Writing Across the Disciplines (for Students and Writing Assistants)

(by Jason Ferguson, 2014)

Every academic discipline requires writing of some kind and most of them require it frequently. Students getting a liberal arts education must not only write often and well, they must also write in multiple disciplines, with each requiring different standards and expectations. This handout helps make understanding this variety easier by providing a quick summary of writing requirements for most of the major fields of study at UP.

What All Campus Disciplines Value in Writing

Despite how varied the forms of academic writing are, expectations of professors are generally uniform and predictable. No field approves of poor mechanics (i.e. glaring grammatical errors, misspellings, misused words), plagiarism, poor or lazy citation, unoriginal thought, opinions that are merely assertive and not supported by evidence, or unreadable writing. Less commonly known, but no less universal taboos, include students failing to carefully read and following an assignment's rubric or not asking their professor for clarification, failing to adhere to a specific citation format (MLA, APA, CMS), failure to engage with course texts if they are required, and filling papers with fluff, clichés, or excessively flowery or pretentious prose that serves only to detract from the student author's message.

Nearly every professor from every field loves writing that adheres to these eight C's:

- *Clarity:* Defining terms, writing sentences structured for ease of flow, using good mechanics, writing a specific, focused, and relevant thesis, and using exact language.

- *Coherence:* Logically organized and well-connected ideas tied to a unified theme.

- *Continuity:* Using consistent tone, diction, transitions, road maps, sign posts, or labels to make the direction of the paper flow smoothly and continually in a purposeful direction.

- *Concision:* Getting straight to the point and avoiding any language or ideas that detract from the meaning of the paper or distract the reader so they become lost.

- *Comprehension:* Demonstrating knowledge and command of the subject the student is writing about by being able to analyze and synthesize data and build arguments from those data or relate thoughts to larger and more global contexts.

- *Courtesy:* Good writers always consider *who* their audience is and tailor their writing accordingly so readers don't have to work hard to understand what's being said.

- *Cleverness:* Exhibiting original thought and producing new and unique insights original to their author.
- *Citation:* Using sources effectively, citing them accurately, and being exceptionally responsible in attributing credit where credit is due.

Summary of Individual Disciplines: College of Art and Science

Life Sciences

Biology and Chemistry

Science writing typically involves two types of papers: 1) lab write-ups which consist of primary journal articles or research papers; 2) secondary source journal or literature reviews. Lab write-ups require a more rigorous adherence to formal writing procedures like the use of passive voice, correct tense (usually past), and careful citation of all researched data. The formula for a lab report: 1) *Introduction:* contains background information regarding related experiments and data, explanation of technical terms, statement about the significance of the following study/experiment; 2) *Materials and methods:* a detailed, past tense account of the experiment procedure; 3) *Results:* documentation of all data relevant to the hypothesis and whether they confirmed or negated the hypothesis. Note that the hypothesis in science writing is equivalent to a thesis. Secondary source papers involve synthesis, review, and analysis of primary sources, checking for the validity of conclusions, soundness of methods and more global implications. Contrary to lab reports and common perceptions of science writing, examination of second sources can be more informal and less rigid, allowing for thoughtful, subjective reflection and opinion provided such commentary is supported by evidence.

The successful science writer must know the art of carefully and impartially documenting data while engaging intellectually with the data she has collected. The passive voice particular to the sciences is meant to help facilitate this purpose by detaching the observer from the information and amplifying the notion of impartiality. However, outside experiments and lab reports, a certain amount of informed subjective reflection is necessary to interpret the data in a way that elucidates scientific knowledge. Precision in use of terminology, direct language, and conciseness are the most essential elements of writing in science. Everything must be well supported by evidence or credible sources.

CSE is the standard format used in the sciences, emphasizing the Name-Date system.

Humanities

English

English is probably the most dynamic of the academic disciplines when it comes to writing. An English paper may involve a discussion about politics, religion, philosophy, art, history, science, or any other subject that may be directly relevant to the particular literature under examination. Literary analysis with the intended goal of forming an interpretive argument is what characterizes the field of English. Other disciplines like Philosophy and Theology are also literature-based in the sense that they use texts as a means to make arguments. However, what signifies and separates English from other text-dependent disciplines is the emphasis on constructing arguments about the text itself, especially its aspects of form. When analyzing literary texts, the author has at her disposal many subtle moves in constructing an argument including tone, diction, voice, syntax, word choice, dialogue, and allusions to other works. English papers may allow more room for creativity in expression than other disciplines, and writers in the English discipline are generally encouraged to take chances and look for novel ways of communicating their ideas.

