

GUIDES TO WRITING AND ANALYTICAL THINKING

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GUIDE FOR WRITING FINAL ESSAYS*

The short essay represents a particular challenge: how to construct a coherent, compelling argument in a small space. Indeed, a short, pithy answer is often more difficult to produce than a long one. Space provides you with room to ramble, to speculate, to move back and forth among the various parts of your argument, reinforcing a little here, hedging your bets a little there. The short essay gives you no such freedom. It places a premium on organization, concision, and clarity. A few things to keep in mind:

1. **Do no put it off.** The clarity of your writing depends largely on the clarity of your thought. Achieving such clarity may take time. Essays written from scratch the night before they are due often lack the clarity and precision of essays which have been nurtured for a few days. Begin the process of thinking early. Write down some preliminary notes, even if they are only momentary responses to the topic. Return to them on occasion if you can. They may well become the basis of your essay; at the very least they will give you something to react to when you finally begin to write.
2. **Develop a plan.** Consider the topic that you have chosen to write about. Can the topic be broken down into constituent parts? Is there an obvious sequence in which those parts should be dealt with? Develop a plan for presenting the topic. What should you present first? What material, which class readings or notes might be of help?
3. **Back up your argument.** The argument you make, whatever it is, should be more than an assertion. Look for support in the texts that you are dealing with. If your argument is not with the texts themselves what other support can you marshal? What is the evidence on which your position is based?
4. **Be disciplined.** A short essay is about one topic. Everything you say should pertain to the topic at hand. Beware the "maybe I'll mention this too" approach. If the point or evidence is relevant to the topic, fit it into your argument in an appropriate place. If it does not seem to fit, it probably does not belong.
5. **Be organized.** An essay should have a logical structure. It needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. The introduction should describe the nature of the problem and indicate how you plan to go about dealing with it; the conclusion should draw together the strands of your argument into a final summary statement. And the middle—the body of the essay—should have a logical organization of its own. What is the appropriate order of sub-topics? Which of the possible orders makes most sense? Think of the essay as a stone wall; the strength and elegance of the finished product will depend on how the various parts are fitted together. Sentence should logically follow sentence, paragraph follow paragraph, point follow point, sub-topic follow sub-topic. The overall design should be orderly and coherent, with each element contributing to the whole.
6. **A warning about quotations.** Use them judiciously. They should support your analysis not replace it. Never use a quotation to make a point you do not make yourself.
7. **Revise.** Write the first draft, take a break (an hour, a day, a weekend), and then read it over carefully. Have you said what you intended to say? Have you said too much, or too little? Do the parts hold together? Do your points make sense? Could you organize them more effectively? Have you thought them through?

Evaluation criteria:

Did you answer all the required questions? Are all the relevant and most important issues considered? Are your answers organized and coherent? Do you back up your argument or explain your position(s) clearly? This is not the time to still be confused about authors' arguments.

*Adopted from M. Berezin, UCLA, 1998 handout.

CITING OTHER PEOPLE'S IDEAS AND WORK

Good scholarly works require that you cite properly so that you will not be accused of plagiarism. This section has a few remarks about Parenthetical Citations. This may help to shorten your paragraphs. NOTE each citation must be within a sentence and not stand by itself.

Check all the journal articles you have read and see what kind of format they use. Pick one journal format and stick with it. The most common one is probably a variation of this: (Author, Year: Page). [In my class, I prefer students using APA or Chicago style.]

Here are some examples:

- Paraphrasing some idea not of your own but you got from the reading: blahblahblah (Author, Year).
- If there are several articles that you want to cite, you separate them by a semicolon(s): blahblahblah (Author1, Year; Author2, Year; Author3, Year).
- If there are several authors to one article, you can simplify, after the initial complete citation, with the 2nd citation being: blahblahblah (1st_Author et al., Year).
- If you mention the author in your paraphrased sentence: Author (year) argued blahblahblah.
- If you quote the author: Author (year: page) argued "blahblahblahblah."

What if you are quoting a quote? For example, you want to quote Lakoff but you got the information from reading O'Barr's book, here is one possibility:

- Lakoff said "blahblah" (Year: Page_for_Lakoff, cited from O'Barr 19xx: page).

This list of examples will save you more space than citing the title. Also a note on writing: An essay does not look "good" when there are too many quotes. A citation at the end of every sentence also does not look "good." Be creative and use other ways of writing so that your paper should have your original input and not just a compilation of quotes and paraphrases. In addition, paraphrases should consist more of your own words rather than a restructuring of the original sentence. Combining ideas into one sentence that show your understanding of the different ideas may help.

For example:

- Instead of: Blahblahblah (Author1, 19xx). Blahblahblah (Ibid.). Blahblahblah, "Blahblahblah" (Ibid.: 34).

You could reorganize the paragraph or sequences of sentences to:

- In "Article_Title" Author1 argued blahblahblah. She also showed that blahblah and blahblahblah in contrast to previous researchers who argued blahblahblah that Author1 critique as "blahblah" (34).

Note how there are fewer parentheses to distract the reader.

TEN COMMON WRITING PROBLEMS TO FIX

1) Verb tense inconsistencies. Decide on a tense you prefer and stick with it, especially in literature review.

CONFUSING: Wittig argued that the notion of “woman” or womanhood is a myth, and she believed how it was constructed still affects how we think about women today.

