

Writing in College

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This is a copy of “Writing in College” by Joseph Williams and Lawrence McEnerney, available online at <http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/index.htm>. It has been copied and updated for Grinnell with permission of the writing laboratory at the University of Chicago. I’ve also reformatted the document to improve the printed copy. You can find this PDF version at <http://www.cs.grinnell.edu/~rebelsky/Courses/Tutorial/2005F/Readings/Williams/handout.pdf>.

The original guide is intended to help first and second year students at the University of Chicago write effective papers in the Humanities Core and Social Sciences Core. It has been updated for students in Sam Rebelsky’s tutorial, *Owning Bits: Intellectual Property in the Information Age*. If you wish to learn more about the principles of organization and argumentation you find here, you may consult with the staff of Grinnell’s writing lab or with Mr. Rebelsky.

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Part I

Some crucial differences between high school and college writing

The original of this document may be found on the Web at

http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/high_school_v_college.htm

From high school to college

Some students make very smooth transitions from writing in high school to writing in college, and we heartily wish all of you an easy passage. But other students are puzzled and frustrated by their experiences in writing for college classes. Only months earlier your writing was winning praise; now your instructors are dissatisfied, saying that the writing isn't quite "there" yet, saying that the writing is "lacking something." You haven't changed--your writing is still mechanically sound, your descriptions are accurate, you're saying smart things. But they're still not happy. Some of the criticism is easy to understand: it's easy to predict that standards at college are going to be higher than in high school. But it is not just a matter of higher standards: Often, what your instructors are asking of you is not just something *better*, but something *different*. If that's the case, then you won't succeed merely by being more intelligent or more skillful at doing what you did in high school. Instead, you'll need to direct your skills and your intelligence to a new task.

We should note here that a college is a big place and that you'll be asked to use writing to fulfill different tasks. You'll find occasions where you'll succeed by summarizing a reading accurately and showing that you understand it. There may be times when you're invited to use writing to react to a reading, speculate about it. Far more often--like every other week--you will be asked to *analyze* the reading, to make a worthwhile *claim* about it that is not obvious (*state a thesis* means almost the same thing), to support your claim with good reasons, all in four or five pages that are organized to present an *argument*. (If you did that in high school, write your teachers a letter of gratitude.)

Argument: a key feature of college writing

Now by "argument" we do not mean a dispute over a loud stereo. In college, an argument is something less contentious and more systematic: It is a set of statements coherently arranged to offer three things that experienced readers expect in essays that they judge to be thoughtful:

- They expect to see a *claim* that would encourage them to say, "That's interesting. I'd like to know more."
- They expect to see *evidence, reasons* for your claim, evidence that would encourage them to agree with your claim, or at least to think it plausible.
- They expect to see that you've thought about *limits* and *objections* to your claim. Almost by definition, an interesting claim is one that can be reasonably challenged. Readers look for answers to questions like "But what about . . . ?" and "Have you considered . . . ?"

This kind of argument is less like disagreeable wrangling, more like an amiable and lively conversation with someone whom you respect and who respects you; someone who is interested in what you have to say, but will not agree with your claims just because you state them; someone who wants to hear your reasons for believing your claims and also wants to hear answers to their questions.

At this point, some students ask why they should be required to *convince* anyone of anything. “After all,” they say, “we are all entitled to our opinions, so all we should have to do is express them clearly. Here’s my opinion. Take it or leave it.” This point of view both misunderstands the nature of argument and ignores its greatest value.

It is true that we are all entitled to our opinions and that we have no duty to defend them. But universities hold as their highest value not just the pursuit of new knowledge and better understanding, but the sharing of that knowledge. We write not only to state what we have think but also to show why others might agree with it and why it matters. We also know that whatever it is we think, it is never the entire truth. Our conclusions are partial, incomplete, and always subject to challenge. So we write in a way that allows others to test our reasoning: we present our best thinking as a series of claims, reasons, and responses to imagined challenges, so that readers can see not only what we think, but whether they ought to agree.

And that’s all an argument is--not wrangling, but a serious and focused conversation among people who are intensely interested in getting to the bottom of things *cooperatively*.

Those values are also an integral part of your education in college. For four years, you are asked to read, do research, gather data, analyze it, think about it, and then communicate it to readers in a form in which enables them to asses it and use it. You are asked to do this not because we expect you all to become professional scholars, but because in just about any profession you pursue, you will do research, think about what you find, make decisions about complex matters, and then explain those decisions--usually in writing--to others who have a stake in your decisions being sound ones. In an Age of Information, what most professionals do is research, think, and make arguments. (And part of the value of doing your own thinking and writing is that it makes you much better at evaluating the thinking and writing of others.)

In the next few pages, we’re going to walk you through a process of creating an argument in a Humanities or Social Science paper. Note that we’re describing “a” process and not “the” process. We’re not describing the way that everyone does go about writing an argument. We’re certainly not describing the way everyone must go about writing an argument. Further, we can’t cover everything, and some of your teachers will expect something other than what we describe here. There are even some differences between how you write papers in Humanities and in the Social Sciences. But within all these limits, we can lay some groundwork for writing college papers.

We begin with the assignment that gets you started; then we discuss some ways to plan your paper so that you don’t waste too much time on false starts. We conclude with some strategies for drafting and revising, especially revising, because the most productive work on a paper begins after you have gotten your ideas out of the warm and cozy incubator of your own mind and into the cold light of day.

Interpreting assignments: a guide to professors' expectations

Not all of your instructors will be equally clear about what they expect of your paper. Some will tell you in detail what to read, how to think about it, and how to organize your paper, but others will ask a general question just to see what you can do with it. Some instructors will expect you to stay close to the assignment, penalizing you if you depart from it; others will encourage you to strike out on your own. Some few instructors may want you to demonstrate only that you have read and understood a reading, but most will want you to use your understanding of the reading as a jumping-off point for an analysis and an argument.

