

PART 2

Reading and Writing in College

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CHAPTER 6

Writing in Academic Situations

When you write in college, you work within a community of teachers and students who have specific aims and expectations. The basic aim of this community—whether in English, psychology, biology, or some other discipline—is to contribute to and build knowledge through questioning, research, and communication. The differences among disciplines lie mainly in the kinds of questions asked, the kinds of research done to find the answers, and the ways of communicating the answers.

Academic writers communicate using conventional forms, such as case studies, research reports, and reviews of others' writings on a particular subject. Both a discipline's concerns and the kind of writing create the writing situation, which in turn shapes a writer's choice of subject, conception of audience, definition of purpose, choice of structure and content, and even choice of language. This chapter introduces academic writing situations in general. Chapters 50–53 detail the particular goals and expectations of the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural and applied sciences.

6a Becoming an academic writer

As an academic writer, you participate in a discipline community first by studying a subject, acquiring its vocabulary, and learning to express yourself in its ways. As you gain experience and knowledge, you begin to contribute to the community by asking questions and communicating your answers. Such a contribution may seem beyond you at first, as you try to grasp the content of assigned reading and identify important ideas. In any discipline, making the transition to academic writing will be easier if you practice the strategies outlined in the box on the facing page.

6b Analyzing audience

Some of your writing assignments may specify an identifiable group of readers—for instance, fellow students, the city council, or the editors of a newspaper. Such readers' needs and expectations vary widely; the discussion on pages 9–13 can help you discover what they might be. Many assignments will specify or assume an educated audience or an academic audience. This more general group of readers looks for writing that is clear, balanced, well organized, and well reasoned, among other qualities discussed on page 131. Still other assignments will specify or assume an audience of experts on your subject, readers who look in addition for writing that meets the subject's requirements for claims and evidence, organization, language, format, and other qualities discussed in Chapters 49–53.

Of course, much of your academic writing will have only one reader besides you: the instructor of the course for which you are writing. Instructors fill two main roles as readers:

- ▼ **They represent the audience you are addressing.** They may actually be members of the audience, as when you address academic readers or subject experts. Or they may imagine themselves as members of your audience—reading, for instance, as if they sat on the city council. In either case, they're interested in how effectively you write for the audience.
- ▼ **They serve as coaches,** guiding you toward achieving the goals of the course and, more broadly, toward the academic aims of building and communicating knowledge.

Like everyone else, instructors have preferences and peeves, but you'll waste time and energy trying to anticipate them. Do attend to written and spoken directions for assignments, of course. But otherwise view your instructors as representatives of the community you are writing for. Their responses will be guided by the community's aims and expectations and by a desire to teach you about them.

6c Determining purpose

For most academic writing, your general purpose will be mainly explanatory or mainly argumentative. That is, you will aim to clarify your subject so that readers understand it as you do, or you will aim to gain readers' agreement with a debatable idea about the subject. (See p. 14 for more on general purposes and Chapters 9–11 for more on argument.) Although the general purpose for writing may not be stated outright in an assignment, it will probably be implied, as you can see in these two abbreviated assignments:

Explanation

Compare the depiction of war in two films viewed this semester, considering plots, characters, dialog, battle scenes, production designs, and other elements of the films.

Argument

What ideology do you see informing the movies of director Steven Spielberg? What beliefs about the world do his choices convey, whether explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or unintentionally? Support your claim with evidence from at least four of Spielberg's movies, considering plots, characters, dialog, production designs, and other elements.

Your specific purpose—including your subject and how you hope readers will respond—depends on the kind of writing you're doing. In a biology lab report, for instance, you want your readers to understand why you conducted your study, how you conducted it, what the results were, and what their significance is. Not coincidentally, these topics correspond to the major sections of a biology lab report. In following the standard format, you both help to define your purpose and begin to meet the discipline's (and thus your instructor's) expectations.

Your specific purpose will be more complex as well. You take a course to learn about a subject and the ways experts think about it. Your writing, in return, contributes to the discipline through the knowledge you uncover and the lens of your perspective. At the same time, as a student you want to demonstrate your competence with research, evidence, format, and other requirements of the discipline.

