What is an Academic Paper?

WRITING FOR COLLEGE

How It Differs From Writing in High School

One of the first things you'll discover as a college student is that writing in college is different from writing in high school. Certainly a lot of what your high school writing teachers taught you will be useful to you as you approach writing in college: you will want to write clearly, to have an interesting and arguable thesis, to construct paragraphs that are coherent and focused, and so on.

Still, many students enter college relying on writing strategies that served them well in high school but that won't serve them well here. Old formulae, such as the five-paragraph theme, aren't sophisticated or flexible enough to provide a sound structure for a college paper. And many of the old tricks - such as using elevated language or repeating yourself so that you might meet a ten-page requirement - will fail you now.

So how does a student make a successful transition from high school to college?

The first thing that you'll need to understand is that writing in college is for the most part a particular kind of writing, called "academic writing." While academic writing might be defined in many ways, there are three concepts that you need to understand before you write your first academic paper.

1. **Academic writing is writing done by scholars for other scholars.** Writing done by scholars for scholars? Doesn't that leave you out? Actually, it doesn't. Now that you are in college you are part of a community of scholars. As a college student, you will be engaged in activities that scholars have been engaged in for centuries: you will read about, think about, argue about, and write about great ideas. Of course, being a scholar requires that you read, think, argue, and write in certain ways. Your education will help you to understand the expectations, conventions, and requirements of scholarship. If you read on, so will this Web site.

2. **Academic writing is devoted to topics and questions that are of interest to the academic community.** When you write an academic paper, you must first try to find a topic or a question that is relevant and appropriate. But how do you know when a topic is relevant and appropriate? First of all, pay attention to what your professor is saying. She will certainly be giving you a context into which you can place your questions and observations. Second, understand that your paper should be of interest to other students and scholars. Remember that academic writing must be more than personal response. You must write something that your readers will find useful. In other words, you will want to write something that helps your reader to better understand your topic, or to see it in a new way.

3. This brings us to our final point: **Academic writing should present the reader with an informed argument.** To construct an informed argument, you must first try to sort out what you *know* about a subject from what you *think* about a subject. Or, to put it another way, you will want to consider what *is known* about a subject and then to determine what *you* think about it. If your paper fails to inform, or if it fails to argue, then it will fail to meet the expectations of the academic reader.

CONSTRUCTING AN INFORMED ARGUMENT

What You Know

When you sit down to write an academic paper, you'll first want to consider what you know about your topic. Different writing assignments require different degrees of knowing. A short paper written in response to a viewing of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window,* for example, may not require you to be familiar with Hitchcock's other works. It may not even require you to have mastered the terms important to film criticism - though clearly any knowledge you bring to the film might help you to make a thoughtful response to it.

However, if you are asked to write an academic paper on the film, then you will want to know more. You will want to have certain terms in hand so that you can explain what Hitchcock is doing in key moments. You will want to be familiar with Hitchcock's other films so that you can understand what themes are important to him and his work. Moreover, if you are watching this film in an upper-level film class, you will want to be aware of different critical perspectives on Hitchcock's films and on films in general, so that you can "place" your argument within the larger ongoing conversation.

When you sit down to write an academic paper, ask yourself these questions:

What do I know about my topic?

- Can I answer the questions who, what, when, where, why, how?
- What do I know about the context of my topic?
- What historical or cultural influences do I know about that might be important to my topic?
- Does my topic belong to any particular genre or category of topics?
- What do I know about this genre?

What seems important to me about this topic?

- If I were to summarize what I know about this topic, what points would I focus on?
- What points seem less important?
- Why do I think so?

How does this topic relate to other things that I know?

- What do I know about the topic that might help my reader to understand it in new ways?

What DON'T I know about my topic?

- What do I need to know?
- How can I find out more?

What You Think

You'll discover as you consider the questions listed above that you are moving beyond what you *know* about a topic and are beginning to consider what you *think.* In the process of really thinking about your topic, your aim is to come up with a fresh observation. After all,

it's not enough to summarize in a paper what is already known and talked about. You must also add something of your own to the conversation.