So your first step in writing an assigned paper occurs well before you begin writing: You must know what your instructor expects. Start by assuming that, unless you see the words "Summarize or paraphrase what X says about . . . ," your instructor is unlikely to want just a summary. Beyond this point, however, you have to become a kind of anthropologist, reading the culture of your particular class to understand what is said, what is not, and what is intended.

Start by looking carefully at the words of the assignment. If it is phrased in any of these ways, one crucial part of your task has been done for you:

- "Agree or disagree: 'Freud misunderstood the feminine mind when he wrote'"
- "Was Lear justified in castigating Cordelia when she refused to . . .?"
- "Discuss whether Socrates adequately answered the charge that he corrupted the youth of Athens."

For questions like these, you start (but it's only a start) by considering two opposing claims: Freud understood the feminine mind or did not, Lear was or was not justified, Socrates did or did not answer the charges against him. For reasons we will discuss below, you will *not* want the claim of your paper to be merely yes or no, he did or he didn't. But an assignment like this can make it easier to get started because you can immediately begin to find and assess data from your readings. You can look at passages from the reading and consider how they would support one of the claims. (Remember: this is only a start. You do not want to end up with a claim that says nothing more than "Freud did (or did not) understand the feminine mind." "Lear was (or was not) justified in castigating Cordelia." "Socrates did (or did not) adequately answer the charge.")

More likely, however, your assignments will be less specific. They won't suggest opposite claims. Instead, they'll give you a reasonably specific sense of subject matter and a reasonably specific sense of your task:

"illustrate," "explain," "analyze," "evaluate," "compare and contrast,"

"Discuss the role that the honor plays in *The Odyssey*."

"Show how Molière exploits comic patterns in a scene from *Tartuffe*."

None of these assignments implies a main point or claim that you can directly import into your paper. You can't just claim that "honor does play a role in *The Odyssey*" or that "Molière does exploit comic patterns in *Tartuffe*." After all, if the instructor has asked you to discuss *how* Molière used comic patterns, she presumably already believes that he *did* use them. You get no credit for asserting the existence of something we already know exists.

Instead, these assignments ask you to spend four or five pages explaining the results of an analysis. Words such as “show how” and “explain” and “illustrate” do *not* ask you to summarize a reading. They ask you to show how the reading is put together, how it works. If you asked someone to show you how your computer worked, you wouldn’t be satisfied if they simply summarized: “This is the keyboard, this is the monitor, this is the printer.” You already know the summary--now you want to know how the thing does what it does. These assignments are similar. They ask you to identify parts of things--parts of an argument, parts of a narrative, parts of a poem; then show how those parts fit together (or work against one another) to create some larger effect.

But in the course of so doing, you can’t just grind out four or five pages of discussion, explanation, or analysis. It may seem strange, but even when you’re asked to “show how” or “illustrate,” you’re still being asked to make an argument. You must shape and focus that discussion or analysis so that it supports a *claim* that you discovered and formulated and that all of your discussion and explanation develops and supports. We’ll talk more about claims -- also known as points -- in later sections.

A third kind of assignment is simultaneously least restrictive and most intimidating. These assignments leave it up to you to decide not only what you will claim but what you will write about and even what kind of analysis you will do: “Analyze the role of a character in *The Odyssey*.” That is the kind of assignment that causes many students anxiety because they must motivate their research almost entirely on their own. To meet this kind of assignment, the best advice we can give is to read with your mind open to things that puzzle you, that make you wish you understood something better.

Now that advice may seem almost counterproductive; you may even think that being puzzled or not understanding something testifies to your intellectual failure. Yet almost everything we do in a university starts with someone being puzzled about something, someone with a vague--or specific--dissatisfaction caused by not knowing something that seems important or by wanting to understand something better. The best place to begin thinking about any assignment is with what *you* don’t understand but wish you did.

If after all this analysis of the assignment you are still uncertain about what is expected of you, ask your instructor. If you can’t find your instructor, ask someone else in the class. If you can’t find someone else in your class, ask the writing lab or your SA for help. **Do this as soon as possible.** You’re not likely to succeed on an assignment if you don’t have a clear sense of what will count as success. You don’t want to spend time doing something different than what you’re being asked to do.

Another key feature of college writing: what’s your point?

However different your assignments may seem, most will share one characteristic: in each, you will almost certainly be asked to make a point. Now when we talk about the “point” of your paper, you should understand what we do and do *not* mean. If asked what the point of their paper is, most students answer with something like, “Well, I wanted to write about the way Falstaff plays the role of Prince Hal’s father.” But that kind of sentence names only your *topic* and an *intention* to write *about* it.

When most of your instructors ask what the point of your paper is, they have in mind something different. By “point” or “claim” (the words are virtually synonymous with *thesis*), they will more often mean the most important *sentence* that you wrote in your essay, a sentence that appears on the page, in black in white; words that you can point to, underline, send on a postcard; a sentence that sums up the most

important thing you want to say as a result of your reading, thinking, research, and writing. In that sense, you might state the point of your paper as “Well, I want to show/prove/claim/argue/demonstrate” (any of those words will serve to introduce the point) that

Though Falstaff seems to play the role of Hal’s father, he is, in fact, acting more like a younger brother who

If you include in your paper what appears after *I want to prove that*, then that’s the point of your paper, its main claim that the rest of your paper supports.

But what’s a *good* point?