Most importantly, besides exhibiting all the usual traits that characterize good academic writing, English papers should show two things on the part of the writer: care and courtesy. Care for the paper itself—its presentation, style, organization, ideas, evidence of revision—and demonstrable courtesy to the audience the paper is intended to reach by making the central message explicit.

English papers use MLA format almost exclusively.

Fine Arts

Writing in the Fine Arts (FA) is perhaps the most informal, the most subjective, and the least restrictive of all academic writing. But the territory is not without rules and expectations. Writing about the arts is quite different than most other disciplines. Assignments typically involve critical reviews of all the various modes and venues in the world of FA including museums, visual art, theatre, film, and opera. FA critical reviews should contain an analysis based on key concepts and conventions—these being established technical and conceptual standards within the world of arts—covered in class. They must answer the question as to *how* an artistic work or performance works to achieve a specific end as well as *why* it does so. The answer to these questions involves a reactionary and reflective response, but writers must not simply state their opinioned observation. Personal observations must be substantiated with strong supporting evidence based on the aforementioned FA conventions. Another way of expressing the essence of FA reviews may be that they involve an

objective analysis of subjective opinions. Because of the greater freedom in FA papers, writers must be wary of an increased risk of unsubstantiated opinions or a lack of coherency due to repetitive or tangential thoughts.

FA papers require minimal citation and professors tend to be fairly lax about format but MLA is generally more than sufficient.

History

History is a robust and research-intense discipline that requires the impartial analysis of significant people and events making up the collective record of the past. Because historian writers cover such a massive window of time, history writing is meant to convey a sense of timelessness on the part of the writer. Accordingly, writers in history must avoid interjecting their own biases and contemporary moral judgments when interpreting historical characters and events (what is otherwise known as the sins of anachronism and "presentism"). Instead, every person and event in antiquity must be judged within the situational context they happen to be placed in. Writers must also avoid colloquialism to preserve a voice that is without time or place.

The process of writing a history paper begins with a well-developed analysis of sources and synthesizing research information to develop an answer to a historical question focusing on one small moment or time period in history. History writers make use of *primary* and *secondary* sources. *Primary* sources constitute anything written and documented during the time period in question. *Secondary* sources refer to a historian's interpretation or analysis of primary sources. These latter sources should always be scrutinized for methodology and for any potential biases or agendas on the part of the authors. After source analysis, the writer develops an interpretative thesis based on the analysis and synthesis of the sources she has consulted. It is a myth that history is merely about reiterating established and indisputable facts. Rather, history involves developing more refined and informed interpretations of historical information. That is to say, history is more about analysis than summation with the hope of gaining new insight into the past.

Chicago (CMS) is the standard format history papers conform to, though MLA is sometimes permissible.

Philosophy

While most academic papers are argumentative on some level, philosophy papers place unique emphasis on argument, subjecting the logical moves a writer makes to greater scrutiny.

Contrary to popular perception, good philosophy papers are not demonstrations of grandiose verbosity or feigned profundity. Instead, they are characterized by simplicity and directness through a concise and focused thesis, exact language, avoiding fluff or extraneous commentary, and getting straight to the point. Philosophy professors at UP state that the two indispensable elements in philosophy papers are "conceptual clarity and logical coherence." Other items incorporated by a good philosophy paper are factual accuracy and effective use of supporting textual evidence. Avoid passive speech, making assertions without arguments, and raising questions that are never answered. Generally, philosophy professors are more concerned that student papers have a coherent and original argument rather than claiming to provide a breakthrough insight into reality. It is also important that writers genuinely interact with the texts they are working with, even if it is difficult. It is normal and even desirable for students to struggle with philosophical ideas that often require multiple levels of reflection for this leads to intellectual growth and expansion of the mind.