Understand, however, that "adding something of your own" is not an invitation simply to bring your own personal associations, reactions, or experiences to the reading of a text. To create an informed argument, you must first recognize that your writing should be *analytical* rather than *personal.* In other words, your writing must show that your associations, reactions, and experiences of a text have been framed in a critical, rather than a personal, way.

How does one move from personal response to analytical writing?

Summarize.
First, summarize what the primary text is saying. You'll notice that you can construct several different summaries, depending on your agenda. Returning to the example of Hitchcock's film, you might make a plot summary, a summary of its themes, a summary of its editing, and so on. You can also summarize what you know about the film in context. In other words, you might write a summary of the difficulties Hitchcock experienced in the film's production, or you might write a summary of how this particular movie complements or challenges other films in the Hitchcock canon. You can also summarize what others have said about the film. Film critics have written much about Hitchcock, his films, and their genre. Try to summarize all that you know.

Evaluate.
The process of evaluation is an ongoing one. You evaluate a text the moment you encounter it, and - if you aren't lazy - you continue to evaluate and to re-evaluate as you go along. Evaluating a text is different from simply reacting to a text. When you evaluate for an academic purpose, it is important to be able to clearly articulate and to support your own personal response. What in the text is leading you to respond a certain way? What's *not* in the text that might be contributing to your response? Watching Hitchcock's film, you are likely to have found yourself feeling anxious, caught up in the film's suspense. What in the film is making you feel this way? The editing? The acting? Can you point to a moment in the film that is particularly successful in creating suspense? In asking these questions, you are straddling two intellectual processes: experiencing your own personal response, and analyzing the text.

Analyze.
This step in constructing an informed argument asks you first to consider the parts of your topic and then to examine how these parts relate to each other or to the whole. To analyze Hitchcock's film, you may want to break the film down by examining particular scenes, point of view, camera movements, and so on. In short, you'll want to ask: What are the components of Hitchcock's film, and how do these components contribute to the film's theme? How do they contribute to Hitchcock's work as a whole? When you analyze, you break the whole into parts so that you might see the whole differently. In the process of analysis, you find things that you might say.

Synthesize.
When you analyze, you break down a text into its parts. When you synthesize, you look for *connections* between ideas. Consider once again the Hitchcock film. In analyzing this film, you might come up with elements that seem initially disparate. You may have some observations that at first don't seem to gel. Or you may have read various critical perspectives on the film, all of them in disagreement with one another. Now would be the time to consider whether these disparate elements or observations might be reconciled, or

synthesized. This intellectual exercise requires that you create an umbrella argument - some larger argument under which several observations and perspectives might stand.

CHOOSING AN APPROPRIATE TOPIC

Many students writing in college have trouble figuring out what constitutes an appropriate topic. Sometimes the professor will provide you with a prompt. She will give you a question to explore, or a problem to resolve. When you are given a prompt by your professor, be sure to read it carefully. Your professor is setting the parameters of the assignment for you. She is telling you what sort of paper will be appropriate.

In many cases, however, the professor won't provide you with a prompt. She might not even give you a topic. For example, in a psychology course you might be asked to write a paper on any theory or theories of self. Your professor has given you a subject, but she has not given you a topic. Nor has she told you what the paper should look like. Should it summarize one of the theories of self? Should it compare two or more theories? Should it place these theories into some historical context? Should it take issue with these theories, pointing out their limitations?

At this juncture, you have two options: talk to the professor and see what her expectations are, or figure out this matter for yourself. It's always a good idea to talk with the professor. At the very least, you'll want to find out if the professor wants a *report* or a *paper*. In other words, is your professor looking for *information* or *argument*?

