

Guide to Writing, Revising, and Submitting Essays

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Why We Write

At its best, writing is a marvelous tool for thinking. It's a technology that allows us to build more intricate structures of thought than we can achieve through mental reflection alone. It's also a technology for extending the reach of our thoughts in time and space. Not all thinkers have been writers, but in our time, the capacity to write has become an indispensable tool of intellectual liberation. Without it, the gift of literacy is incomplete.

Like many of the worthiest human endeavors, writing well takes sustained effort and no small amount of courage. The prospect of sitting down to write is even (or especially?) daunting for those of us who love to talk. Why? First, there's the tedium of hunting for the right words to express our thoughts. Then there's the fear of exposure lest we succeed in making our thoughts publicly known. All that tedium and fear of exposure are psychological forces that militate against our ever putting words on the page. Once we get past them, though, we hopefully discover both the pleasure of manipulating words and the deeper satisfaction that comes from creating ideas to share with others.

For some reason, academic essay-writing is not often imagined to be a rich source of pleasure or satisfaction. This guide hopes to persuade you otherwise. It starts by aiming to equip you with a clear sense of what an academic essay looks like, what it aims to achieve, and how to go about writing one. It introduces you to the conventions of the genre and offers some suggestions to steer your own efforts at generating coherent and compelling (and pleasurable) argumentative prose. It communicates my grading criteria, my expectations for formatting, and my ideas about what a satisfying undergraduate essay does and doesn't do. In anticipation of the life-long career of writing that lies ahead of you, it also aims to help you develop good writing and revising practices for the long term. As one of your readers,

and as a fellow writer, I hope it will help you to find both pleasure and satisfaction in a place you might not have thought to look for it before.

Elements of an Academic Essay

An essay is an experiment in thought. It involves three essential components: a writer, a reader, and a subject that interests them both. The writer gets to choose the scope of the subject and set the terms of engagement, by charting the course that the essay will pursue through the subject. The reader's job is to follow along and remain open to the new ideas being presented. Whether or not the essay succeeds in its ultimate goal of persuading the reader to share its author's view entirely, it should certainly leave them wiser on the subject in question, with new insights and new angles of inquiry to consider.

The writer's job is to engage the reader's attention from the first paragraph and sustain it throughout. Essays are often difficult to write, but they should not be exhausting to read. To that end, here are three things to aim for in yours:

1. *Clarity of expression.* Your essay should be written in a style designed to be easily understood by your reader. This means that words should be chosen, and sentences and paragraphs shaped, with the goal of enabling your reader's ready comprehension. The clarity of your prose is the last thing you should worry about as you draft your essay (see the section below on "[How to Write](#)"), but it's the first thing your reader will notice, and it will play a large role in determining their susceptibility to your argument.
2. *Clarity of argument.* Your essay should use its introduction to clearly present both the central problem it plans to tackle and the *stakes* of that problem. (See "[On Introductions](#)" below.) By the end of that first paragraph, your reader should feel themselves hot on the trail of a solution to some intellectual problem. The essay that follows should guide your reader through a carefully assembled array of evidence, interpretation, and argument, developing our understanding of the problem and the solution you outline so that our thinking comes to resemble yours. Each paragraph should be built around a central idea, and each sentence in it should advance that idea. On reaching the end of your essay, your reader should be left in no doubt as to your principal claims and how you have sought to advance them. Brief, interesting tangents are certainly permissible, but they should not be allowed to confuse or distract us.
3. *Quality of argument.* Make sure the path you are charting for the reader takes us somewhere new and worthwhile. A great essay advances claims that are **interesting**, **focused**, and **productive** – qualities that are discussed in greater detail below in the section "[On Claims and Arguments](#)."

Guide to Letter Grades

A – Original and ambitious argument, well-suited to the confines of a 1,500-word essay, that enriches our reading of the texts it discusses; persuasively advances its case through a transparent and readily graspable argumentative structure and utterly limpid prose. Correctly formatted, proofread, and submitted in the manner specified below (see "[Six Guidelines for Formatting and Submission](#)").

B – Reasonably interesting and original argument, reasonably well argued, reasonably clearly written. Perhaps lacking in focus.

C – Quite likely interesting, but neither persuasive nor well-written.

D – Displays no effort to interest the reader, let alone persuade them.

F – No paper at all.

