

Representative excerpts from:

A Short Handbook
for writing essays in the
Humanities and Social Sciences

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Getting Started

Anxiety is the writer's first obstacle. We often wonder, "what can I write that hasn't already been written, and probably much better?" As you can see, we (the two authors of this handbook) are already on the way to overcoming this anxiety simply by writing a section heading and two sentences (now three). However, we're still anxious about doing a good job and making this a useful tool that you'll benefit from reading.

Our first paragraph above makes assertions and asks for development. This is what first paragraphs are often for. We'll get to that soon enough. For now, we'll expand it by making some observations that will move us forward.

- ✓ Writing about anything – a text, a source, an exam question – is at least a three-way dialogue: between us, the writers; you, the reader; and the material. Therefore, it should serve at least three purposes: to explore the material; to describe our reactions to it; and to communicate with you.
- ✓ Waiting until you know exactly what and how you want to write is unproductive. You learn both *by writing*.
- ✓ Writing is a craft for most of us, not an art. That means we are not seeking perfection, and we learn by *practicing*.

Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Then why state the obvious? Because new writers often forget, and because some writing manuals assume you know things that you don't, since their authors have known them for so long. This handbook will take you step-by-step through the process of writing essays for a college course. It's intended to be relatively basic and direct, because most of your college writing should be basic and direct.

Remember, this is utilitarian writing, not poetry or the great American novel. You're probably reading this because you have to. Either it's been assigned or you realize you need some help developing these skills (good for you!). Even so, if we want to hold your interest, we (your authors) need to get to the point. Nothing turns away readers as quickly as feeling that their time is being wasted. Therefore, just like you, we need to decide how best to use the time and space we're given for this task. What words to use? What tone to set? How to organize the writing so that it makes sense and gets the job done; and so the reader feels the least possible amount of pain – or maybe even has some fun? These are all questions we're asking ourselves as we outline, draft, and revise this handbook. These are the questions the handbook will help you ask and answer about your own writing.

The general plan of the handbook

- ✓ Chapters 1-4 deal with the general task of writing a critical essay. We cover taking good notes, analyzing texts, discovering and developing a topic, creating a thesis, organizing evidence into an argument
- ✓ Chapters 5-7 discuss the more specific problems of supporting an argument with effective paragraphs, clear sentences, and appropriate words.
- ✓ Chapters 8-10 give you tools for editing and revising both the structure and the details of your essay.
- ✓ A (general) table of contents at the beginning and a (specific) index at the end will help you to locate your immediate concerns quickly.

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1 Analyzing a Text, Taking Notes

He who understands also loves, notices, sees...the more knowledge is inherent in a thing, the greater the love. (Paracelsus 1493-1541)

First of all, what is a text? For our purposes, a text is any statement you run into in this class. Anything you read, of course. But a lecture is also a text. And a discussion. You should be thinking about them, analyzing them all the time. Don't passively accept what you're told or what you read. Ask questions, compare what you're hearing with things you've heard before, things you've read, things you believe. And write this down – because it will be the foundation of your essays and exams.

Analyzing a text is the same as analyzing anything else: you take it apart so you can see what it's supposed to do and how it does its job. Author W.H. Auden demystified both literature and criticism when he said, "Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?"

By now you've probably discussed in an English class how authors use plot, imagery, symbolism, and allusion to express ideas and values in literature. We often forget that authors of nonfiction do this too, using pretty much the same set of language tools. Historians tell stories. Even physicists, when they leave equations behind and try to describe their discoveries to the rest of us in plain English, find themselves using analogies, metaphors, and the other language tools we all use. We're really doing two related things in this handbook: showing you how to analyze someone else's writing and showing you how to write yourself. These two tasks are obviously related, but not quite the same. We don't expect you to write books just yet, or even short narratives. Writing an interpretive essay uses a subset of these language

tools, so as you're learning to recognize how authors do it, remember that you're going to be doing it too.

When you take lecture notes, you're beginning the writing process. Yes, you're recording *information* that might be on the exam. But you are also hearing an argument – the lecturer isn't just reciting some random set of facts. Most lectures are built around a central question or idea. If the lecturer doesn't come right out and tell you what that is (clue: does the syllabus have lecture titles? Are they in the form of questions?), try to figure it out. If it doesn't come to you in class, review your notes later and try to boil the lecture's theme down to a sentence or two. If you're really stumped, ask.

