

# A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO WRITING ESSAYS

# THE WRITE ADVICE

SPECIAL EDITION

UWF WRITING LAB

## The 17 C's of Writing

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Descriptions by the Spring 2007  
UWF Writing Lab Paper Reading Staff and  
Mamie Webb Hixon, Writing Lab Director

A good paper should be

- C**omprehensive – The paper has supporting and fully explained evidence taken from the text or other reliable sources, with all evidence in correct citation style and with the writer illustrating full understanding of the topic.
- C**lear – The paper uses plain, direct, understandable language and sentence construction to make its purpose obvious, and it is void of logical flaws, obscurities, ambiguities, and other statements that might derail the reader.
- C**redible – The paper contains accurate and verifiable information presented in an academic tone and voice, and it reflects a high level of professionalism.
- C**orrect – The paper uses language effectively, appropriately, and correctly; the language also conforms to the rules of standard written American English grammar, punctuation, sentence construction, spelling, capitalization, and diction and adheres to the conventions of its particular format.
- C**oherent – The paper is well organized and easy to read. Its supporting paragraphs and textual support address the thesis or main idea, and the paper does not deviate from the overall topic or theme.
- C**oncise – The paper is free of redundant and meaningless words in order to make each sentence as clear and expressive as possible.
- C**oncentrated – The paper maintains a direction of attention toward the argument at hand, focusing only on ideas or information that develops the topic.
- C**onversant – The paper reveals familiarity with the subject from either experience or research. It engages the topic and adds to the academic discourse on that topic. Though conversant, the paper does not contain conversational language or tone.
- C**ritical – The paper is not a summary, but an evaluative critique whose claims are analytical and argumentative.
- C**ontroversial – The paper presents a defined, debatable argument and provides accurate and relevant information regarding the topic.
- C**omplex – The paper addresses the prompt or question in a thorough, interesting, and unique manner while taking into account all

the intricacies of the question and all the possible arguments and counterarguments applicable to the exploration of the question.

**C**ohesive – The paper presents information in a manner that is logically connected and consistent so that the reader may readily follow the progression of the writer's argument. Its use of smooth transitions makes it fluid, moving logically from one idea to the next.

**C**ontextual – The paper sums up an informed opinion about the subject or presents carefully synthesized facts and data about the subject.

**C**lever – The paper uses language and style that will be particularly pleasing to the reader, and it also anticipates and addresses questions that the reader may or may not have considered about the content of the paper. A clever paper strives to be witty, sharp, inventive, resourceful, intelligent, and astute.

**C**onvincing – The paper demonstrates mastery in the use of reliable supporting data, relevant quotations, and appropriate and varied introductory verbs for quotations. It uses language that appeals to reason and maintains a calm, objective demeanor in order to persuade the reader of the validity of its primary claim.

**C**ompelling – The paper's engaging use of language, clear development of argument, precise word choice, and logical organization compel the reader to consider a new way of thinking about the world.

**C**reative – The paper presents the details in an unusual and creative way to help the reader see the subject anew.

## The D's of Writing

- D**on't make your writing instructor the first person to read your paper. You and someone else should read and proofread it first.
- D**on't be the only person who didn't read your paper. You wrote it. Proofread and edit it too.
- D**on't shift into "rant mode," that is, being excessively repetitive, antagonistic, and subjective about a subject that has several sides. Make your paper reader-friendly.
- D**on't use tags such as "I think," "I believe," and "in my opinion," since it is assumed that the thoughts expressed in the paper (other than those cited as resources) belong to you.
- D**on't use conversational English such as slang or colloquialisms except to achieve a particular tone or rhetorical effect.
- D**on't shift from past to present tense or present to past tense unnecessarily.
- D**on't use second-person pronouns (*you and your*) unless you are writing a business correspondence.
- D**on't use contractions or abbreviations.

**Don't** use sexist language such as *fireman*, *policeman*, and *postman* or masculine pronouns (*he*, *him*, *his*) to refer to a representative of a generic group.

**Don't** use clichés such as *last but not least*, *arguably*, and *as a whole*; find exact words. As writer James Orwell quipped, "Don't use a word or phrase you're used to seeing in print."