A question just as important as what a point is, though, is what counts as a good one. We will answer that question here, even though it gets us ahead of ourselves in describing the process of writing a paper. Many beginning writers think that writing an essay means thinking up a point or thesis and then finding evidence to support it. But few of us work that way. Most of us begin our research with a question, with a puzzle, something that we don’t understand but want to, and maybe a vague sense of what an answer might look like. We hope that out of our early research to resolve that puzzle there emerges a solution to the puzzle, an idea that seems promising, but one that only more research can test. But even if more research supports that developing idea, we aren’t ready to say that *that* idea is our claim or point. Instead, we start writing to see whether we can build an argument to support it, suspecting, hoping that in the act of writing we will refine that idea, maybe even change it substantially.

That’s why we say we are getting ahead of ourselves in this account of writing a paper, because as paradoxical as it may sound, you are unlikely to know *exactly* what point you will make until *after* you have written the paper in which you made it. So for us to talk about the *quality* of a point now is to get ahead of ourselves, because we haven’t even touched on how you might think about drafting your paper, much less revising it. But because everything you do at the beginning aims at finding a good point, it is useful to have a clear idea about what it is you are trying to find, what makes for a good point.

A good point or claim typically has several key characteristics: it says something significant about what you have read, something that helps you and your readers understand it better; it says something that is not obvious, something that your reader didn’t already know; it is at least mildly contestable, something that no one would agree with just by reading it; it asserts something that you can plausibly support in five pages, not something that would require a book.

Measured by those criteria, these are *not* good points or claims:

- “*I Henry IV* by William Shakespeare is a play that raises questions about the nature of kingship and responsibility.” Sounds impressive, but who would contest it? Everyone who has read the play already knows that it raises such questions.
- “*Native Son* is one of the most important stories about race relations ever written.” Again, your readers probably already agree with this, and if so, why would they read an essay that supported it? Further, are you ready to provide an argument that this point is true? What evidence could you provide to make this argument? Are you prepared to compare the effect of *Native Son* with the effects of other books about race relations?

- ‘Socrates’ argument in *The Apology* is very interesting.” Right. So?
- “In this paper I discuss Thucydides’ account of the Corcyrean-Corinthian debate in Book I.” First, what significant thing does this point tell us about the book? Second, who would contest this (who would argue that you are not going to discuss Thucydides’ account?).

None of these is a particularly significant or contestable point, and so none of them qualifies as a good one.

What does qualify as a good claim? These might:

- The three most prominent women in *Heart of Darkness* play key roles in a complex system of parallels: literally as gatekeepers of Africa, representatively as gatekeepers of darkness, and metaphorically as gatekeepers of brutality.
- While Freud argues that followers obey because each has a part of themselves invested in the leader, Blau claims that followers obey in order to avoid punishment. Both neglect the effects of external power.

You should recognize, however, that you will only rarely be able state good points like these *before* you write your first draft. Much more often, you *discover* good points at the end of the process of drafting. Writing is a way of thinking through a problem, of discovering what you want to say. So do not feel that you should begin to write only when you have a fully articulated point in mind. Instead, write to discover and to refine it.

One note on the language of point sentences. If you’re like us, you will want your readers to think that your points are terrifically interesting and significant. What almost never accomplishes this is to say: “My point is terrifically interesting and significant.” Many writers try to generate a sense of importance for what they write by simply adding some synonym of the word “important.” “An important question to consider . . .” “It is essential to examine . . .” “A crucial concern is whether. . .” This isn’t going to work. What convinces readers that a point is important is not the word “important,” but the words that tell us the substance of the point. If, during your first draft, you find yourself using words like “important,” you should make a note to yourself to come back during your revisions to replace “important” with more substantive language. Then don’t forget to do it. It’s really important.

Now: in order to prove that important point -- or to go through a process that will help you develop one -- you’ll need a strategy for gathering evidence and writing a first draft. We offer advice on these matters in the next section: “Preparing to write and drafting the paper.”

Part II

Preparing to write and drafting the paper

The original of this document may be found on the Web at
http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/preparing_to_write_and_drafting.htm

Preparing to prove your point: the process of gathering evidence

Once you understand the assignment, your next task is to find data relevant to meeting it. The word “data” makes some humanists flinch a bit, but we need a word that distinguishes all the facts, quotations, references, numbers, events that might be relevant to your assignment from those fact, quotations, references, etc. that might support your specific claim or point. All the information related to your assignment is data; data becomes evidence when you use it to convince readers to agree with your point.

We do not have the space here to discuss the process of reading critically and selecting data, thinking about what you have gathered, analyzing it, and discovering the point or claim that you want to make and support. Every assignment will ask you to look at your readings in a different way, and every text you read will raise its own problems of interpretation and analysis. In fact, that is what most of your classes are about: selecting and analyzing data, and arriving at a plausible conclusion about them.

The best generic advice we can give is this:

- Go through your readings once and mark with a highlighter *everything* you think plausibly relevant to answering the assignment.
- So that you can get a sense of it all, go through a second time, skimming what you have highlighted.
- Go through a third time, marking passages that seem *most* central to your assignment. Try to assign to each passage a key word that will help you sort them later.
- Now try to categorize those passages according to how they might support different points. Which ones support one point, which ones support another point. (Spend the time it takes to find data that might support different, even opposing, points. You need such data so that you can critically balance one point against another.)
- On a piece of paper, jot down what you think are the central concepts that emerge from this analysis.
- To these central concepts attach subsidiary concepts. Use some sort of symbol to represent the kinds of relationships that the subsidiary concepts have to the central concepts and to one another: cause and effect, similarity, contrast, more important-less important, earlier-later in time, and so on. Spend time playing with these relationships. Make lists of the central concepts, order and re-order them, find categories and subcategories.
- Then create a working outline around topics suggested by your categories of evidence.