On Claims and Arguments

Don't worry about writing a bad essay. Instead, make sure you pick claims worth arguing for, and let them inspire you to do your best work. You'll need a well-chosen set of claims that cohere to form a persuasive argument. So how do you choose which claims to make? A good claim is all of the following:

Interesting. Your essay should set out to show your reader something about the text that they might not have discovered on their own. In other words, it should help *illuminate* some aspect of the text that might otherwise escape them. Thus its central claim should not be an assertion that your reader already knows (i.e., a matter of fact), or an observation so timid that it doesn't require much persuasion. An essay built around the claim "Plato's *Republic* is deeply concerned with justice" is too bland to be interesting. Instead, your argument should be built around an insight, or series of insights, that are the product of close reading and sustained reflection on your part. If the central claim you present arises from a combination of these two activities, we are likely to find it interesting, too.

Focused. The scope of the claims you make in your essay should be well-suited to the scope of the essay itself. Overly small or petty claims are also not good, but they are a rare problem for undergraduate theorists. More common is the enthusiastic and well-written essay that nevertheless fails to prove its somewhat grandiose claims. If you (or your peer reader) thinks you may have found yourself in such a situation, look for ways to temper or qualify your central claim to fit the evidence and argument you are able to present in the course of this essay. Suppose your initial insight is that Tocqueville's text reveals a fundamental dislike of democracy. Such a thesis is interesting enough, but is likely to prove too sweeping for a 1,500-word essay. Instead, you can have fun with a scaled-down version of the same central claim: perhaps that "Tocqueville's hesitations about democracy stem from two related but distinct concerns about the susceptibility of democratic regimes to despotic tendencies." Now you can spend the essay elaborating those two concerns and showing how they are, indeed, distinct yet related, and how they inform his overall attitude toward democracy. To get the focus right, you'll need to exercise a sense of scale and proportion. Remember that you can also ask your peers, or me, to help give you a sense of whether your argument is too broad or too narrow.

Productive. Your essay should say something that is worth saying about the text. This criterion is perhaps the vaguest of those listed here, but it deserves inclusion because it's so important. Of course, opinions of what is worth saying vary widely. This is as true among professional scholars as it is among undergraduates, and it is why we have disciplines. Some disciplines value readings of texts that highlight some aspect of their historical context and present this context as determinative or definitive of that text's meaning, while others ignore a text's historical context entirely and focus exclusively on the text itself, seeking to present some argument about the text using its own language and its own logic and values. Still others read the text as revealing important psychological truths about the author. As an example, let's say you become interested in Nietzsche's life, read a biography of him, and then write an essay linking his ideas about bad conscience to his fraught relationship with his mother. Some readers would find that a valuable insight, while others might say, "Interesting, but so what?" For the purposes of this course, we value arguments that illuminate our understanding of how specific concepts—for instance, the concept of property in Locke—operate within a thinker's broader conceptual framework. We are also interested in comparing the different uses to which the same terms are put by different thinkers. For example, how can the concept of liberty be made to do different work when placed in a different constellation of concepts and values? We find value in this kind of close attention to specific terms because it helps us develop a kind of *critical reflexivity* about the concepts that we use to describe our own views of social good. If you have doubts about whether the argument you're considering counts as "productive" within the framework of this course, the best thing to do is to come to my office hours and talk it over with me.

On Introductions

You may have been told that the introduction is the most important part of your essay, and as a result, you may think of it as the hardest. It is undeniably important, but it doesn't have to be hard to write. Its mandate is quite simple: it welcomes the reader to your essay and prepares them for the argument that follows. By the end of the introduction, your reader should have a good idea of the problem that interests you and what's at stake in finding a solution. They should also have a pretty clear idea of how you propose to solve it.

You can execute a good introduction with ease if you follow this simple protocol: start with what your reader may already know or find interesting about the texts or problems you've chosen to write about, and use this point of entry to introduce what *you* have come to find interesting about the text. Then provide a brief, lucid summary of your argument: that is, where your problem lies, and how you propose to solve it. Take care to frame your central claim so that your reader will recognize it as **interesting**, **focused**, and **productive**, as outlined above. Your central claim should be easily identifiable on a first read-through, and its meaning should be crystal-clear. (Avoid larding it with

obscure conceptual keywords that only confuse the reader because you don't have room to explain them yet.) After you've written your introduction, test it out on another reader and then ask them to tell you in their own words what your essay aims to do. If their reply is garbled, you've got some revising to do. What you emphatically should not do is put off writing your introduction. Instead, write it early, and revise it often.

How to Write

There are two basic phases to essay-writing—drafting and revision—and the design of this course requires you to spend substantial effort on both. But what do these phases entail? Here I offer some suggestions for how to develop your initial insights into an argument, and how to craft an essay that does justice to that argument.