As far as layout is concerned, philosophy papers are unique in typically using an overview or prospective roadmap of the moves the paper intends to make. This usually comes in the introduction or soon afterward. Before any arguments are presented, all background information and essential definitions should be explained. When arguments are presented, they often take an argument-objection-counterargument form. As such, naysayers are very important in philosophical writing.

MLA is the most commonly used format in Philosophy but some professors accept or even prefer Chicago (CMS) style. Consistency in citation is most important.

Theology

Theology is a methodological hybrid of philosophy and history. Like philosophy, theology papers require forming arguments based on careful analysis and intimate interaction with the religious text writers are working with (usually the Bible). But examination and interaction with the text is not enough. Theology writers must grasp large and complicated issues that often require metaphysical contemplation. Like History, Theology is working from texts that also happen to be historical texts.

History is vitally important for contextual understanding, and it is intricately bound up with theological viewpoints as well as textual interpretations. Many of the theology courses at UP essentially function as either history classes or philosophy classes.

A good theology paper will follow all the more typical conventions of academic papers such as having a strong and specific thesis, clarity, and brevity. The introduction should be engaging and interesting to the reader while providing all the necessary background information and definitions for setting up the thesis and making the direction of the paper clear. The body should have coherent and organic development.

Like history, and to a lesser extent philosophy, Chicago (CMS) style is the standard format of theology papers.

Social Sciences

Communications Studies

Communications Studies (CS) is something of an amorphous hybrid of the social sciences and humanities. It is an umbrella label for a number of different subjects including rhetoric, organization communication and journalism. There is no specialized or universal form in this discipline, but papers may include the use of subtitles for added organizational clarity, and above all they must consistent. Among the kinds of abilities expected of veteran writers in this field is being able to incorporate not just concepts related to specific in-class assignments but to relate them to broader and more global implications in communication. The intended audience is usually the general population; therefore, explanations and arguments should be universally understandable. Theses in this field usually reflect what the writer wants the reader to believe about whatever particular issue is being discussed. Literature reviews are also common in CS and take on a more persuasive mode than in other fields, arguing for the implications of defined concepts. These reviews focus on secondary sources.

MLA is the most common format used, but some professors allow or prefer APA. In the case of journalism, AP style is used.

Political Science

Political Science (PS) papers cover a broad range of topics and forms of writing: anything from short reflection papers to 15-page research papers. Most PS assignments involve objective analysis of political issues, trends, and phenomena rather than expressions of personal political opinions on the part of the writer. Writing in PS usually involves a heavy reliance on sources which must be analyzed and integrated conceptually in order to support and construct a thesis. Unlike some other disciplines, thesis claims are typically built upon source information, rather than using

source information to support the thesis. Good PS papers will move through different topics linking them back to the main thesis argument and relate the research to larger political issues and events beyond the scope of the paper's focus. The kinds of sources PS writers usually interact with and are permitted to use include peer-reviewed journal articles and literature reviews. Official government documents such as legislation, polls, or census data may be used as well. In fact, doing research in PS often involves looking for information on government websites which tend to be good sources to look for on any research database. Political pundits are generally not accepted as reliable and respectable sources.

PS papers do not universally conform to any standard citation format. MLA is common but often students can use whatever format they prefer so long as they are consistent.

Psychology

Psychology writers must answer the question as to why the particular research they are using in their papers is meaningful, how it applies to the larger scope of human life, and why it should matter to the reader. Psychology papers differ from many other fields in a couple of ways. First, they are less often argumentative or persuasive and are rarely based around a thesis making a controversial claim. Second, they often involve or require personal reflection derived from analyzing research data, though sometimes no reflection is involved but only a rigorous summary analysis. However, research papers can take on a similar form as life science papers having distinct sections or components starting with a title page, followed by the *abstract, the introduction, the method, the results, the discussion, references*, and *appendices*.

Like most social sciences, writers are expected to summarize the information they use from their research in their own words in order to demonstrate proficiency rather than quoting sources directly. However, writers must watch out for misusing complex terminology. Psychology requires writers to be serious and professional, to avoid passive voice, to reject verbosity in favor of brevity, to be concise, and stick to reporting the facts instead of trying to be overly creative and create a mood for the paper. However, there may be exceptions among lower-level assignments that do allow for more creative expression.

APA is the standard for citation format for Psychology papers.