At this point, you may have a fairly clear idea about the point you want to make; more often, you won't. Either way, if you have even a dim idea about the shape of your general point, prepare to start your first draft.

Planning your first draft: styles of outlining

You may have been told in high school that you needed a detailed outline before you began to draft a paper. For some writers, that's good advice; for others it is not. Some writers can't begin writing until they have a detailed outline consisting of their main point and every subpoint, in the order in which they intend to make them. Other writers need an outline of some kind, but usually only of topics so that we know what the parts of our paper are and the order in which we want them to appear. You will know which is right for you only after you write a few papers.

But almost everyone profits from at least a scratch outline that focuses your attention on particular aspects of your paper and in a particular order:

- Harlem Renaissance-art using experience to develop urban identity
- African-American art muffled in rural south.
- Migration north: transforming effect of urban life.
- Armstrong transforms mainstream song using folk and African elements.
- Significance of opposition to jazz
- Motley transforms painting with bold color, form and subject (stereotypes?)
- Clash of dignified vs. primitive

If you can formulate a complete sentence that captures the central idea in each section, so much the better. But it is likely that you will discover those sentences in the act of drafting, as well.

Beginning your first draft: the draft introduction

Every writer, beginner or experienced, feels at least some small twinge of anxiety when it comes time to write the first sentence of a paper. That's why some writing teachers tell you to write your introduction last. What they mean, of course, is that after you finish a draft, you need to go back and re-write your introduction. Once you know what you've said in the draft, you can write a much better introduction to it. So in that sense, you will have written the real introduction only after you've written the draft: you'll have written the introduction last. But even first drafts need introductions of some kind, so no one escapes that moment of uncertainty.

It is useful to spend more than a moment or two thinking about even this first draft introduction because it has a way of so entrenching itself in your paper that you will have a hard time getting rid of it when you get to your last draft. You may be resolved to get rid of your first draft introduction later, but such a resolution can fade as your deadline approaches--especially if sunrise is approaching at the same time. It is not a bad idea even from the beginning to take some steps to avoid last minute trouble.

First, here are some introductory strategies to *avoid* even in first drafts. If they survive into your last draft, you can be sure that your instructor will judge them amateurish.

- **Don't simply echo the language of the assignment.** If the assignment says "Discuss the logical structure of the Declaration of Independence, particularly those assumptions on which Jefferson based his argument," do not start with something like, "In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson

based his argument on assumptions that are part of its logical structure.” You’re very likely to need *some* of the language from the assignment, but you should leave room, even in your first draft, for language of your own, so your readers will understand your unique approach to the question.

- **Avoid offering a history of your thinking about the assignment.** Don’t begin, “In analyzing the logical structure of the Declaration of Independence, it is first necessary to define the assumptions that Jefferson worked with. In my analysis, I found that Jefferson began with one assumption, which was that . . .” Such a discussion of your own thought processes forces readers to wait a bit too long to find out what the paper will actually be about.
- **Avoid beginning with “Webster defines ‘xxx’ as . . .”** If a concept is so important to your paper that you feel compelled to specify its meaning, its dictionary definition will be too generic for your purposes. A somewhat better strategy here is to cite a definition by a specialist in a particular field or by an otherwise admirable individual. If you wish to explore “generosity,” for example, you are unlikely to find a good starting point for your paper in a dictionary’s definition, but you are more likely to find one in philosopher’s definition, or a psychologist’s, or an economist’s, or a political theorist’s, or a sociobiologist’s, or Mother Theresa’s. The reason for this is that dictionaries and thinkers are doing quite different things when they define: dictionaries are merely establishing a baseline of situations to which a word may be applied, while thinkers are participating in an ongoing intellectual conversation about a concept. And it is this conversation that your paper seeks to join, by citing such a definition and then contesting it, or elaborating on it, or finding exceptions to it, or adding to it. What if you’re not sure who “counts” as a participant in this conversation? In that case, you have two choices: you may ask someone, such as your professor or Writing Intern or a Writing Tutor, or you may choose to avoid this opening strategy altogether until you are more familiar with the field.
- **Avoid beginning with grandly banal statements:** “The Declaration of Independence is the greatest and most logical document in American history. . . .” The danger here is twofold. Readers may find the statement too obvious to be worth reading, or (and this is more likely in an academic setting) they may think that it oversimplifies a complex matter, so much so that it cannot function as the beginning of an intellectually respectable argument.

How *should* a draft introduction begin? One way to focus your own thinking is to begin with a kind of sentence that *you must change in the final draft*:

I am addressing the issue of [-----fill in your topic here] in order to show why/how/what/who/whether [fill this in with subject and verb]

For example,

I am addressing the issue of *the relationship between Jefferson’s assumptions and evidence* in order to show *how he depended on assumptions that he could not prove but needed in order to use the evidence he had*.

That kind of sentence focuses your attention not on what you are writing *about*, but on what you are trying to *do*. The indirect question such as, “. . . show *how*. . .” or “. . . explain *why*. . .” helps you identify something that you do not know but are trying to find out.

If you have even a tentative answer to your question, state it at the end of your introduction. That will launch you into the body of your paper with some sense of direction. If you do not have a tentative answer, make up some sentence that uses most of the key terms you came up with when you were assembling, organizing, and analyzing your data. (Not sure how to fit those key words into a sentence?

Feel free to use question marks, ellipses or just blank space to reflect your uncertainty: “The evidence that Jefferson most relies on are specific acts of tyranny (injustice?), which caused him to rely on unproven assumptions . . . fundamental purpose of government.” You can come back to this sentence after you’ve written the draft to fill in the missing pieces.)

If you can get some key terms into your draft introduction, you will help yourself focus on developing those concepts.