Chances are she'll want you to make an argument. It will be up to you to narrow your topic and to make sure that it's appropriately academic. As you think about a topic, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you formed an intellectual question? In other words, have you constructed a question that will require a complex, thoughtful answer?
- Is the question provocative? Startling? Controversial? Fresh?
- Will you be able to answer this question adequately in a few pages? Or is the question impossibly broad?
- If the question seems broad, how might you narrow it?
- Does your question address both text and context? In other words, have you considered the historical and cultural circumstances that influenced this text? Have you considered what other scholars have said about it?
- Will your reader care about this question? Or will she say, "So what?"
- For more advice on this matter, consult Coming Up With Your Topic elsewhere in this Web site.

FINDING A RHETORICAL STANCE

When writing an academic paper, you must not only consider *what* you want to say, you must also consider *to whom* you are saying it. In other words, it's important to determine not only what *you* think about a topic, but also what *your audience* is likely to think. What are your audience's biases? Values? Expectations? Knowledge? To whom are you writing, and for what purpose?

When you begin to answer all of these questions, you have started to reckon with what has been called "the rhetorical stance." "Rhetorical stance" refers to the position you take as a writer in terms of the subject and the reader of your paper.

Consider Your Position

Let's first consider your relationship to your topic. When you write a paper, you take a stand on a topic. You determine whether you are for or against, passionate or cool-headed. You determine whether you are going to view this topic through a particular perspective (feminist, for example), or whether you are going to make a more general response. You also determine whether you are going to analyze your topic through the lens of a particular discipline - history, for example. Your stance on the topic depends on the many decisions you have made in the reading and thinking processes.

In order to make sure that your stance on a topic is appropriately analytical, you might want to ask yourself some questions. Begin by asking why you've taken this particular stance. Why did you find some elements of the text more important than others? Does this prioritizing reflect some bias or preconception on your part? If you dismissed part of a text as boring or unimportant, why did you do so? Do you have personal issues or experiences that lead you to be impatient with certain claims? Is there any part of your response to the text that might cause your reader to discount your paper as biased or un-critical? If so, you might want to reconsider your position on your topic.

Consider Your Audience

Your position on a topic does not by itself determine your rhetorical stance. You must also consider your reader. In the college classroom, the audience is usually the professor or your classmates - although occasionally your professor will instruct you to write for a more particular or more general audience. No matter who your reader is, you will want to consider him carefully before you start to write.

What do you know about your reader and his stance towards your topic? What is he likely to know about the topic? What biases is he likely to have? Moreover, what effect do you hope to have on the reader? Is your aim to be controversial? Informative? Entertaining? Will the reader appreciate or resent your intention?

Once you have determined who your reader is, you will want to consider how you might best reach him. If, for example, you are an authority on a subject and you are writing to readers who know little or nothing about it, then you'll want to take an informative stance. If you aren't yet confident about a topic, and you have more questions than answers, you might want to take an inquisitive stance.

In any case, when you are deciding on a rhetorical stance, choose one that allows you to be sincere. You don't want to take an authoritative stance on a subject if you aren't confident about what you are saying. On the other hand, you can't avoid taking a position on a subject: nothing is worse than reading a paper in which the writer has refused to take a stance. What if you are of two minds on a subject? Declare that to the reader. Make ambivalence your clear rhetorical stance.

Finally, don't write simply to please your professor. Though some professors find it flattering to discover that all of their students share their positions on a subject, most of us are hoping that your argument will engage us by telling us something new about your topic - even if that "something new" is simply a fresh emphasis on a minor detail. Moreover, it is impossible for you to replicate the "ideal paper" that exists in your professor's head. When you try, you risk having your analysis compared to your professor's. Do you really want that to happen?

CONSIDERING STRUCTURE

In high school you might have been taught various strategies for structuring your papers. Some of you might have been raised on the five paragraph theme, in which you introduce your topic, come up with three supporting points, and then conclude by repeating what you've already said. Others of you might have been told that the best structure for a paper is the hour-glass model, in which you begin with a general statement, make observations that are increasingly specific, and then conclude with a statement that is once again general.