Sociology

Sociology writing is something of a wildcard compared to most arts and science fields, as it does not to conform to many of the usual patterns or norms of academic writing. Here are some notable differences: First, sociology professors tend to place greater importance and value on the overall quality of writing than the actual content or ideas of the paper. This is probably because sociology tends to be based on theory and theoretical application of ideas instead of relying on hard, empirical facts, which makes it unpredictable and constantly changing. There is much less certitude over basic relevant facts than in other fields. Second, while any academic paper ought to consider the audience it attempts to reach, the exact form a sociology paper will take is determined by the audience, so the relationship between writer and reader is even more consequential than with other disciplines. Third, sociology papers tend to be opinionated commentary on research and analysis. Despite this fact, first-person writing is generally discouraged but is gradually becoming more accepted.

Perhaps the only ordinary and constant standard for sociology papers is the actual format they are required to use which is APA or ASA.

School of Business

Business writing is similar to the real-world free market it studies in that it is fast-paced and tailored to specific audiences, just as businesses are tailored to customer needs. Business writing requires that the author's message get out quickly and clearly, seeking to maximize a profitable communication by cutting out any extraneous or incoherent material. Straightforwardness is the key because business papers ought to assume that readers are busy and have short attention spans. Such writing must be concise with short sentences, precise in language, use active voice, and be extremely well-organized. Introductions usually act as roadmaps for the paper, letting the reader know immediately where the paper is going. Writers should get to the main point as early as possible and state it bluntly. Perhaps the best known feature of the business paper is the use of headings and subheadings before each topic or category of information to make the paper more visually friendly. Business papers are also likely to make use of graphs and figures.

Because the School of Business covers many different disciplines and majors, writing assistants are likely to encounter a wide variety of assignments, including group projects and collaborative papers which may present unique difficulties for them. Besides more academic assignments like economics research papers or situation analysis, business writers must also

undertake more practical "office place" assignments, such as writing cover letters, resumes, memos, and proposals. Any sources cited must be as current as possible.

The format for Business writing varies, depending on the particular discipline and assignment. Business students are given an online handbook titled *Expectations for Student Writing* which lays out the rules for Business writing assignments. MLA and APA are often used.

School of Education

Unlike other disciplines, much of Education writing is based on experience and practical application of what is learned in class. Because Education students are generally required to teach in the local school system, they often write about direct classroom experience which makes education writing distinctly anecdotal, personal, opinionated, and theoretical. The essence of Education writing is to analyze and critically evaluate teaching methods and pedagogical theories, to test those theories through real teaching experience, and then to ultimately build a personal pedagogy based on the knowledge gained through both study and direct experience in the field. Writing assignments place significant emphasis on following rubrics.

School of Engineering

It may come as a surprise to those outside of the Engineering field that even Engineering majors have to write as a part of their discipline. Engineering combines the methodology of life sciences like biology with business writing. It resembles science writing by being technical, formulaic, and requiring the writer to be an objective observer detached from the subject by using the third-person perspective and passive voice. However, it should be noted that there is now a growing acceptance of using the first-person perspective. Writing in engineering also involves lab reports and lab notebooks for documentation just as biology does. And like business writing, engineering papers often involve the use of headings for organizational clarity, carefully labeled diagrams, and graphs. Many engineering assignments are the kind of writing one would see in a professional office such as proposals, letters, reports, and memoranda.

All formatting standards and expectations for writing in Engineering can be found in the *Writing for Engineers* online handbook provided to all engineering students.

School of Nursing

Writing assignments for writers pursuing the nursing program include personal reflection papers and research papers. The first written assignment all nursing students must do is a reflection paper about what the definition of nursing is to them, based on analyzing and synthesizing information taken from interviewing professional nurses, professors of nursing, and other nursing students. Other assignments involve more intensive research: anything from the intricacies of working in health care to writing about more philosophical questions regarding medical ethics or theological perspectives on death and suffering. Research assignments should have a professional and objective tone, but may incorporate reflection as well, so personal opinion is often acceptable for writers in the nursing program provided it is substantive and supported by evidence.

APA is the accepted format for all written assignments in the field of nursing.

Works Cited

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Thanks goes to UP Writing Assistants across the years, whose interviews and sample assignments they gathered for their training course helped shape this synthesizing overview.