Remember, after you’ve completed your paper draft, you’ll need to revise this first try at an introduction. We offer some suggestions in a later section on revising introductions, but you’ll be better able to follow them after you’ve drafted the whole paper.

After your draft introduction: a common danger

After you finish the draft introduction, your biggest risk is that instead of laying down the foundation of your argument, you might lapse into a long narrative summary of what you have read. The act of producing such a summary can actually be a valuable part of your writing process, but only if you have started your paper at least two or three days before it is due and if you will substantially revise what you have written. In these circumstances, your summary is a useful way to allow you (but *not* your readers) to gain control over your subject matter.

But perhaps the most common problem that first year students have with their papers is that they take this summary of their subject, tack on a half-page conclusion and then turn the essay in. They may spend an hour or two tinkering with spelling and punctuation, but essentially, once they’ve written a summary of what they’ve read, and then added a short conclusion, they’re done. It is a pattern of behavior that many students fall into without even noticing. Remember: if you feel you have to summarize, start drafting at least three or four days before the paper is due. Give yourself time not only to write the summary, but to transform it into an argument.

Two styles of drafting: fast vs. slow

There are two extremes in drafting styles. Some writers draft as fast as they can make pen or keys move. Not worrying about style or correctness, or even clarity (least of all spelling and punctuation), they try to keep the ideas flowing. If they bog down, they note why they got stuck, refer to their outline for their next move, and push on. If they are on a roll, they do not type out quotes or footnotes: they insert just enough to know what to do later. Then if they do freeze up, they have things to do: fiddle with wording, add quotes, play with the introduction, review what they’ve drafted, in a sentence or two summarize the ground they have covered. As a last resort, they correct spelling, punctuation---anything that diverts their minds from what is blocking them, but keeps them on task, giving their subconscious a chance to work on the problem. Or they go for a walk.

There are others, though, who cannot work with such “sloppy” methods, but only “word-by-perfect-word,” “sentence-by-polished-sentence.” They cannot start a new sentence, until the one they are working on is dead right. If this sounds like you, if you cannot imagine a quicker but rougher style of drafting, do not fight it. But remember: the more you nail down each small piece, the fewer

alternatives you have thereafter. For this reason, if you are a “sentence-by-sentence” drafter, you must have a detailed outline that tells you where you are going and how you will get there.

Neither of these styles is “the” correct one; both can lead to excellent papers. Both also have built-in pitfalls of which you must be aware. The faster style can lead to careless errors in the final draft if you fail to proofread rigorously, and it may also degenerate into a history of your thought process rather than a carefully structured argument if you fail to revise it with readers’ needs in mind. The slower style can become overly focused on sentence-level correctness and neglect the paper’s overall structure; you must therefore use outlines and frequent rereadings to remind yourself of the role each part should play in the whole.

Whichever style is yours, establish a ritual for writing and follow it. Ritualistically straighten up your desk, sit down, sharpen your pencils or boot up your computer, get the light just right, knowing that you will sit there for an absolute minimum time. If you sit staring, not an idea in your head, write a summary: *So far, I have these points . . .* Or look at the last few paragraphs you wrote, and treat some important bit of evidence as a claim in a subordinate argument.

The crucial part of writing: revision

When you have finished your first draft, you should have enough time left for a few hours of revision. Ideally, you should leave enough time to put the draft aside so that you can forget at least some of what you were thinking when you drafted. The very worst time to revise a draft is right after you have finished it. At that moment you are the worst possible editor. You know too much about what you have written and are thereby constitutionally incapacitated from reading your essay as your readers will.

Some research at Carnegie-Mellon University suggests why. A group of researchers created a passage on a technical subject and inserted into it problems of organization, sentence structure, clarity, etc.. They asked two groups of readers to read the passage and indicate where they had trouble understanding. One group, however, was given background reading in the subject of the passage before they read it. Which group was better able to identify those deliberately inserted problems? The readers *without* the background reading, of course: when the ones with the better knowledge hit a passage with errors, they were able to bring up from memory what they already knew. They didn’t spot the errors in the writing because they were not relying on the writing to understand the ideas--they already understood. The ones without previous knowledge were much more effective at spotting flaws because they were much more attentive to the text. They had to be--without the background reading, the only way they could understand the material was to concentrate on the text.

At the moment you finish writing something, who knows more about it than you do? When you re-read your own writing, you aren’t really reading it; you’re only reminding yourself of what you wanted to mean when you wrote it. That means two things:

1. The longer you can set aside something you have written before you revise it, the more you will have forgotten what you were thinking when you wrote it. This amnesia is a blessing: it will enable you to read what you have written more quickly.
2. Even then, you will still know too much. In the next section, we offer some ways to analyze, diagnose, and revise your own writing in a way that sidesteps your too-good memory of it. To see our

suggestions for revision, go to “A strategy for analyzing and revising a first draft.”

Part III

A strategy for analyzing and revising a first draft

*The original of this document may be found on the Web at
http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/strategy_for_analyzing_and_rev.htm.*

Here are some steps for re-reading and revising your essays in a reasonably objective way. These steps may seem formulaic and mechanical, but you need a way to diagnose your own prose so that you have some sense of how others will read it.

Finding your best point -- and making sure your readers can find it

This first step is intended to ensure that the beginning and end of your paper cohere with each other, that they “frame” your paper in an appropriate way.

1. Find the beginning and the end.

Draw a line after the end of your introduction and just before the beginning of your conclusion.

2. Find candidates for your point.

Underline one sentence in both your introduction and conclusion that comes closest to expressing your main point, your claim, the thesis of your paper. In your introduction, that sentence is most likely to be the last one; in your conclusion, it might be anywhere.

3. Find the *best* candidate.

Read the introduction and conclusion together, particularly comparing those two most important sentences. They should at least not contradict one another.