6d Choosing structure and content

Many academic writing assignments will at least imply how you should organize your paper and even how you should develop your ideas. Like the biology lab report mentioned earlier, the type of paper required will break into discrete parts, each with its own requirements for content. A common academic writing assignment, the analysis, does not predict definite content but still implies certain requirements: you are asked to make a claim about your subject's meaning or significance, to support the claim with specific evidence, and, often, to show that you understand what others think about the subject. (See Chapter 8 for more on analysis.)

No matter what type of paper an assignment specifies, the broad academic aims of building and exchanging knowledge determine features that are common across disciplines. Follow these general guidelines for your academic writing, supplementing them as indicated with others elsewhere in this book:

- ✓ **Develop a central idea or claim, called a *thesis*.** Everything in the paper should relate clearly to this claim. For more on theses, see pages 27–31.
- ✓ **State your thesis,** usually near the beginning of the paper.
- ✓ **Support the thesis with evidence,** drawn usually from research and sometimes from your own experience. The kinds of evidence will depend on the discipline you're writing in and the type of paper you're doing. For more on evidence in the disciplines, see pages 743 (literature), 759–60 (other humanities), 778–79 (social sciences), and 807–08 (natural and applied sciences).
- ✓ **Interact with sources.** Do not merely summarize sources but evaluate and synthesize them from your own perspective. For more on using sources, see pages 599–611.
- ✓ **Acknowledge sources fully,** using the documentation style appropriate to the discipline. See pages 764, 784, and 812 for lists of disciplines' style guides and pages 648–86 (MLA style for English and some other humanities), 764–75 (Chicago style for history, philosophy, and some other humanities), 784–800 (APA style for the social sciences), and 812–19 (CSE style for the natural and applied sciences).
- ✓ **Balance your presentation.** Discuss evidence and opposing views fairly, and take a serious and impartial approach.

- v **Organize clearly within the framework of the type of writing you're doing.** Develop your ideas as simply and directly as your purpose and content allow. Clearly relate sentences, paragraphs, and sections so that readers always know where they are in the paper's development.

These features are far from universal. In other cultures, academic writers may be indirect, may expect readers to discover the thesis, or may assume that readers do not require acknowledgment of well-known sources. Recognizing such differences between practices in your native culture and in the United States can help you adapt to US academic writing.

6e Using academic language

American academic writing relies on a dialect called standard American English. The dialect is also used in business, the professions, government, the media, and other sites of social and economic power where people of diverse backgrounds must communicate with one another. It is "standard" not because it is better than other forms of English, but because it is accepted as the common language, much as the dollar bill is accepted as the common currency.

You'll recognize standard American English as the dialect used in this handbook, in magazines and newspapers, and on television news. But you might also notice that the dialect varies a lot, from the formal English of a President's State of the Union address through the middle formality of this handbook to the informal chitchat between anchors on morning TV. Even in academic writing, standard American English allows much room for the writer's own tone and voice, as these passages on the same topic show:

More formal

Using the technique of "color engineering," manufacturers and advertisers can heighten the interest of consumers in a product by adding color that does not contribute to the utility of the product but appeals more to emotions. In one example from the 1920s, manufacturers of fountain pens, which had previously been made of hard black rubber, dramatically increased sales simply by producing the pens in bright colors.

Less formal

A touch of "color engineering" can sharpen the emotional appeal of a product or its ad. New color can boost sales even when the color serves no other use. In the 1920s, for example, fountain pen makers introduced brightly colored pens along with the familiar ones of hard black rubber. Sales shot up.