**Don't** write in passive voice when you need to make a specific statement about the performer of the action.

**Don't** use redundant phrases such as *each and every*, *continue on*, and *due to the fact that*.

**Don't** use the pronouns *this* and *that* unless they precede a noun.

**Don't** write short, choppy sentences; instead vary your sentence structure.

**Don't** use politically incorrect or emotionally charged language.

**Don't** use questionable Internet sources such as Wikipedia or Joe's homepage.

**Don't** use large words in order to impress your reader if those larger words aren't the best words to convey your thoughts. Use the right words, not the biggest words.

**Don't** write to impress; write to express.

**Don't** ramble. Stay on topic.

**Don't** use another person's words (from the Internet, books or journals, interviews) without giving credit to the author by citing your source.

## Understanding College Writing

By Dr. M.J. Braun  
Assistant Professor

UWF Composition Faculty

When producing college writing, students are asked to follow certain conventions and strategies that professors follow when they publish in their academic disciplines. The entire process professors engage in is generally referred to as "scholarship" and the type of writing as academic writing. Your paper assignments in Composition I ask you to think and write as your professors do.

### 1. Purpose

Professors are expected to know the content of their disciplines, but they are also expected to add knowledge to their disciplines. They do this by researching, asking new questions, seeking new answers, and arguing a case for their conclusions. Before their work can be published, scholarly writing must be reviewed by other scholars in the discipline.

### 2. Ethos: Speaking in the Voice of Demonstration and Reason, not Emotion

In order to gain the respect of his or her audience, the academic writer must demonstrate a thorough understanding of the scholarship that already exists. For this reason, in your college writing, you are also expected to do in-depth research on your topic.

In this way, you demonstrate that you have also have gained some expertise on a particular subject and have something to say about it.

The academic writer demonstrates his or her knowledge of the body of work that exists on the topic by analyzing it to determine how various scholars' views compare and contrast. Academic writers must summarize and explain the work of other scholars, but more so, they must decide what terms and concepts relate to their own research.

Academic audiences expect the author to deliberate on his or her research and present a balanced treatment of the material. They do not expect emotional responses to the material, nor do they expect the author to draw attention to him or herself. Because of this fact, many college professors expect students to refrain from using phrases such as "I think that" or "It seems to me that." The scientific, demonstrative voice academics are expected to speak in, therefore, is a dispassionate voice. It assumes that the observer is merely demonstrating what he or she observes. Consequently, the academic writer often uses the passive voice, a voice that tends to deflect the reader's attention away from human beings who are examining the subject being studied.

When you write for your college courses, be aware that your assignment may ask you to mimic the kind of writing your professor does. You will probably be asked to write for an audience of your peers, demonstrate that you are well-read on a subject, speak in the demonstrative voice, and exhibit some original thinking on the subject.

### 3. The Elements of Academic Argument

Although the organization of scholarly papers depends on the conventions of the various disciplines, most scholarly papers published in the humanities and social sciences contain sections that perform the following functions:

1. The general introduction provides the context or backdrop of the scholarly work. This section helps the readers situate themselves in the general conditions that give rise to the research.
2. The literature review summarizes, analyzes, and evaluates what has already been written about the subject. Often at the end of this section, scholars explain what the research lacks, or how it could be extended. Their purpose is to problematize what has already been said and show that their own argument is proposing a counterargument or saying something new.
3. The outline provides information on what the scholar will argue or how his or her argument is organized. In this section, scholars reiterate why their argument is different from what has already been said on a subject.
4. The explanation provides the method of analysis the scholar will follow. All disciplines have developed theories that become acceptable grounds for research. From these theories, scholars develop methods of analyzing the phenomena their disciplines comprise.
5. The argument forms the body of the paper in which the claim, reasons, and evidence are logically connected.
6. The conclusion of a scholarly paper may contain a summary of what has been argued, but more importantly, a conclusion usually discusses the significance of the findings or points to further research suggested by the argument.

## The Writing Process

by Mamie Webb Hixon  
Writing Lab Director

There really is no recipe or formula for writing a paper, but there are some stages that most seasoned writers go through before a reader sees the finished product.