When you are writing papers in college, you will require structures that will support ideas that are more complex than the ones you considered in high school. Your professors might offer you several models for structuring your paper. They might tell you to order your information chronologically or spatially, depending on whether you are writing a paper for a history class or a course in art history. Or they may provide you with different models for argument: compare and contrast, cause and effect, and so on. But remember: the structure for your argument will in the end be determined by the content itself. No prefab model exists that will provide adequate structure for the academic argument. (For more detailed advice on various ways to structure your paper, see Writing: Considering Structure and Organization.)

When creating an informed argument, you will want to rely on several organizational strategies, but you will want to keep some general advice in mind.

Introductions:

Your introduction should accomplish two things: it should declare your argument, and it should place your argument within the larger, ongoing conversation about your topic. Often writers will do the latter before they do the former. That is, they will begin by summarizing what other scholars have said about their topic, and then they will declare what they are adding to the conversation. Even when your paper is not a research paper you will be expected to introduce your argument as if into a larger conversation. "Place" your argument for your reader by naming the text, the author, the issues it raises, and your take on these issues. (For more specific advice on writing a good introduction, see Introductions and Conclusions.)

Thesis Sentence:

Probably you were taught in high school that every paper must have a declared thesis, and that this sentence should appear at the end of the introduction. While this advice is sound, a thesis is sometimes implied rather than declared in a text, and it can appear almost anywhere - if the writer is skillful.

Still, if you want to be safe, your paper will have a declared thesis and it will appear where the reader expects it to appear: at the end of the introduction. Your thesis should also be an arguable point - that is, it should declare something that is interesting and controversial. Because your thesis is probably the single most important sentence in your paper, you will want to read more about it in Developing Your Thesis.

The Other Side(s):

Because every thesis presents an arguable point, you as a writer are obligated to acknowledge in your paper the other side(s) of an argument. Consider what your opponents might say against your argument. Then determine where and how you want to deal with the opposition. Do you want to dismiss the opposition in the first paragraph? Do you want to list each opposing argument and rebut them one by one? Your decisions will determine how you structure your paper.

Supporting Paragraphs:
Every convincing argument must have support. Your argument's support will be organized in your paper's paragraphs. These paragraphs must each declare a point, usually formed as that paragraph's topic sentence.

A topic sentence is like a thesis sentence - except that instead of announcing the argument of the entire paper, it announces the argument of that particular paragraph. In this way, the topic sentence controls the paper's evidence. The topic sentence is more flexible than the thesis in that it can more readily appear in different places within the paragraph. Most often, however, it appears at or near the beginning. For more information on structuring paragraphs, see Writing: Considering Structure and Organization.

Conclusions:
Writing a good conclusion is difficult. You will want to sum up, but you will want to do more than say what you have already said. You will want to leave the reader with something to think about, but you will want to avoid preaching. You might want to point to a new idea or question, but you risk confusing the reader by introducing something that he finds irrelevant. Writing conclusions is, in part, a matter of finding the proper balance. For more instruction on how to write a good conclusion, see Introductions and Conclusions.

USING APPROPRIATE TONE AND STYLE

OK: you think you understand what's required of you in an academic paper. You need to be analytical. Critical. You need to create an informed argument. You need to consider your relationship to your topic and to your reader. But what about the matter of finding an appropriate academic tone and style?

The tone and style of academic writing might at first seem intimidating. But they needn't be. Professors want students to write clearly and intelligently on matters that they, the students, care about. What professors DON'T want is imitation scholarship - that is, exalted gibberish that no one cares about. If the student didn't care to write the paper, the professor probably won't care to read it. The tone of an academic paper, then, must be inviting to the reader, even while it maintains an appropriate academic style.

Remember: professors are human beings, capable of boredom, laughter, irritation, and awe. Understand that you are writing to a person who is delighted when you make your point clearly, concisely, and persuasively. Understand, too, that she is less delighted when you have inflated your prose, pumped up your page count, or tried to impress her by using terms that you didn't take the time to understand.