As different as they are, both examples illustrate several common features of academic language:

- v **It follows the conventions of standard American English for grammar and usage.** These conventions are detailed in guides to the dialect, such as this handbook.
- v **It uses a standard vocabulary,** not one that only some groups understand, such as slang, an ethnic or regional dialect, or another language. (See pp. 510–13 for more on specialized vocabularies.)
- v **It creates some distance between writer and reader with the third person (*he, she, it, they*).** The first person (*I, we*) is sometimes appropriate to express personal opinions or invite readers to think along, but not with a strongly explanatory purpose (*I discovered that "color engineering" can heighten . . .*). The second person (*you*) is appropriate only in addressing readers directly (as in this handbook), and even then it may seem condescending or too chummy (*You should know that "color engineering" can heighten . . .*).
- v **It is authoritative and neutral.** In the examples on the facing page, the writers express themselves confidently, not timidly (as in *One possible example of color engineering that might be considered in this case is . . .*). They also refrain from hostility (*Advertisers will stop at nothing to achieve their goals*) and enthusiasm (*Color engineering is genius at work*).

At first, the diverse demands of academic writing may leave you groping for an appropriate voice. In an effort to sound fresh and confident, you may write too casually:

Too casual

“Color engineering” is a great way to get at consumers’ feelings. . . . When the guys jazzed up the color, sales shot through the roof.

In an effort to sound “academic,” you may produce wordy and awkward sentences:

Wordy and awkward

The emotions of consumers can be made more engaged by the technique known as “color engineering.” . . . A very large increase in the sales of fountain pens was achieved by the manufacturers of the pens as a result of this color enhancement technique. [The passive voice in this example, such as *increase . . . was achieved* instead of *the manufacturers achieved*, adds to its wordiness and indirection. See pp. 302–03 for more on voice.]

A cure for writing too informally or too stiffly is to read academic writing so that the language and style become familiar and to edit your writing (see pp. 58–59).

If your first language is not English or is an English dialect besides standard American, you know well the power of communicating with others who share your language. Learning to write standard American English in no way requires you to abandon your first language. Like most multilingual people, you are probably already adept at switching between languages as the situation demands—speaking one way with your relatives, say, and another way with an employer. As you practice academic writing, you’ll develop the same flexibility with it.

EXERCISE 6.1 Using academic language

Revise the following paragraph to make the language more academic while keeping the factual information the same. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

If you buy into the stereotype of girls chatting away on their cell phones, you should think again. One of the major wireless companies surveyed 1021 cell phone owners for a period of five years and—surprise!—reported that guys talk on cell phones more than girls do. In fact, guys were way ahead of girls, using an average of 571 minutes a month compared to 424 for girls. That’s 35 percent more time on the phone! The survey also asked about conversations on home phones, and while girls still beat the field, the guys are catching up.

EXERCISE 6.2 CONSIDERING YOUR PAST WORK: WRITING IN ACADEMIC SITUATIONS

Look back at a paper you wrote for a course in high school or college. To what extent does it share the features of academic writing discussed in this chapter? How does it differ? Write a revision plan for making the paper more academic.

EXERCISE 6.3 Considering your native language or dialect

What main similarities and differences do you notice between writing in your native language or dialect and writing for US college courses? Consider especially audience, purpose, content, structure, and the expression of ideas. Which differences do you think are easiest to bridge? Which are most difficult? Why?

<http://www.ablongman.com/littlebrown>

Visit the companion Web site for more help with academic writing.

Tips for becoming an academic writer

- ✓ **Study the syllabus for each course.** This outline lays out the instructor’s expectations as well as the course topics, assignments, and deadlines.
- ✓ **Do the assigned reading.** You’ll gain experience with the discipline’s terms and ideas, and you’ll become familiar with the kinds of writing expected of you.
- ✓ **Attend and participate in class.** Make class attendance a priority, whether or not the instructor checks the roll. Listen carefully, take notes (see p. 137 for tips), ask questions, and join in discussions.
- ✓ **Ask questions.** Instructors, advisers, tutors, other students—all can help you.
- ✓ **Understand the writing situation posed by each assignment.** Knowing your audience, purpose, options for subjects, and other elements of the situation will help you meet the assignment’s expectations. (See pp. 6–7 on analyzing assignments.)

Two complicated sentences, one explaining the technique and one giving the example

Drawn-out phrasing, such as *interest of consumers* instead of *consumers’ interest*

Formal vocabulary, such as *heighten*, *contribute*, and *utility*

Four sentences, two each explaining the technique and giving the example

More informal phrasing, such as *Sales shot up*
More informal vocabulary, such as *boost* and *ad*