1. **Start with the text.** Your essay is a response to the texts we're engaging with in this course. You can't write a good essay without having read the text carefully and allowed it to inspire you with some ideas. One reliable way to become inspired, as I suggest above, is to read with pen in hand, marking out the passages that strike you as especially interesting and drafting an abundance of notes that document your evolving sense of the text's idiosyncrasies and flaws.
2. **Find your problem.** The prompts I give you are one good place to start, but you are also welcome to come up with your own. To help you find a problem worth arguing about, think about the following: What sort of assumptions about individuals and societies does this text make? What are the premises on which the argument is built, and which of these premises strike you as questionable? Are you entirely satisfied with the logic of the argument itself? If an argument is like a machine, where you put in premises and come out with conclusions, which parts of the machine are well-oiled and in which parts can you hear the gears grinding loudly or starting to smoke? Where's the rub?
3. **Develop your insights into an argument.** You've spotted a problem; now how do you solve it, and turn your solution into an essay? Some form of freewriting is in order here. (Here's a link to [a brief explanation of freewriting](#) by Peter Elbow, one of the originators of the technique.) One remarkably effective technique is to write an exploratory dialogue between two characters who speak for two sides of yourself. They may be fascinated by the same problem, but see different solutions to it; let them help you figure out which solution works best. Once you've got a good idea, pause the freewriting and take a first stab at writing a thesis statement. Do not postpone this essential act of framing your argument in a single sentence. You may well refine this statement several times over the course of your drafting and revision process, but you still need one as you sit down to draft the rest of the essay.
4. **Reason through your argument.** What are your claims, and what are the suppositions on which those claims rest? The easiest way to figure this out is by writing out your claims as if explaining them to someone. Which passages show what you're talking about? Rather than going hunting for these passages after the fact, you can let the essay write itself, in a sense, by starting with the passages and then writing out what you think about them. Don't worry about the order of the passages, or claims, until you've drawn up this list.
5. **Draft an outline.** This is where you assemble all the claims you want to make into a sort of list, and begin to pair them with the passages from the text that led you to make these claims. After you've made a list, you'll want to think about the order. Which passages do you want to present to a reader first, and what do you want to say about them? Remember that you're trying to figure out how to get your reader on your side, so think about which points your reader needs to hear first.
6. **Write your first draft.** You've got your outline: now all you've got to do is turn those points into paragraphs from start to finish. At this stage, don't bother with the wordcount. Your draft should be drafty—the sentences need not be polished, and you may have a sense as you write that there are claims missing, or weak claims, or a need for evidence. Perhaps the passage you just cited doesn't support your claim as well as you want it to. Perhaps you're having trouble articulating how one claim leads to the next. That's OK: make a quick note to yourself in the text (I like to use the comment function for this, but in-line brackets also work) and keep going. Trust you'll come back to it later. Don't stop writing until you've made it all the way

through! Even if you find yourself struggling to introduce or conclude your argument, plough ahead, as this is absolutely central to the exercise of writing a draft.

7. **Take a walk.** Congratulations on your draft! Give your mind a rest to keep it working well.
8. **Read it over from start to finish.** Don't worry about the elegance of your prose yet – that comes later. For now, attend carefully to argument. I suggest drawing up a [reverse outline](#): an itemized account of the essay that proceeds paragraph by paragraph, or point by point. Take a close, hard look of what your actual claims are and identify gaps in your reasoning and spots where the textual evidence you offer is weaker than you'd like it to be. This is a bracing reality check for those of us whose thoughts tend to leap ahead of our ability to capture them on the page.
9. **Scale your argument.** This is the part where you look at the wordcount and see whether you've said too much or too little. If you've said too little, you'll want to take another look at your problem and see if it's meaty enough. Is it a real problem you're responding to? If you've said too much, or if what you've said is poorly substantiated and not entirely persuasive, then you may have bitten off more than you can chew for an essay of this length, in which case, scale back your claim.
10. **Hone your argument.** Go back and take a look at those gaps in your argument, and decide whether you want to strengthen your argument with better textual evidence and more explicit reasoning, or if you're better off revising that argument to fit the evidence and interpretive work you've already furnished. You're the expert on your argument, and so you will probably have the best sense of which choice is the right one in each case. This stage of revision is also a good time to look for redundant quotations to eliminate. There's no need to quote different expressions of the same idea twice. Instead, use that space to quite a slightly different idea and make a subtle addition to your point.
11. **Clarify your prose.** Once your argument is in good shape, you can turn to the task of making sure it's clearly and persuasively expressed. Print out the draft and read it out loud to yourself. Mark every sentence where the subject and action aren't perfectly clear, and every paragraph that doesn't contain a clear statement of its main idea. Mark every unclear transition between one idea and the next. Fix up those rough spots, paying special attention to the first and final paragraphs, as your reader will depend on these to make sense of the argument as a whole. Each sentence should go down smoothly, and should bear a clear relationship to the one preceding it. Don't let stylistic flourishes stand in the way of basic comprehension. Instead, make your prose exactly as complex as it needs to be to adequately convey your ideas, and no more. Your reader may need to pause to digest an original or provocative idea, but a good test of clarity is whether a listener could hear it read aloud and understand it fully after a single read-through. If you can make your phrasing so elegant that your reader is inspired to read it aloud, so much the better. This is called *good writing*. The good news is that anyone can do it. The bad news is that it takes plenty of rewriting to achieve.
12. **Give your essay a title.** Every essay needs one. Make sure the one you choose does justice to the themes of your essay. A title like "The Concept of Property in Locke" is too generic to be useful to your reader, so reword it to give us a hint of what your essay says *about* Locke's conception of property.