From an introduction:

During this unprecedented period, African-American artists shared in the process of creating a black urban identity through their depictions of a culture’s experience.

From a conclusion:

While many were eager to slash the culture’s ties to its primitive history, Armstrong and Motley created art which included elements of the community’s history and which made this history a central part of African-American urban identity.

It is likely that the sentence in your conclusion will be more specific, more substantive, more thoughtful than the one in your introduction. Your introduction may merely announce a general intention to write about some topic. If so, your conclusion is more likely to make a more important claim, generalization, or point about that topic. In the example above, the sentence from the introduction describes only the fairly general idea that artists contributed to a culture’s identity by depicting its experience. An important idea, certainly, but one that your readers probably already hold. An essay that did no more than reiterate it

would not be especially valuable. Contrast the sentence from the conclusion. Here, the writer is more specific in several important ways. First, she is specific about one element in African-American experience: its ties to its primitive history. She is specific about what the artists did: they included aspects of that history in their art. She also adds the suggestive information that some people opposed including primitive history in African-American culture (“While many eager to slash the culture’s ties . . .”). This controversy is potentially enriching for the essay because it may prompt the reader (and the writer) to analyze the subject from a very different perspective.

4. Revise your introduction to match the best point.

If you find that the sentence from your conclusion is more insightful than the one from your introduction, then you have to revise your introduction to make it seem that you had this sentence in mind all along (even though when you started drafting the paper you may have had no idea how you were going to end it). You can do this in one of two ways:

- i. Insert at the end of your introduction some version of that sentence in your conclusion that comes closest to expressing your main point. You may have to revise the rest of the introduction to make it fit.
- ii. If you don’t want to “give away” the point of your paper at the beginning, insert a sentence at the end of your introduction that at least anticipates your point by using some of its same language.

For example:

As African-American artists such as Louis Armstrong and Archibald Motley, Jr. shared in the collective process of creating a black urban identity, they reflected their community’s struggle to define the role of historical experience in modern culture.

Note that this sentence does not conclude that Armstrong and Motley did include primitive history in their art. But it does introduce some implicit questions that anticipate that conclusion: did these artists use their historical experience? If so, how? Those implicit question set up the explicit point.

How do you choose between stating your main point at the beginning of the essay or waiting to state it at the end? If you think you are a skilled writer, the second choice--the “point-last” strategy--is a possibility. You must be certain, though, that the rest of the paper plausibly takes your reader to your conclusion. (We’ll talk more about that in a minute.) Point-last writing, however, is always more difficult than point-first, and if you feel uncertain about your writing or more important, if you aren’t interested in spending the extra time it takes to write good point-last prose, then you should state your main point explicitly at the end of your introduction. If you’ve stated your main point at the beginning of your essay, your reader won’t lose track of your argument, won’t lose the sense of where you are headed. More important, it will focus *your* attention on where you are headed. Don’t worry that if you state your point first your professors will lose interest in your paper. If your point is interesting (or even if it’s not), they will read on to see how you support it. (That, after all, is what you’re paying them to do.)

There are, to be sure, some instructors, mostly but not exclusively in the humanities, who prefer point-last papers: papers that pose a problem in their introductions, then work toward a conclusion, demonstrating how the writer thought about the topic, wrestled with alternative answers, and finally discovered a

solution. That kind of organization creates a dramatic tension that some instructors like, because they want to see the processes of your thinking.

The risk is that you might do exactly that! For nearly all of us, the process of our thinking is messy, inefficient, hard to follow. If you write a paper that in fact tracks what you thought about at 1 AM, then 3 AM, the 6 AM, you're likely to write a messy, inefficient and hard to follow paper. Few instructors want to see that. They want to see a coherent, ordered, analytical account of your thinking that may *seem* to be a narrative, but in fact is always an artful invention, something that requires writing skills of a high order.

So when you go through this first phase of your analysis, you have to make a thoughtful choice about where you want to locate your point--in your introduction *and* your conclusion, or just in your conclusion, with an "anticipatory" point in your introduction. The default choice for both writer and reader is the first: point-first.

Creating coherent sections

Now you need to determine whether the parts of your paper hang together to form a coherent argument and whether the parts are in an order that will seem to make sense to your reader.

1. Find the paper's major sections.

Draw a line between every major section in your paper. A four or five page paper should have at least two and probably not more than three or four.

Now, analyze and revise each section as you did your whole paper:

2. Find each section's introduction and conclusion.

Put a slash mark after the introduction to each section. The introduction to a section may be only one sentence or it may be a complete paragraph. Each section needs a sentence that tells your readers that they have finished one segment of your argument and are moving on to another.

Put a slash mark before the conclusion to each major section. If your sections are short--only a couple of paragraphs or less--that section might not need a separate conclusion.

3. Identify the major point in each section.

Just as your whole paper has to have a point, so should each section have a sentence that offers some generalization, some point, some claim that that section is intended to support.

If most of your points seem to be at the beginnings of your sections, fine. If most of them are at the ends of your sections as conclusions, you have to . . .

4. Think hard about whether you want any particular section to be point-last.

If you can think of no good reason, revise so that that section is point first. If you decide that you want the section to be point-last, then you'll have to repeat for the section the process we described for a point-last essay. You'll need to write an introductory sentence for the section that uses some of the key words that will appear in the point sentence that concludes the section. This principle simply reflects the needs of readers to know where they are and where they are going. Nothing confuses a reader more than moving from paragraph to paragraph with no sense of the logical progression of your argument. Such an essay feels like pudding with an occasional raisin to chew on, but not in any particular order.