**Writing is a process** – a process of writing and rewriting. A paper you're planning to submit to your professor for assessment should be constantly in flux. The final product should be one that has gone through at least four of these stages:

- **Stage 1 - Prewriting and Discovery**

Decide on your topic, collect your thoughts, brainstorm, gather information, and then "free write" – write whatever comes to your mind without regard for correctness of expression. Remember, this version is for your eyes only. Spend about **15% of your writing time** on this stage.

- **Stage 2 - Drafting**

Now, it's time to develop a sloppy draft from your prewriting and free-writing notes. Again, ignore the conventions of writing, spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc. Talk on paper. Spend about **20% of your writing time** on this stage.

- **Stage 3 - Writing**

Now you're ready to write your paper. Organize the information from your sloppy rough draft: write your introduction and state a thesis, format the paper, and develop your thesis with details in several body paragraphs. This is your first draft. Spend about **30% of your writing time** on this part.

- **Stage 4 - Rewriting and Editing**

Read your first draft yourself. Check this draft for clarity, continuity (transitions), coherence, unity, focus, logic, and relevant details. Fine-tune your paper by making changes in word usage, punctuation, grammar, etc. You shouldn't be the only person who reads your paper, so ask a competent writer to give you some input. You could also take your paper to a Writing Lab Paper Reader for assistance. Spend about **30% of your writing time** on this part.

- **Step 5 - Proofreading**

After you and someone else have carefully edited the first draft, proofread your paper so that it is ready for publication or presentation: check for typos and other errors you missed in the editing process. Spend about **5% of your writing time** on this stage.

- **Step 6 - Pacing**

Leave your finished product alone to "simmer" for 24 hours or so. Then return to it. You may be surprised by what you find. Read and revise again before turning it in.

Remember that, as you write, you will probably move back and forth between stages and that not all writing goes through all the stages.

## COMPOSITION SKILLS: DON'T ABUSE "TO BE" VERBS

by Judy Young

Composition Director

A significant problem with undergraduate writing involves overuse of "to be" verbs. One such use involves the well-known and much-maligned passive voice, but there are other ways in which writers overuse these verbs. Let's look at three of the most common abuses and how to avoid them.

- **Passive voice** involves the use of a "to be" verb with another, usually more active verb.

Examples:

This concern *is represented* by the writer through environmental symbolism.

The winning goal *was scored* by Jill.

- **Nominalization:** Creating a weak, passive-sounding adjective from a perfectly good verb, such that you have to add a "to be" verb to write the sentence.

Examples:

Such thoughtless actions are *representative of* Americans' tendency to take the easy way out.

The leg of lamb in this passage *is symbolic of* the commodification of the female characters.

- **Expletives:** Using constructions such as "it is" or "there are" to obscure or delay the subject.

Examples:

*There are* several points Masiel makes that show how profit-making drives oil-drilling practices.

*It is* this cultural greed that is slowly destroying our natural environment.

### How to Revise These Kinds of Sentences

A. First, identify possible sentences for revision by finding ALL uses of "to be" verbs in the draft.

B. For each of these sentences, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the real action happening in this sentence? (dynamic verb)

2. Who is or should be taking that action? (subject)

The answer to #2 should be the subject of the sentence.

The answer to #1 should be the verb of the sentence, without the help of "to be" verbs.

C. Rewrite the sentence, doing the following:

1. making the correct person or thing the subject of the sentence, and
2. using a dynamic verb to express the main action.

Caution: Don't expect to change every circled verb. Sometimes, "to be" verbs simply indicate states of existence: *This belief is understandable. Our image of aliens is a product of popular culture.* In cases like this, "to be" verbs are acceptable.

### WRITING TIPS

Get the first draft done three days before the assignment is due.

