that the spare tire has been changed, you can safely make your way home, or to the nearest garage to have the old tire repaired or replaced.*

WRITING ABOUT COMPLEX SUBJECTS

The Basics

1. When writing about a **complex subject,** the first step is to *do the research.* It is not necessary to know about the subject from the outset, but it is necessary to start as a "blank page" and begin the research process.
2. **Evaluate the sources.** From the mass of information available on the given subject, *narrow down the focus to one aspect of the topic.*

EX: Stem cell research is a wide field. Narrowing the focus to the responsibilities of investigators conducting stem cell research is more manageable.

3. **Understand the material.** This comes from doing the research and reviewing and thinking about the information gathered. Some references are better than others, and some authors are better at explaining their subject than others. So, understanding takes a little time, but it is more beneficial than simply copying information. **In other words, writers must think about what they have read before writing the research paper!**
4. **Translate the material.** Who is the intended audience? How can you, the writer, take the reader from the known to the unknown?
   a. As with general note taking, the use of index cards or a computer database program can help break complex ideas into manageable pieces.
   b. The first step is to get the information down.
   c. Next, sort through the information and keep what is pertinent to the topic.
   d. From that list, sort the information into a logical and linear order.
   e. From this final list, begin the outline.

PUNCTUATION & GRAMMAR

Generally, **punctuation** and **grammar** *should be reviewed as part of a* **final check, after** *revising/editing, but there will be some overlap.*

Common punctuation and grammar issues include:

1. *Subjects and verbs* **must agree** in number.
2. *Nouns (antecedents) and pronouns* **must agree** in number.
3. **Use complete sentences:**
   a. A complete sentence must contain a subject (noun or pronoun) and a predicate (verb). Complex sentences contain one or more independent clauses.
4. **Avoid run-on sentences.**
5. **Avoid vague pronouns.** Make sure that pronouns such as *it* and *this* refer to something specific.
6. **Beware of wordiness:** Use the minimum number of words needed to express your idea.
7. **Avoid comma splices:**
   a. A comma splice is the joining (splicing) of two independent clauses with only a comma. Use a period or semicolon to separate two independent clauses, or join them with a subordinating conjunction.

Common Punctuation Rules

1. **Commas** should be used when joining two independent clauses (clauses that could stand alone as sentences) *with a coordinating conjunction* (and, or, nor, but, yet, for, so). Normally, the comma is placed before the conjunction; but, remember that, without the conjunction, joining two independent clauses creates a comma splice.
2. **Semicolons** are used to combine two closely related independent clauses into one sentence, and to separate list elements that are long or complex.
3. **Periods** are the most common end punctuation mark, but should only be used at the end of complete sentences.
4. **Colons** introduce lists and comparisons, but should not be used for dramatic pauses, which are better left to em-dashes.
5. **Dashes** serve some of the same functions as commas and colons. Like commas, em-dashes are used to set off interrupting clauses or phrases, and are particularly effective for indicating intentional dramatic pauses in the flow of the writing. [Note that en-dashes serve a different purpose from em-dashes, but are not covered here.]
6. **Parentheses** offer another way of introducing interrupting material. A parenthetical aside often sounds like a footnote.

[**NOTE:** *Other punctuation marks include: apostrophes, ellipses, exclamation points, hyphens, question marks, quotation marks, slashes, and square brackets. A comprehensive treatment of punctuation is beyond the scope of this guide.*]

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