You'll want to take notes when you read, too. We (and your instructor) are going to show you how writers work: how they *generally* organize arguments, how they *generally* use setting and point of view to create atmosphere and mood; how they *generally* present narrators and characters to engage problems, etc. These are valuable clues to help you determine what a text might "mean" – *in general*. Your task is to analyze them in the *specific* context of the text you are reading and interpret how they make *that contraption* work. You might find once you get used to it, that such active reading doesn't diminish, but actually increases the pleasure of reading.

Your reading notes should explore both the "facts" in the text (who did what, when, where, how, and, if indicated, why?) and what they might suggest. But don't be too surprised if "facts" and "interpretations" are sometimes hard to distinguish. Discussions will go more smoothly and productively if you've already read the assignment and have begun a dialogue with the text *before* you come to class. If you've underlined interesting passages and written questions and comments in the margins of your book and if you've jotted down your thoughts about the reading, then you'll be coming to class as an active member of an exploratory party and not as a passive fellow traveler. This will prevent the discussion leader from having to give you yet another lecture and will improve your understanding of the material and your participation grade. And there's a reason why we discuss this

material in groups, rather than each pondering it on our own. We're all looking for the "truth" of our subject. As Franz Kafka noted in his diary, "one person cannot express the truth, but a host of perspectives might come close to this goal."

So what should you write down, when you're taking notes on a reading? Begin with anything at all that you're not sure about, that you don't understand, that you'd like explained. Start with basic questions that clarify facts, then move on to interpretations. Compare the reading with other readings you've done, or with lecture and discussion notes. Add questions that reflect your interests and concerns – they're usually the issues that lead to good discussions and essays.

Here are some examples. We've divided them between fiction and nonfiction, but sometimes you'll find that these divisions aren't as set-in-stone as you might think. So use what fits:

For Fiction (mostly)

✓ *If it's a narrative, who is telling the story?*

Is the narrator reliable? Unreliable? Biased? Recognizing the narrator's point of view will help you evaluate the "facts" of the story.

✓ *What is the setting and tone?*

What are you allowed to see, hear, taste, touch, smell, and feel – both physically and emotionally? Is there a sense of comedy, tragedy, irony?

✓ *Who are the major and minor characters?*

What are their concerns? What motivates them? Who are you supposed to identify with?

✓ *What kind of language is being used?*

What level of diction? What might that indicate?

✓ *How is the plot structured?*

How are the issues and problems organized? Are there challenges and responses? Is there a recognizable archetype (hero's journey, classical tragedy, etc.)?

✓ *What images and motifs recur?*

What kinds of terms, images, patterns are repeated? Can you recognize metaphors? To what do they point?

✓ *How does it end?*

What is resolved? What is the significance of the ending? Why does it end where it does?

For Non-fiction (mostly)

✓ *Who is the author?*

What is the author's background? Is the author qualified to be the authority on the material in the piece?

✓ *Who is the original audience for the piece?*

How does the author feel about the audience? Are they allies? Opponents? Neutral readers the author is trying to convince of something?

✓ *What is the author's intention?*

Is the piece explanatory? Polemical? Celebratory? Why was it written?

✓ *How is the argument structured?*

Does the author appeal to logic or emotion? What type of argument does the author use?

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Transitions (from Chapter 5, page 35)

Only connect! (E.M. Forster)

Writers use transitional words and expressions as markers to guide readers on their exploratory journey. They can express relationships very *explicitly*, which is often exactly what is needed. However, experienced writers can also build more subtle bridges between ideas, hinting at relationships with *implicit* transitions. These relationships may change from vague impressions to a very concrete statement, as the argument develops, allowing the reader to “discover” the writer’s conclusion as the essay builds to its final paragraph.

Examples: explicit transitional expressions

- ✓ Comparison: *such as, like, similarly, likewise, in the same way, in comparison, correspondingly, analogous to*
- ✓ Contrast: *but, however, in contrast, although, different from, opposing, another distinction, paradoxically*
- ✓ Cause-effect: *because, as a result, consequently, for this reason, produced, generated, yielded*
- ✓ Sequence: *initially, subsequently, at the onset, next, in turn, then, ultimately*
- ✓ Emphasis: *above all, of major interest, unequivocally, significantly, of great concern, notably*

- ✓ Examples: *for example, in this instance, specifically, such as, to illustrate, in particular*
- ✓ Adding points: *as well as, furthermore, also, moreover, in addition, again, besides*

If you find that you are overusing explicit connectors and your transitions are beginning to appear mechanical (how many times have you used “furthermore” or “however”? How many “other hands” do you have?), you can improve the flow of your writing either by changing up the transitional expressions, or by shifting toward more implicit transitions.