5. Ordering the sections.

Try to explain to yourself why you put the parts of the paper in the order you did. If you arranged the parts of your paper in the order you did because that's the order in which they occurred to you, your readers are likely not to see any rationale for moving through your paper in the order they do.

- If you have three (or four, or whatever) reasons for something, why are the reasons in the order they are in? (By the way, beware of organization-by-number: “. . . for three reasons. First . . . Second . . . Third . . .” If the *only* relationship you can demonstrate among your arguments is “first-second-third,” your essay will probably be perceived as unsophisticated. Most significant arguments have substantive relationships: they are related not merely by number but by content.)
- If you have ordered the parts of your paper from cause-to-effect, why did you do that? Why not effect-to-cause?
- If you organized your paper to echo the organization of the text you are writing about, why have you done that? If you did, you risk having written a mere summary.
- If you organized your paper to match the terms of the assignment, is that what your instructor wanted, or did your instructor want something more original from you?
- If you organized your paper around major topics in your assignment (“Compare and contrast Freud and Jung in terms of the role of society in the development of their theories”) did you write about, say, Freud first and Jung second simply because that was the order in the assignment?

There are so many principles of order that we cannot list them all here. We can only urge you to identify the one you chose and then to justify it as the best one from among the many possible.

Ensuring your evidence fits your claims

The most common evidence you will offer to support your claims will be quotations from the texts you read and references to passages in them. Without such evidence, your claims are merely statements of opinion. As we said, you are entitled to your opinions but you're not entitled to having your readers agree with them. In fact, your readers generally will not highly value your opinions unless you provide some evidence to support them. When you provide evidence, you turn your opinions into arguments.

But before readers can value your claim as supported with evidence, they must first understand how your evidence *counts* as evidence for that claim. No flaw more afflicts the papers of less experienced writers than to make some sort of claim, or to offer a quotation from the text, and *assume* that the reader understands how the quotations speaks to the claim. Here is an example:

Lincoln believed that the Founders would have supported the North, because as he said, this country was “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

The writer may be correct that Lincoln believed that the Founders would have supported the North, but what in that quotation would cause a reader to agree? In other words, how does the quotation count as evidence of the claim? The evidence says something about the views of the founders in 1776. How does that support a claim about what the founders would think about 1863? When pressed, the writer explained: “Since the Founders dedicated the country to the proposition that all men are created equal and Lincoln freed the slaves because he thought they were created equal, then he must have thought that he and the Founders agreed, so they would have supported the North. *It’s obvious.*”

Well, it’s not. After it has been explained, it may or may not be persuasive (after all, the author of “all men are create equal” was himself a slave owner). But it isn’t obvious. Quotations rarely speak for themselves; most have to be “unpacked.” If you offer only quotes without interpreting those quotes, your reader will likely have trouble understanding how the quote, as evidence, supports your claim. Your paper will seem to be a pastiche of strung-together quotations, suggesting that your data never passed through the critical analysis of a working mind.

Whenever you support a claim with numbers, charts, pictures, and especially quotations---whatever looks like primary data---do not assume that what you see is what your readers will get. Spell out for them how it is that the data counts as evidence for your claim. For a quotation, a good principle is to use a few of its key words just before or after it. Something like this:

Lincoln believed that the Founders would have supported the North because they would have supported his attempt to move the slaves to a more equal position. He echoes the Founder’s own language when he says that the country was “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

Making your case without oversimplifying it

Some inexperienced writers think that the strongest and most persuasive kind of writing projects a voice of utter confidence, complete certainty, no room for doubt of the possibility of seeing things in a different way. That view could not be more mistaken. If communicating with your readers is like having a serious, mutually respectful conversation with them, then the last kind of person you want to talk with is someone who is

UTTERLY CERTAIN OF EVERYTHING WITH NO QUALIFICATIONS, RESERVATIONS, OR LIMITATIONS.

Two minutes with such a person is at least one too many. Compare these two passages:

a. For more than a century now, every liberal has vehemently argued against any kind of censorship of art and/or entertainment. And in the last 20 years, the courts and the legislatures of Western nations have found these arguments so persuasive that no one remembers any rebuttals to these arguments. Censorship has simply ceased to exist.

b. For almost a century now, many liberals have argued against the censorship of art and/or entertainment, and in the last 20 years, courts and the legislatures in most Western nations have found these arguments fairly persuasive. Few people now clearly remember what the rebuttals to these arguments were. Today, in the United States and other democracies, censorship has just about ceased to exist.

Twenty pages of the (a) prose would quickly grow wearisome. It is too strident, too flat-footed, completely unnuanced. But some would say the second is mealy mouthed, too hedged about with qualifiers. Here is a third version, which neither proclaims nor hedges:

c. For a century now, liberals have been arguing against the censorship of art and/or entertainment, and in the last 20 years, courts and the legislatures in Western nations have found these arguments so persuasive that few now remember what the rebuttals to these arguments were. Today, in the United States and other democracies, *overt censorship by the central government has largely* ceased to exist.

It is hard to give completely reliable advice about hedging and emphasizing because different writers have different opinions about it, different fields do it in different ways. But something most of us share is a sense of caution. (Notice that we said “most of us.”)

Another kind of reservation you ought to make room for in your papers is plausibly contradictory evidence. No matter what position you take on a text, there will almost always be some evidence in it that someone can use as a basis to disagree with you.

Lincoln may have been willing to let his readers associate the Founders with the North, but it is not clear that he actually believed that they would have supported the Union. He does not specifically say so. Although he describes what the founders did in the past (‘Four score and seven years ago’), he does not say what they would do in the present.