In short, then, good academic writing follows the rules of good writing. If you'd like to know more about how to improve your academic style, please see Attending to Style, elsewhere in this Web site. But before you do, consider some of the following tips, designed to make the process of writing an academic paper go more smoothly:

- Keep the personal in check. Some assignments will invite you to make a personal response to a text. For example, a professor might want you to describe your experience of a text, or to talk about personal experiences that are relevant to the topic at hand. But if you haven't been invited to make a personal response, then it's better not to digress. As interesting as Aunt Sally's story about having a baby out of wedlock is, it probably doesn't have a place in your academic paper about *The Scarlet Letter.*

- Rely on evidence over feeling. You may be very passionate about a subject, but that's no excuse to allow rhetoric alone to carry the ball. Even if you have constructed some very pretty phrases to argue against genetic engineering, they won't mean much to your professor unless you back those pretty phrases with facts.
- Watch your personal pronouns. Students often wonder if it's OK to use the pronouns "I" and "you" in a paper. In fact, it is OK - provided you use them with care. Overusing the "I" might make the reader feel that the paper was overly subjective. In fact, when a writer too often invokes himself in the first person, he may be doing so to avoid offering proof: "It's my own personal opinion, and I have a right to it. I don't have to defend it." But of course, he does. As to using the pronoun "you": Do you really want to aim a remark directly at the reader? Doing so draws the reader closer to the text and invites a more subjective (and sometimes more intensely critical) response. Remember: certain academic disciplines (the sciences, for example) would frown on the use of these pronouns. When in doubt, ask.
- Watch your gendered pronouns. When you write, you'll want to make sure that you don't do anything to make your readers feel excluded. If you use "he" and "him" all the time, you are excluding half of your potential readership. We'll acknowledge that the he/she solution is a bit cumbersome in writing. However, you might solve the problem as we have done in this document: by alternating "he" and "she" throughout. Other writers advocate always using "she" instead of "he" as a way of acknowledging a long-standing exclusion of women from texts. Whatever decision you make in the end, be sensitive to its effect on your readers.
- Be aware of discipline-specific differences. Each of the academic disciplines has its own conventions when it comes to matters of tone and style. If you need more information about discipline-specific matters, check out a style manual, such as the MLA or APA style sheets.
- Avoid mechanical errors. No matter what audience you're writing for, you'll want to produce text that is error-free. Errors in grammar and style slow your reader down. Sometimes they even obscure your meaning. Always proofread your text before passing it on to your reader. If you find that you are making a lot of errors and want help with grammar and style, consult a handbook or see Attending to Grammar and Attending to Style elsewhere in this Web site. You might also contact the OWRC for help.

TIPS FOR NEWCOMERS

For those of you who are just beginning your academic careers, here are some tips that might help you to survive:

- First of all, keep up with your reading and go to class. You can't hope to be part of a conversation if you are absent from it.
- Pay attention not only to what others are saying, but also to how they are saying it. Notice that sound arguments are never made without evidence.
- Don't confuse evidence, assumption, and opinion. Evidence is something that you can prove. Assumption is something that one can safely infer from the evidence at hand. Opinion is your own particular interpretation of the evidence.
- Pay attention to the requirements of an assignment. When asked for evidence, don't offer opinion. When asked for your opinion, don't simply present the facts. Too often students write summary when they are asked to write analysis. The assignment will cue you as to how to respond.
- Familiarize yourself with new language. Every discipline has its own jargon. While you will want to avoid unnecessary use of jargon in your own writing, you will want

to be sure before you write that you have a clear understanding of important concepts and terms.

- Don't make the mistake of thinking that because something is in print it has cornered the market on truth. Your own interpretation of a text might be just as valid (or even more valid) than something you've found in the library or on the internet. Be critical of what you read, and have confidence that you might say as much.
- Pay attention to standards and rules. Your professors will expect you to write carefully and clearly. They will expect your work to be free of errors in grammar and style. They will expect you to follow the rules for citing sources and to turn in work that is indeed your own. If you have a question about a professor's standards, ask. You will find that your professors are eager to help you.