Timothy Oleksiak, Graduate Teaching Assistant

*Myth: Only teachers are qualified to critique your rough draft.*

*Fact: Anyone can check for typos! There is nothing wrong with getting together with a couple of classmates to read over each other's rough drafts.*

Helen Richards, Composition Instructor

## Lock, Stock and Three Smoking Barrels for Proofreading Papers

By Heather J. Allman  
Instructor, Department of English

There is a commonly accepted **THREE-STEP WRITING PROCESS** to follow when writing papers: Planning, Writing, and Completing or Proofreading. However, most of us erroneously think our papers ARE completed—lock, stock and barrel—immediately after we finish writing them, and we end up skipping the most important step in the writing process: proofreading.

First, we **LOCK** in the paper's content in this **planning** step. We gather and analyze accurate, ethical, and pertinent information to include before choosing the medium through which to communicate: oral, written, or electronic.

Second, we **STOCK** our paper with our planned content, actually creating the paper in this **writing** step. We select a formal or informal tone depending on our audience, choose functional words, devise effective sentences, and eventually turn it all into coherent paragraphs.

Obviously, we frequently use technology to help with the lock and stock parts . . . But with our dependence on technology and our rampant use of electronic and instant correspondence in today's computer age, skipping the **THREE SMOKING BARRELS**, or the final **proofreading** step, happens far too often. After writing a paper, for example, some students rarely take the extra time to actually **READ** through their paper with their own two eyes before submitting it to the instructor. This failure can cause some serious communication problems as you can see from these real-life examples I have encountered, exhibiting everything from simple typos to incorrect word choices to overly casual conversation:

- "I often use a laptop."
- "I am thrilled that you let me into your glass."
- "I am facing the possibly of getting a pour evaluation."
- "I need to be picked up at the bark after practice."

Whether we like it or not, there is a tendency among readers of our papers—instructors, friends, colleagues, employers, parents—to view papers and their content not only as indications of our attention to detail and accuracy, but also as estimations of importance: the importance of the recipient to us and the significance of the paper's information. Mistakes in our papers signify both a lack of attention and a lack of importance. Do you want to stop the mistakes, the miscommunications, and the myriad misunderstandings? Well, I have your weapon right here! Observe the **THREE SMOKING BARRELS** needed to proofread and complete any type of paper, whether oral, written hard-copy, or electronic.

### BARREL 1: READ YOUR PAPER WITH YOUR OWN EYES.

- ☞ Take your time and read carefully, as if you were the recipient. Be sure to read the paper slowly from start to finish; do not skim.

### BARREL 2: RUN YOUR COMPUTER'S SPELL-CHECK FUNCTION.

- ☞ Sounds basic, I know, but many students skip it. Include

the grammar-check capability also if it is available in your word processing program. After running your spell/grammar-check, ask a friend to review if possible, **OR TAKE YOUR PAPER TO THE WRITING LAB.**

### BARREL 3: MOST IMPORTANTLY, READ YOUR PAPER ALOUD FROM START TO FINISH —TWICE.

- ☞ Print your paper out if you are submitting a written hard-copy and read it out loud; if you are submitting your paper electronically (Email, eLearning, etc.), read it out loud directly off the screen or print out a copy.

With any paper, **LOCK** up the planning; **STOCK** your paper with written content, and break out these **THREE SMOKING BARRELS** for proofreading. If you use all three barrels every single time you write a paper, then you will catch easily fixable errors, you will get the results you desire: attention and importance, and eventually you will stop making so many mistakes.

### What Is Your Point of View?

**I**, the person writing, am writing in **FIRST PERSON**.

\*First person point of view uses first person pronouns (I, me, we, us) to speak to the reader from the page. *For personal experience essays, some memos, letters, autobiographies*

**YOU**, the person(s) written to, are writing in **SECOND PERSON**.

\*The intentional use of second person pronouns such as you and your engages the writer and the reader in a personal conversation. *For letters, memos, some process analysis essays. Using YOU, second person, involves the reader unfairly and therefore should be avoided in essays which require a first or third person perspective.*

**THEY**, the person(s) written about, are writing in **THIRD PERSON**.

\*The use of third person pronouns (he, she, it, they, them) expresses an objective point of view that puts the emphasis on the topic (the person, place, thing, or idea written about) rather than on the person writing the essay. *For expository essays, narratives, descriptions, argumentative essays, some memos*

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