

TIPS for WRITING

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1. Dismiss that old myth about writing: writers are born, not made. Clear, effective writing just takes practice and feedback. You may be smart, but that does not make you the best writer you can be. Writing skills need honing, as with any skill. Together we can demystify the writing process and help improve your writing, no matter how well you write when the term begins. Check out as reference sites:
<http://www.aresearchguide.com/styleguides.html> (all you need for citing sources) or <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html> or <http://www.drgrammar.org/faqs/> (common errors in English, useful for ESL students as well as others)
2. When you schedule a writing session bring a writing sample and question about what you want to work on (logical organization of ideas, clarifying arguments, identifying a thesis). Our meetings can be for brainstorming/honing ideas or editing, but I need to see some writing. Talking about your writing and ideas increases clarity, and also the complexity of your thought.
3. On beginning to write: After reading and thinking about your material,
 - Decide on one question that intrigues you, and that you have some feeling about. What is your current answer to that question?
 - That is the nub of your essay, or your thesis – that is, your answer to a research question on a given topic. [Topic >> research question >> thesis or answer to Q.]
 - Write notes about 3-4 of your most important points. What evidence supports your observations? What might intelligent peers (that is your audience, not the professor or TA) want to know about this question? Do some free writing to get the ideas flowing.
 - Begin to organize your thoughts and evidence, outlining the points you'll make in some logical way -- this will change drastically, if you write a good paper and rewrite thoughtfully.
 - Write a draft, then read aloud, to yourself or to a friend who's a trusted thinker/writer.
 - Then sleep, revise it and revise it a couple more times (rearrange, rewrite).
4. Separate the writing from the editing completely. See Peter Elbow's superb advice on this and on freewriting. While you are writing your first draft, don't start editing, or you may interrupt the flow of ideas. Let the ideas and questions flow freely at first.
<http://myweb.wvnet.edu/~jelkins/writeshop/writeshop/elbow.html> When editing,

- no self abuse, please. What exactly do you mean to say? You want to A -- brainstorm first, to get your ideas down, then B – edit and reorganize sections, then C – read aloud, polish, correct and read it all again – did I mention read aloud?
5. Effective argumentative writing is about making a sound and persuasive argument. An argument means a) expressing a point of view (not summarizing a survey of readings- that's another sort of paper) – which is your analysis of an issue you have studied; and b) supporting your point of view with evidence c) which you interpret for your reader clearly and persuasively. Have pity on your reader. Anticipate points your reader might not understand, taking care to explain clearly (intelligent peers are your audience, not specialists or others in your class familiar with the jargon). Then answer potential arguments or objections/questions your reader may have with your position.
 6. Generally, in your opening, you want to tell us what you will tell us and what your plan is, in a phrase (introduction); then tell us, (the body of your paper), using evidence, examples and arguments; and finally, tell us what you told us, why it's important and what that may lead to (conclusion). Write/revise your INTRODUCTION last, since only then will you really know what you've said.
 7. Once you have your major points, evidence and conclusion nailed down, construct your opening paragraph with a compelling first sentence. Now that you are clear what the paper is about, revise your opening graph to tells us what the how/why question is that your paper will answer, with a short summary of your direction/points.
 8. Support aspects of your single idea (only one per paragraph, normally) with examples, visuals, brief quotes or references to events or persons mentioned in the content you've studied. Include only details that bear directly on your claim or argument. The engine that drives this paragraph is your informed conviction and the relevant detail you use to support it. The paragraph should be focused , with no irrelevant details. Two or three vivid or convincing details are better than ten, which can overwhelm.
 9. Once you have written at least one strong paragraph, keep going. Make new paragraphs for each new idea; paragraphs that go on for a page mean you haven't separated your ideas, in most cases. Remember to use transitions to relate the idea you just explained to the next, in the paragraph that follows.
 10. For the first assignment, write two pages of paragraphs like the above, double-spaced. [If the oral medium is easier for you for getting your ideas organized, record yourself on

- tape, then transcribe and rework your ideas.] Reading your topic sentences for each graph should lead a reader through the argument of your paper.
11. Once you have your ideas and arguments formulated, write a complete draft, then read it aloud (yes, it brings three separate senses to the task) and ask yourself:
 - Is my central idea clear, arguable and specific? Are my supporting arguments, logical, taken together? Do they include the strongest points I could make?
 - Are my supporting details on point, understandable and persuasive?
 - Be sure to use active verbs when possible, not passive. Clarify and streamline sentences. Try to use NO jargon.
 - Have I acknowledged objections and opposing points of view? (This strengthens your argument and suggests you've been thorough in thinking.)
 - Are there any words/phrases that can be deleted? (fewer words increase power)
 - Did I run a spelling and grammar check? Are all unclear phrases clarified?
 12. Make your style consistent and make it in your own voice. Use words you normally would (don't try to impress, just state clear ideas, simply). Still, this is a formal paper, not a conversation. Use style appropriate to a formal paper.
 13. Avoid abstract nouns when possible. Use concrete nouns and few adjectives, with ACTIVE (not passive or TO BE) verbs. [avoid sentences like: "Abstract verbalization is symptomatic of the culture's denial of its personal agency and responsibility." – snore.]
 14. Once edited, your sentences will present illustrative detail to support your analysis. They must be tightly constructed with no extra verbiage, awkward phrasing, errors of syntax, spelling, or punctuation.
 15. Before you do a final draft, find someone who can vet your paper – peer feedback can help both of you. If you are doing an oral presentation, do a practice run (after you've rehearsed at the mirror) with a friend. Q: Why not let someone read your paper or hear your presentation? A: Time constraints (plan ahead), fear of criticism (that's how we improve!), whom to ask and how (simply, with positives and negatives), too little sleep (plan ahead!)...
 16. Finally, REVISE your paper, doing a full rewrite, perhaps using a backward outline: examining the points each graph makes to revise the logical structure of your argument and make sure every point is in the best possible place. Check Peter Elbow's advice on the link given above in item 4. Finally, sum up your ideas with an engaging conclusion and pose a question about the future or relate historical events to a current situation.

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