Remember that while you're ultimately responsible for the quality and coherence of your essay, you can (and *should*) seek help with the writing process. Here is a partial list of the resources available to you: the advice in this guide, the feedback that you receive from your peer reader, a meeting with me in office hours, an appointment with a Writing Tutor, and even a draft swap with another classmate. Get help early and often, and bear in mind that writing and revising are usually more enjoyable when you work on them steadily every day, for no more than a few hours at a time.

Providing Peer Feedback

As a peer reader, your task is to help your classmate identify ways to improve the clarity, coherence, and persuasiveness of her draft. Do not get bogged down in line-editing your peer's prose, which may still be rough at this stage of the game. Instead, focus your efforts on identifying the different claims being made, assessing the strength of the evidence and reasoning used to support them, and considering the organization of the argument as a whole. Look for

gaps between what you think the author *wants* to say and what they *actually* say, and help them find ways to bridge those gaps. Your feedback to the author will take two forms:

1. Marginal notes throughout the text (shared electronically or on paper) highlighting any confusing word choices or syntax, ambiguous claims, or repetitive sentences; and
2. Up to a page of written feedback, typed or handwritten (approximately 200-500 words), in which you restate the essay's argument and offer suggestions to make it more clear and persuasive. Be kind and courteous. Do not savage your classmate's prose like a critical beast; instead, imagine yourself as a fellow traveler on the path to truth, and act like it. Address your classmate by name, and sign off with your own. Here is a set of questions to help guide your feedback:
 - ✓ After reading the first paragraph, can you easily identify the essay's central claim?
 - ✓ Is that claim interesting, focused, and productive?
 - ✓ Does each succeeding paragraph play a clear role in advancing that claim?
 - ✓ Are subsequent claims clearly articulated and connected to the broader argument?
 - ✓ After finishing the essay, can the reader easily summarize its central argument?
 - ✓ Does the essay do what it sets out to do? Does it do something else also, or instead?
 - ✓ How might the essay's argument be reframed so that the promises it makes at the outset are delivered on by the time you read the conclusion?

What Is a Source, and How Do I Cite It?

The term “source” refers to both the primary texts you’re responding to and any secondary materials that have shaped your thinking about those texts. Please note that since the purpose of the essays you write for this course is to develop your own reading of the texts in question, I don’t *expect* you to read or refer to any outside commentaries. However, I encourage you to explore widely and read as much as you like on the subjects of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and contract theory. Instead of just Googling blindly, I suggest starting with the introductory essays included in the editions we’re using, and moving on to high-quality online sources like the scholarly articles found in the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) and through [JSTOR](#). Wherever you find yourself browsing, if you come across a commentary that enriches your understanding of some problem in the text you’re writing about, that’s wonderful. Just do not fail to cite it.

A citable “source” can also be less a formal one than a published commentary, such as one of your fellow students. If you stumble upon a great idea in the course of a conversation with a classmate, or in the written feedback you get from your peer reader, you are encouraged to cite the inspiration for this idea in a footnote. (“I am indebted to a conversation with Ben McKean for this reading of Beauvoir’s use of the master-slave dialectic.”) Professional scholars often footnote conversations with peers as well as the written feedback they receive on their drafts as important sources for their thinking. I like this practice, because it helps make visible the intellectual networks that inform our thinking and demystifies the sources of our ideas.

