

# Writing for the Classroom

NOTE: This is not generally meant for little assignments or journal entries. On the other hand, if you are going to write, do it well.



You write with the purpose of informing and, to some degree, persuading a highly intelligent audience about your outlook on an important topic. Yes, ultimately, it will be an opinion based upon the choices of material that you cite in your paper and how you have put your thoughts together. The more professional you sound the more convincing you are. Choosing weak sources for your paper or argument diminishes its effectiveness. (I had a student use <http://hubby.com/> for a citation on marriage.) Regarding the use of sources, stay as academic as you can and avoid agenda-driven sources as much as possible. Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>) is a good start for ideas, but should not be used as an actual resource as it is limited in quality control and can be edited by the general public and can't be monitored as rigorously as academic journals. But, to paraphrase the old adage “follow the money,” you should “follow the links!” Wikipedia articles are cited and the citations (those blue things) are the true source of credibility. As well, when looking at any journal article, check out its references for further reading or other ideas for you paper.

I do expect at least a level of grammar and spelling that reflects a genuine effort. While I'm not here to teach you how to spell or how to become a good grammarian, your school *should* have some sort of tutorial center where someone can look at your work before it is turned in. In short, if it appears you don't care, then why should I?

The following are some writing tips taken from mistakes commonly made by students. These apply most of the work you will be doing for class. As I

usually require a paper or two as well as a weekly journal in my classes, I suggest you read them and take them seriously.

Dont's:

Never start a sentence with "Well ..." as in "Well, the author just doesn't..." You are not writing a letter to your family.

Never start a paragraph, paper, or sentence with "In my opinion," for the reasons stated above, and because it is just plain poor form. Never start a paper (unless otherwise instructed to do so) with, "I am writing this paper..." or "The purpose of this paper is..." and the like.

The first sentence is critical! Don't blow it. And so many do. Typically it is a statement that just isn't true, or at least is not provable, such as:

"Throughout history..."

"It has always been the case that..."

"Everyone knows..."

and all other versions of such hyperbole.

Just get to the point straight off and don't assume "everyone knows" anything.

Avoid of the use of "etc." as it often refers to an unknown number of unknown things.

Never use the expression "back in the day" or its derivatives. It is meaningless. Be specific. Do you mean a year, a decade, a century or a millennium?

No abbreviations. A great one is b/c. Not here. It is not appropriate.

Don't get personal. Even in journal submissions, keep it academic. "I am writing about ..." is simply too informal and sounds like middle school. Just start out with what you are writing about. Don't write about what you are writing about.

For paper submissions, don't use report covers. They get tossed.

Almost always include a title page. Some classes want an abstract. Ask what should be on them.

Don't use decorative typefaces. Stick to the standards. Times Roman and Helvetica are the safest for paper and Verdana is among the best for online. But be consistent. Don't mix types. Also stay at 12 point with 1&1/2 to 2-line spacing.

Cite, cite, cite!

Everything and anything you say that is either a generalized statement of fact or a piece of data must be represented by an "embedded" or "in text" citation. A pretty good source on how this is done can be found at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/02/> but I can probably simplify things a bit in class. The easiest way to learn how to do this is to actually look at some actual academic articles. But it must be done.

Reference page:

Your citations, naturally, are from your reference page. Your references are extremely important. Using popular magazines is only appropriate under limited circumstances. Really, you must be using "peer reviewed" sources. In your online library databases, there is somewhere a box to check for this. It is actually called "peer review." These are papers that have been reviewed by other experts prior to publishing, assuring the highest quality standards. Note that when I review a paper, the very first place I look is the reference page. Then I check to see if all of the statements and data are cited.

Opinion versus criticism:

We all have opinions, and even though we should keep them out of academic writing, opinion still steers us in our thinking. This is like prejudice that is, pre-judging things before investigating them. It is essentially bias having a predetermined idea about how things should be. Max Weber insisted that the social researcher should do everything he or she could to mitigate bias. But as we know, it lurks in our thinking if only in that it directs

us towards what we want to study or research. How you approach your topic can pre-determine the outcome.

Thus, including opinionated statements that include key words or phrases such as “should,” are not appropriate until the end, or summation, of the paper. At that point, a critical evaluation is in order. Indeed, when there is sufficient material that is cited and credible in your paper, some kind of interpretation on the part of the student is in order. This is not mere opinion in the colloquial sense. It is now informed opinion.

Some examples of some of the common writing mistakes follow, with a discussion of some of the more common fallacies. Bear in mind that I am not a grammarian, but can guide you away from some of the more tempting pitfalls of scholarly writing.