BETTER: Wittig argues that notion of “woman” or womanhood is a myth, and she believes this constructed image still affects how we think about women today.

2) Passive voice. Use the active voice whenever possible—it will add

BAD: Four groups of 40 kindergarten students were interviewed (N=160).

BETTER: Four research assistants each interviewed 40 kindergarten students (N=160).

3) Inconsistent terminology. When you use a word or phrase to label a variable or concept, use that same word or phrase throughout your article—always.

4) Obscure terminology. Help your reader by avoiding obscure terminology. When you use jargon (and sometimes, for brevity, jargon is the best alternative), define each term clearly the first time you use it and then use it consistently.

5) Wordy phrases or expressions. Search your article for unnecessary words or wordy phrases and strike them out. DELETE “very”.

EXAMPLES:

- “Because the fact that” >>> “because”
- “in order to” >>> “to”
- “an example of this is the fact that” >>> “for example”

6) Nonparallel construction of words, phrases, or clauses in series. In a series of words, phrases, or clauses, all items in the series should be

BAD: “He objected, first, to the injustice of the law; second, that it is unconstitutional.”

BETTER: “He objected that, first, the law is unjust; second, that the law is unconstitutional.”

7) Pronouns with ambiguous antecedents. An antecedent is a noun that precedes a pronoun in a sentence or paragraph. Sometimes, the antecedent for a pronoun is not obvious, and the meaning of a sentence is lost. Repeating

BAD: “Stone (1985) modified Block’s (1942) method; she used only telephone interviews.”

BETTER: “Stone (1985) modified Block’s (1942) method; Block used only telephone interviews.”

8) “Which” versus “That”. Usually if “that” works in a sentence, use it. “That” restricts or defines: “only the students that completed the course were selected.” Generally, “which” is preceded by a comma and introduces a clause that provides extra but unneeded details: “The data, which were on tape, came from France.”

9) General “clunkiness”. “Clunky” writing makes frequent use of colorless verbs, run-on or awkward sentences, and repetitive (boring) “rhythms.” If you must read a sentence twice to make sense of it, the sentence is probably clunky.

10) Inattention to journal style. Formats of all text citations and reference list entries should be correct.

A NOTE ON ANALYTICAL READING, THINKING & WRITING

In this class, your analytical skill is measured largely by how well you write. To the extent that your writing is assumed to reflect your thinking ability, I urge that you proofread before you hand in writing assignments that will be graded. Grammatical errors detract the reader from the content of your argument. Most importantly, pay attention to how you structure your sentence or how you phrase your ideas, especially when you are trying to paraphrase notes from lecture or from the readings. Ask yourself if this is what you really mean, or if you are trying to say something else. For example,

There are two views on the causes of homosexuality. The first is a biological view. The second is a psychological view.

VERSUS

There are two causes of homosexuality. The first is biological; the second is psychological.

NOTE that these two paragraphs are expressing VERY DIFFERENT IDEAS. The first paragraph discusses two EXPLANATIONS or VIEWS on the causes of homosexuality. The second paragraph asserts that homosexuality is caused by both psychological and biological factors.

One important point to keep in mind when you write is not to let words and strings of wonderful quotes dictate the direction of your essay. Be the master conductor and organize your words to support a theme or thesis. Do not let strange or awkward sentence structures to redirect your focus and to change your argument.

Here is another fact to consider. DO NOT CONFUSE BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF ANALYSIS OF AN ARGUMENT. Consider the following sets of examples:

Set A:

- Author1 argues that X caused Y.
- Author2 discusses about Author1's argument.

Note that this does not mean that Author2 is necessarily agreeing with Author1 just because Author2 mentions Author1's argument. [Hint: Read Carefully!! Bad skimming may lead to misinterpretation of the author's thesis.]

Set B:

- Author1 argues X.
- Author2 critiques argument X. (= Y)
- Author3 critiques Author2's critique Y. (= Z)

Imagine now that your assignment is to critique all three authors' arguments. You might want to make a chart somewhere to keep the arguments clear.

Set C:

- A Marxist view [M] of the political economy [Y] suggests that the capitalists [Y1] are benefiting at the expense of the proletariats [Y2].

Imagine if you had to discuss the advantage and disadvantage of the above Marxist view. [That is, to evaluate View M for its strengths and weaknesses.] You would want to distinguish between the content of the argument from the content of the analysis so that your evaluation may be as followed:

- A Marxist view of the political economy offers a good understanding of Y in terms of the relationship between Y1 and Y2 but does not explain Y3 well.

This is very different from the following example of confusion:

- A Marxist view is a benefit for the capitalists and a disadvantage for the proletariats.

Set D:

Sometimes, it may help to code these arguments as variables so that you do not mix the content of these arguments with the content of analyses of these arguments. Consider the following examples:

- Author1 argues that X caused Y.
- Author2 categorizes Author1's argument as A and critiques argument A-type as inadequate in explaining Y. Author2 offers an alternative argument W to explain Y.
- Author3 critiques Author2's critique of Author1's argument, saying that Author2 did not really understand Author1's argument and that X caused Y falls under another type of arguments called C, not A.

It is very easy to get confused among these arguments by the three authors. It is easier and more obvious in analytical writings on natural science topics. One does not confuse between the researcher and their findings and theories on, say, electrons. On the other hand, it is easy to slip back and forth between the analytical level and the social phenomenon because both levels deal with people. So, BE CAREFUL to write what you mean and mean what you write.