The rules for citing texts are more rigorous than those for casual conversations. There are two ways to refer to a text in your essay: you can quote it directly, or you can summarize something it says. Both kinds of reference need a citation. Because of the limited number of sources you will be citing, there is no need to include a separate “Works Cited” page. Instead, just provide the bibliographical information for the text you’re using in a footnote following your first reference to the text, and cite page numbers in parentheses, as in the following example:

This paper will seek to show that rabbits are an important, if overlooked, social category in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto*.¹ I will argue that when Marx and Engels refer to the "modern labourer" (483, and *passim*), they implicitly include rabbits in this designation.

It takes years to learn how to make good use of all the sources at your disposal and cite them properly. That's why it's well worth the effort to start learning good practices of citation *now*. A reliable standard is the rules for citation outlined in the *Chicago Manual of Style*, currently in its 16th edition. An excellent and user-friendly overview of the basic rules you need to know can be found on the [Purdue Online Writing Lab's General Format page](#). Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions you run into about whether and how to cite a source.

Plagiarism

A clumsy citation in an undergraduate paper is an easily fixable mistake, while deliberate dishonesty about your use of sources is plagiarism. As noted in the syllabus, academic dishonesty of this sort will result in disciplinary action and a grade of F for the course. To avoid plagiarism and the stigma of academic dishonesty, make sure to write your own essays, and take care to cite your sources. If you have questions about how to cite correctly that are not answered here, please ask me; I attach no stigma to uncertainty. To learn in more detail about what plagiarism is, how it happens, and how to avoid it, I strongly recommend Joseph Williams and Lawrence McEnerney's online guide, *Writing in College*, which includes a section entitled "[The Pitfall to Avoid at All Costs.](#)"

Six Guidelines for Formatting and Submission

1. Your final essay should be roughly 1,500 words in length, with a variation of no more than 10 percent short or long of this target. (An essay of fewer than 1,350 or more than 1,650 words is too short/long.)
2. The first page should list your name, the title of your essay, the name of your peer reader, and the final word count at the top. *No separate title page is needed.*
3. Your essay should appear in an attractive and readable font, in 11- or 12-point type, double-spaced, with suitably generous margins.
4. Your essay should be proofread before submission to catch any errors of spelling, syntax, or formatting.
5. Please submit your essay as an attachment via email, and name the attachment as follows: Lastname_Essay1.docx (or .rtf or .odt).
6. Along with your final essay, also submit your original draft and the peer feedback you received on it. (For Essay No. 1, these will be in hard copy; you can submit them to me in class on Tuesday, the day after the essay is due. For Essay No. 2, you will have received feedback electronically, in which case please send me your draft and feedback as an attachment along with your final essay.)

Lateness Policy

As noted in the syllabus, late essays will be penalized by a third of a letter grade (e.g., from a B to a B-minus) for every 24-hour delay in their submission. Essays are due in my inbox at noon, and those that arrive after this time risk being marked down. All written assignments must be submitted in order to receive credit for this course.

Concession to Human Fallibility

As noted in the syllabus, each student may, at any point over the course of the term, a) miss a class, or b) submit a writing assignment up to 24 hours late without a grade penalty. If circumstances arise that might justify a longer extension, please come to my office hours so that we can explore this possibility. This policy is intended to preserve the balance between justice and mercy by extending a certain measure of flexibility to each student, including those who would never claim such a privilege on their own. This privilege may be exercised only *once* per term, for *either* a

¹ "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 469-500.

missed class *or* a late assignment, but not *both*. Please exercise it judiciously and courteously by sending me an email when you plan to use it.

Further Sources of Inspiration and Instruction

In the lifelong quest to write with greater pleasure and satisfaction, here are a few books and websites that I have found useful. If you have any to suggest as additions to the list, let me know.

Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1995). This book is a wise and humane guide to undertaking and staying with a challenging writing project.

Robert Boice, *How Writers Journey To Comfort and Fluency: A Psychological Adventure* (1994). All of Robert Boice's books are built around the simple insight that writing comes more easily when we undertake a few simple practices to make it more enjoyable. These practices include writing in brief, daily sessions; starting, and stopping, before you feel ready; using pre-writing exercises to help your thoughts proliferate and organize themselves; and eschewing the euphoria and misery often associated with writing, aiming instead for a steady thrum of moderate pleasure.

Joe Williams and Larry McEnerney, *Writing in College: A Short Guide to College Writing*. This guide offers detailed advice on how to come up with a thesis, build a convincing argument, and write a clear, persuasive essay. You can find it on the website of the University of Chicago Writing Program at writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/.

The Amherst College Writing Center maintains a great online collection of resources for writers at www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/writingcenter/resourcesforwriters/.

The Harvard Writing Center also maintains an excellent collection of resources at writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/resources/, including an arsenal of strategies for essay-writing.