Fallacies: (defined as a mistaken belief, or a mistake in reasoning which makes an argument invalid. (Pocket Oxford English Dictionary)):

For many of us, fallacies are a part of our everyday thinking and speaking. We over generalize and exaggerate and use hyperbole to make a point about some experience that may need a bit of embellishment for the sake of conversation. When we feel wronged, the wrongdoer is often guilty of all manner of misdeeds, regardless of our limited amount of investigation. (Take politics, for instance.) We use illogical associations and selective memory among friends to generate sympathy for our cause. It is natural. But it has no place in academic writing, or any serious writing of factual and sober persuasion.

Here is a short list of fallacies. Fallacies are flawed, or mistaken arguments. Some are best described in Lauer and Lauer's Social Problems and the Quality of Life (2006), and others are in Wikipedia, while others may be found by just banging around the Web. I highly suggest you visit <http://www.don-lindsay-archive.org/skeptic/arguments.html> especially for the descriptions on "authority."

A short list of common fallacies:

1 The single case scenario, or dramatic instance. Overgeneralization. "I know a person who ..." is a phrase that might be used, but not as the sole subtext of an argument. This is exactly where prejudice is born.

2 The fallacy of retrospective determinism, or, "it is the way it is because it always has been that way." Again, race, gender and ethnic prejudice begins right here. Such arguments are dismissive of new information and close the door to further inquiry. Keep as open a mind as you can stand.

3 Ad hominem, or the fallacy of personal attack. Politics comes to mind again. Do not attack the speaker, attack the argument. This applies to classroom discussion as well. When debating a point, stick to the point rather than digressing to the person's character.

4 Ad populum, or the appeal to prejudice. This is the use of reductionism and shallow thinking. It relies upon popular myths and slogans such as "when guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns." Lauer and Lauer note "Myths are hard to break down, but if you want to understand social problems, you must abandon popular ideas and assumptions and resist popular slogans and prejudices that cloud our thinking. Instead, you must make judgments based on evidence."

5 Appeal to false authority. This is especially true in the use of celebrities endorsing products or candidates or complex social issues. The greatest example that comes to mind is an ad for a medication by an actor who actually stated "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV." Another is the appeal to anonymous authority. This would be "scientists agree," or "they say ..." and it is left at that. You have nothing but the author's word. Don't do it.

6 The fallacy of circular reasoning. This uses conclusions to support the argument that was made to support the conclusions. All so-and-sos are bad because they act guilty. If they act guilty they must have done something wrong. If they have done something wrong, then they are guilty. And so it goes ...

7 The fallacy of composition: This can be an elegant faux pas when not done deliberately. It is the assumption that the whole has the same simplicity as the parts that make it up. The Don Lindsay archive (linked above) states, "A car makes less pollution than a bus. Therefore, cars are less of a pollution problem than buses." It simply doesn't hold, but is used regardless. Be careful.

8 The fallacy of non sequitur: It simply means: "Does not follow." Is there a sufficient logical train leading to a conclusion? Consider state welfare expenses. They have gone down in many instances, seemingly supportive of changes in U.S. policy. But in fact, this only demonstrates how many people are now off the rolls and not how many people are out of the situation that put them on welfare in the first place. The first number is easy to ascertain. The other requires more rigorous research.

9 The appeal to faith: If the arguer relies on faith as the basis of his argument, then one can gain little from further discussion. Faith, by definition, relies on a belief that does not rest on logic or evidence.

A Few More Don'ts:

All of this brings up the delicate question of religious faith in your writing and in discussion in the classroom and online. There is no arguing faith. But in academia (outside of religious institutions of study) we argue about everything else. Indeed, it is "the ruthless criticism of all that exists" (if I may once again paraphrase Karl Marx). We appeal to a collective authority—that of science. In writing this would be what amounts to "peer review". You cannot use your religion or your god to justify an academic position, argument, or statement. You can talk about religion, as indeed, religion is a serious topic in the social sciences. You can be critical in your analysis of religion, but not critical about another person's personal religion. Roughly, the same rules of discussion apply to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender: be courteous and sensitive regarding both what is said to you and what you say to or about others. In any event, even if you cannot suspend your beliefs while writing about sociological topics, just keep them out of your work.

More Help:

A great link for further help is Purdue University's Writing Lab: (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>) It includes such topics as creating a thesis statement. It also has information on appropriate styles such as the American Sociological Association (ASA), the American Psychological Association (APA), American Sociological Association (ASA—although rarely used), and the Modern Language Association (MLA).

NOTE: If I do not assign a specific style in the classroom you may use any one of the three listed here. But you must be consistent. No mix-and-match. Do a good job.