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Writing a Paper

Consider a simple claim: sloppy writing reflects sloppy thinking. Many students do not want to believe this. Yet, it is relatively easy to convince yourself that point X follows from point Y, etc. However, it is relatively difficult to communicate such a contention to others (whether orally or in writing) and persuade them of the strength of your argument if the argument is, indeed, faulty. Often when one writes down one's ideas, they crumble before one's eyes. The upshot is: writing is hard work and it is intimately related to thinking. If you cannot communicate your ideas clearly, your ideas are not as clear as you think. Students like to believe that they have good ideas and poor writing skills. Except in cases where bona fide learning disabilities make this true, it is largely a fallacy.

A paper should convey the ideas you wish to present in a clear and convincing manner. Irrelevant or distracting information (no matter how interesting!) should be eliminated. Students often fall into a trap by assuming that the reader knows the material well and thus can "figure out" what the student means. Though the professor "knows this stuff," s/he is trying to determine whether you do! Thus, if you leave out "obvious" points or logical connections in the argument, the professor has no option but to assume you did not know/understand the material. Write the paper so that any college student could understand it--do not expect the professor to fill in the holes.

Different courses assign different types of papers. This overview is meant to be useful for any type of paper (e.g., thought papers, research papers, etc.). Put more directly, all papers should follow the basic structure listed below.

Students sometimes tell professors that they have troubled writing introductions and conclusions because those sections seem redundant or insult the reader. Please realize that although it is obvious to you why you are thinking the way you are, the reader is not inside your head and cannot know what you are thinking. It is unreasonable to expect the reader to simply follow your thought process as it unfolds; it is incumbent upon the writer to explain to the reader what it is that will be done in the paper.

Consider an analogy. As a lawyer uses an opening statement to explain to the jury how s/he will proceed in court and then uses a closing statement to reiterate what has been shown, you must use the introduction and conclusion to explain to the reader

what it is you will do in the paper and then reiterate what it is you have done. This is easily the most common deficiency in undergraduate papers (and bluebook essays).

The second, revising, is discussed below and in detail in an excellent little book by Richard Lanham (*Revising Prose*, New York: MacMillan).

The third (and most serious as it is an academic offense), plagiarism, is also discussed below, and receives good treatment in James D. Lester (*Writing Research Papers*, Glenview: Scott Foresman) and Lee Cuba (*A Short Guide to Writing about Social Science*, New York: Harper Collins).

Outline:

- I. Introduction: An introductory paragraph (or section depending upon the paper's length) should introduce the topic of the paper. It should capture the reader's interest and MOTIVATE her/him to continue reading. You want to tell the reader what it is you say in the paper. This section should be written last. The keys to consider while writing it are: Does the body, as outlined in the introduction, flow logically or in some meaningful manner (if not, you need to rewrite the body)? What are the key points made in the body (note them in the introduction)? What implications do I draw in the conclusion (note them in the introduction)?
- II. Body: Several paragraphs (or pages) which present your argument. This is where you say what you promised to say in the introduction. It is important that the paragraphs flow from one to the next--that there is some logic to the presentation. The reader, having read the introduction, should be able to anticipate the argument. Hitchcock films work by shocking the viewer, but effective papers are "predictable" because they follow a logical sequence that the author has developed and explained to the reader.
- III. Conclusion: Now that you have told the reader what you are going to say and then said it, tell her/ him what it is that you said. The purpose is not to bore the reader, but to reinforce why this argument is important. This is also the section where you draw out the implications of your argument. In other words, what does your argument imply about the behavior of people, scholars, countries, etc.? In a word, explain the contribution of your paper (e.g., Why should we care?).

Conclusions are usually the most difficult section to write. While you have our empathy, you are expected to wrestle with your conclusions and write good ones. Remember: it is the last thing the reader reads and may well have a greater impact on your grade than any other section of the paper.

Paragraph Structure:

A good paragraph has the same structure as a paper. There should be an introductory sentence that gives the reader an idea of what the paragraph is about. This should be followed by several additional sentences that elaborate that idea/theme. Then, write a concluding or transition sentence that leads the reader toward the next paragraph. Do not try to write elaborate paragraphs that make several points. Instead, break it into several paragraphs with one point each--this forces you to explain (as opposed to merely assert) the linkages/connections you are making.

Revising:

Few of us write good papers in one draft (naturally, there are exceptions). Unfortunately, too few faculty require students to revise papers, and thus, few students do. The result is that students turn in papers that are not as well written as they could be--it is not that "today's students" cannot write well (as some educators claim), it is that students generally do not revise their work. Instead, they turn in what are essentially rough drafts. Richard Lanham's book (*Revising Prose*, New York: MacMillan) emphasizes the importance of revising. Professors recognize that revising is a time-consuming process (we do it all the time).

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and it can, in some cases, lead to a student's dismissal from the university. One has committed plagiarism when one "offer[s] the words or ideas of another person as one's own" (Lester 1980: 49). It is useful to distinguish between intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Intentional plagiarism occurs when a student knowingly and wantonly misrepresents the work of another as her/his own. Unintentional plagiarism occurs when a student misrepresents the work of another as her/his own because of laziness, sloppiness or ignorance. While it is easy to distinguish these two types in theory, it is very difficult to distinguish them in practice. In any case, it is imperative that you understand

that whether plagiarism was intentional or unintentional, it is an academic offense: ignorance, laziness, or sloppiness is not an excuse.

Both James D. Lester (*Writing Research Papers*, Glenview: Scott Foresman) and Lee Cuba (*A Short Guide to Writing about Social Science*, New York: Harper Collins) provide a number of examples to help clarify for students when they need to cite other's work. A good rule of thumb is that when information is common knowledge, you need not cite a source. However, when you wish to repeat factual information which you obtained from a source, or to repeat an argument, point of view, or theory which you obtained from a source, you must note the source. Further, if you directly quote text, you must note the source. Please keep in mind that WWW sites and other internet/electronic data bases must be cited as well as books, magazines, etc.