

Encountering Academic Writing

Writing for the university is hard work. You must deal with new materials and new concepts, while saying something new, something that reflects your own thinking, but based on disciplinary-appropriate evidence. At the same time you must be aware that there are different theories and perspective presented in the different books and articles you have read, so that you can evaluate and choose among those ideas to develop your own thoughts. Perhaps in the past you may have seen school writing simply as repeating what you have been told by your teachers and textbooks, to show that you have learned and can represent accurately the course information, while avoiding language errors. But now something more is asked from you. Your ideas, knowledge, analysis and critical thinking are important--but your views must be built on the knowledge and concepts of your chosen field, your career, using the ways of thinking, arguing, and representing evidence of that field.

Each discipline provides new ways of seeing the world, new ways of thinking about issues and problems, and new ways of acting. But to begin to see and think in these new ways you have to adopt the discipline offered by the subject. The discipline is like a set of magic glasses that allow you to see details that you never noticed, to see why those details are important, and how they fit with bigger ideas. These lenses also block out some things, some of which may just be phantasms or imagined things, but some of which are the focuses of other disciplines, other ways of seeing. The same event (such as the appearance of a new social media tool like Twitter) may be viewed very differently by a sociologist, a political scientist, a psychologist, a linguist, a cultural critic, or an economist. They each see different things in the event, because of the kinds of problems they solve, of evidence they pay attention to, and of theories they draw on.

You learn about these special lenses through your reading and the class lectures, but you really learn how to use them in your discussions in class and your written assignments, because then you start examining them and start describing what you can see through them. In your talk and writing you also learn to use the conceptual terms of the field and place those terms in relation to the terms of other theorists, specific evidence you gather, your own thinking, and your own experiences. In making your writing coherent and intelligible to others, you are also clarifying your own understanding and evaluation of these ideas as well as what they show you about life. By working on making your writing more precise and intelligible, you are adjusting the focus on these magic lenses.

At first you may feel overwhelmed by well-written texts you are asked to read, because they say things so much more accurately, comprehensively, and eloquently than you feel you can. You may simply want to give the voice of your writing over to those other texts by long quotations with little of your own phrasing. But the way to make their ideas your own and make them relevant to what you have to say is to be very selective in quotations and to try to use paraphrase and summary. Then try to add your own thoughts, evaluations, experiences, or evidence where appropriate.

The more you practice inserting your own voice into your discussions of the readings, the more you will move from simple repetition to having confidence in the facts you report, the analysis and criticisms you make, and your solutions to the problems you formulate in your essays. Perhaps you might keep a private reading journal where you comment on your reading, or annotate your readings in the margin or with stickie notes. These will help develop your own understanding and evaluation of the reading and see connections and contrasts with other readings and experiences.

As you learn to discuss your readings more confidently and incorporate them more deeply into your own thinking, you will be able to take on more of the role of a person in your chosen field, able to respond to new situations and develop new thoughts, with awareness of what others have said, and in ways appropriate to the field, but still expressing your own views. The way you draw on the readings of your field, represent them, and position your own statements with respect to them is named by the conceptual term intertextuality.

As you engage with your readings, you will find that people in your field pay attention to particular kinds of phenomena and collect specific kinds of evidence through specific procedures, and they then represent this evidence in specific kinds of ways. Notice how they do this, because this is the exact point at which they use disciplinary lenses to look at the world. What they look at, how they characterize their ways of looking as ways of knowing, and their exact procedures for looking are called the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of their field. Members of a field often worry about such things because these are crucial to building reliable knowledge in the field and understanding the kind of knowledge the field has built. However, more practically, the examples you notice will provide you models about the kinds of things to write about, how to gather information, and how to write about the information you do gather. In learning to participate in a field and report your own evidence to other members of the field you will be more credible if you come to understand and respect the ways of gathering and representing evidence. You will also gather deeper insights into the nature of the field and its work.

Further, you will find that scholars in your field have particular ways of putting ideas and information together and organizing it in recognizable text forms that carry out particular functions, such as reporting a research study, or interpreting texts, or presenting new theoretical concepts. As you become familiar with the work of the field and the kinds of writing teachers assign, you will become more familiar with the ways of reasoning embodied in these forms, or genres. In learning to write in these genres you will understand better how to think as a member of the field and how to present your thinking to carry out the work of the field.

For these reasons, you should think of all the writing assignments teachers give you as more than just a burden or a test of your knowledge. Each writing assignment is a way to help your mind grow and for you to build a professional identity. Accordingly, you should give each assignment enough time to let your ideas grow

and sharpen. Don't leave writing to the last minute, but begin planning when the assignment is first given, and then spend time to gather information and ideas, write outlines, sketches and early drafts, and then revise. Over the years as a writing teacher, I have found the biggest problem students have as writers (actually that we all have as writers) is procrastination, even if at the end some writing emerges in a rush to meet the deadline. Leaving writing to the last minute gives the writing no opportunity to emerge, mature, and become refined. As your ideas become more complex, however, you need to take care that you present them as clearly as you can to your readers. Thoughtful revision helps you cut through and clarify the complex thoughts, explaining them as simply as possible, but no simpler than they should be. Last minute writing tends to be vague, jumbled, missing elaboration and details, and overall less intelligent than the students really are. Students usually can write much better and show how knowledgeable and smart they are, if they just give their writing more time.

New lenses can give you headaches while you learn to adjust to them. They can continue to give you headaches even after you learn how to use them, because they allow you to identify and address brain-busting issues and problems. But if you learn to use them well, you can see your ideas and thinking changing, can feel yourself getting smarter and more knowledgeable. You may be surprised by what you write and impressed with the professional dialogues you are able to enter into. You will have written your way into your field of choice.

This "Manual de escritura para carreras de humanidades " provides conceptual and practical entry ways into academic writing, helping you understand some of the genres you will be working with in your education, and providing you some practical tools of language and planning. These written assignments range from short questions to be answered on exams to extended papers for seminars to be worked on for a week or longer. These assignments vary as well, from subject matter to subject matter, to give you practice in the forms of reasoning, evidence, and intertextuality brought together in the field's genres. As you move onward in your schooling and then your career, you will move from the school versions of the genres to the ones used by professionals in the field. This manual will provide a good companion and guide for your professional journey into new identities and new ways of thinking.

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