Examples: implicit transitional devices

- ✓ In the first sentence of the new paragraph, refer (either explicitly or implicitly) to material in the preceding paragraph:

When Alcibiades does give his speech, we see that his example is Socrates himself.

While this interpretation still seems reasonable, I was surprised at the difficulty of uncovering useable data in the records of past societies.

Each of these sentences builds on the previous paragraph and calls for support in the new paragraph. Even more subtle (that is, more difficult) would be to make the *last* sentence of the paragraph indicate the direction the next paragraph will take. If you try this, be careful you do not at the same time change the subject. *You do not want to introduce a new idea at the end of a paragraph, and destroy its unity.* Since it suggests a change in direction, we see this device used most commonly with thesis sentences at the end of introductory paragraphs, or in transitional paragraphs like the example above.

- ✓ Other examples of hinges writers use to make connections include pronouns referring back to nouns in the previous paragraphs and synonyms to avoid repetition and overuse of pronouns. A good rule is not to overuse any device.

Remember: in general, your transitions should not draw attention to themselves and distract your reader; they should help your argument flow as smoothly and logically as possible.

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Watch out for these (from Chapter 6, page 46)

The most common sentence problems are FRAGMENTS and RUN-ONS.

1. "What am I going to do with my life?" A question everyone asks and can never answer.
 - *Connect the fragment:* "What am I going to do with my life is a question..."
2. Overall the English invasion was a complete success with some learning curves thrown in at the beginning, but for the most part, it was a complete and utter domination of the indigenous people.
 - *Separate the thoughts:* simplify the sentence and drop the qualifiers to divide these ideas and emphasize the "but."
"The American colonies were a great success for the English, but they were an utter disaster for indigenous peoples."

A related Subject-Predicate problem concerns REPETITION of the subject.

1. It was not uncommon that different families would share certain abundant areas for everyone had equal right to the bounty. It was this idea of the native families that was probably what they were believing would be the case when deals were made with the English colonists.
 - *Trim, then combine these thoughts:* “Native families commonly shared resources, and believed this sharing was protected in their contracts with colonists.” (47 words to 16. And we got rid of the *passive voice*)
2. Beowulf killed dragons. The fact that he killed dragons is what made him a hero. He achieved this status through the ability to overcome his fear.
 - *Eliminate repetition & contradiction:* Sentence 3 contradicts sentence 2. Maybe the writer meant: “Beowulf killed dragons, and became a hero by overcoming his fear.” (26 words to 11)

Many sentence problems in student essays are due to a lack of PARALLEL STRUCTURE.

1. Dante finds himself lost in a dark wood and then Virgil led him out.
 - *Don't mix tenses:* either “finds—leads” or “found—led”
2. They believed in having territories merely for the safety of their villages but the concept of owning the land itself for private gain didn't seem to be an ideology.
 - *Try not to change subjects:* “They” are the subject of first part, “the concept” is the subject of second (and there's that *active-passive voice* issue again). How about: “The natives held land to protect their villages, not for private gain.”

3. Unlike the Christian philosophy of mourning a loved one, the pagans sought out revenge.
 - *Faulty comparison:* Christian philosophy should be compared to pagan *philosophy*, or Christians to pagans.
 - *Another way of thinking about it:* Does my modifier clearly refer to what it is supposed to modify? “Unlike the Christian philosophy of mourning a loved one” *does not* modify “the pagans,” but it *could* modify “pagan philosophy.”

Remember that without a clearly expressed SUBJECT and PREDICATE, your “sentence” merely confused the reader.

1. The static theme of Gilgamesh’s quest for immortality is tested when the hero’s only undefeatable conflict evolves into the sobering death of his beloved counterpart.
 - *Subject? Predicate? Is the theme tested? What does “static” mean here? Is the quest tested? How? Does “undefeatable contest” mean victory or defeat? This is very difficult to understand. Perhaps the reader means: “The death of his beloved Enkidu sobers Gilgamesh and stimulates his quest for immortality.” Perhaps not. The writer should be interpreting this, not the reader.*
2. For Scott, gender must necessarily be a highly-dynamic concept, for her ultimate goal is the deconstruction of existing categories of analysis so that new (or hitherto unconsidered) historiographic themes—such as sexuality, family, identity, and, of course, gender—can be incorporated into the analytic methodology.
 - *Does the simple sentence buried here (gender must necessarily be a highly-dynamic concept) mean anything? The writer of this sentence was very unhappy he had to write a paper about Joan Scott’s book Gender and the Politics of History. It shows.*