The shrewd writer considers these kinds of objections before readers do, and may include the objections in the essay. Once you think you have constructed an argument that fully supports your claim, skim your reading again specifically looking for evidence that might support a different conclusion. Then raise that evidence and counterclaim in order both to acknowledge and, if you can, rebut them. Even if you can’t fully rebut them, you can suggest that the weight of evidence is still on your side. Don’t worry that including counter evidence will make your argument less persuasive. On the contrary. While there are exceptions, most academic readers are much more persuaded by writers who admit reservations than by writers who insist that they are always absolutely correct.

The point here is to avoid the kind of flat-footed, unnuanced, unsophisticated certainty that characterizes the thinking of someone who does not recognize that things are usually more complex, less clear-cut, than most of us wish.

Once your arguments are polished and well-organized, you at last will have an excellent idea of what it is that you’ve really said. You’re now ready to move on to those parts of the revision that can make the most difference in the way readers experience your paper: the introduction and conclusion. We offer some pointers on such revision in the next section, ‘Revising the introduction and conclusion, and polishing the draft.’

Part IV

Revising the introduction and conclusion, and polishing the draft

The original of this document can be found on the Web at

http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/revising_the_introduction.htm

If you are satisfied that you have made a claim, supported and qualified it; that the parts of your paper hang together, you are probably ready to write your last draft introduction and conclusion. These are important, because the first thing your reader reads creates a “frame” through which your reader reads, understands, and interprets everything that follows. Your conclusion is your last opportunity to shape your reader’s *memory* of your paper.

Effective introductions

We’ve already touched on your decision whether to state your point at the end of your introduction and in your conclusion, or whether to end your introduction with a kind of ‘anticipatory, jumping-off’ point that only launches the reader into the body of the paper but does not reveal the full contours of your claim. There are advantages and disadvantages to both, as we have indicated in the section on drafting introductions. Whichever strategy you choose, you have to use your introduction to lead up to either your main point sentence or to that launching-point sentence.

The most important role of your introduction is to give a brief statement about the question or problem that you are answering or solving. You do this by suggesting something that is puzzling, not entirely understood, perhaps overlooked, not noticed, undervalued. The intention is to make your reader feel that you have answered a question that is worth asking, that you have seen something that helps make sense out of a reading. Here are two introductions the first typical, the second not. They both respond to an assignment asking students to discuss ways in which Tolstoy used the French language to critique social and cultural values in *War and Peace*.

a. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy portrays many aspects of Russian society. One of the most important and interesting of these is the role of the French language. Throughout the book, many characters speak French, although this is the language of their enemy. Later on in the book, the Russians are concerned about using French and begin to learn and use Russian. This very significant shift in the language of the characters indicates some of Tolstoy’s views about the values contained in Russian culture. By comparing the use of the French language throughout *War and Peace*, Tolstoy’s views of culture can be examined.

b. Throughout *War and Peace*, the French language is linked to a range of negative themes. In the opening scene, superficial characters at the soiree reveal their artificiality and insincerity through their ostentatious use of French. Those characters who are the most adept at French tend to be the most concerned with social appearances, those who speak Russian are usually associated with honesty and unselfishness. It is notable that those Russians who speak French incorrectly are good, straightforward, kindhearted souls while those who smirk at their virtues speak flawless French. It is misleading, however, to conclude that there is a simple association between negative values and the French language. Although it may seem that French itself reveals a character’s superficiality or

viciousness, this is not always the case. Very often, Tolstoy uses French in conjunction with irony, paradox or other literary techniques. The French language is not the main vehicle of Tolstoy's cultural criticism, rather, it is more of a parasite that lives off of other devices, a virus that intensifies their effect.

The tone to avoid at all costs is the tone of that first one: "Well," it says, "you asked me to write about French in *War and Peace*, so I will. You said that Tolstoy uses French to criticize certain values, so I'll repeat that. You seem to think this matters, so I'll say that it is 'important,' 'interesting,' and 'very significant.' Then I'll cite lots of places in the text where Tolstoy uses French to criticize values. Isn't that what you want?" No. Mostly, this is not what they want. The first introduction makes the paper seem merely a report on a topic: the paper will report on the places where the writer found Tolstoy using French to criticize values. There is no sense of the writer having thought much about *War and Peace* because the paper seems to answer no question, resolve no puzzle, solve no problem. In the second introduction, the writer suggests that there is something difficult to understand about the way Tolstoy uses French in *War and Peace*. This writer suggests that what appears to be true about the link between French and values may be a misunderstanding of the text. Where the first writer positions her paper as a list of citations from the text, the second writer positions her paper as an effort to enhance our understanding.

As the very first sentences in your introduction, you might try to find a quotation in the text that you can say inspired your question or raises your problem, a quotation that you can balance with one at the end of your conclusion.

Effective conclusions

Your conclusion is the easiest to revise, because you will probably have already written a conclusion that makes a good point. Most of us write to discover, and it is at the end where we discover our most interesting ideas. We have to make sure our introductions cohere with our conclusions, but for the most part, our conclusions will be the richest, most complex part of our paper, because that is where we are prepared to do our richest and most complex thinking.

In addition to stating--or restating--the main point, usually as the first or second sentence of the conclusion, most writers want to go beyond it. They can do that in two ways:

- They can suggest the significance of their conclusion. They do that by suggesting the consequences of answering the question they asked, solving the problem they posed. In effect, they answer the question "So what?" Try that as a strategy of revision: State your main point, and then have someone ask, "So what?" If you can answer that question, you have identified the significance of your point.

The following is a conclusion from a paper whose main point was that the character Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* did not accomplish a 'moral victory.' But as you'll see, the writer ended the essay not only by restating this point but also by suggesting that this problem of Kurtz's morality has implications for another problem: the problem of whether *Heart of Darkness* is a racist text.

The contrast between Kurtz and Nietzsche's Superman has shown that Kurtz did not achieve any kind of 'moral victory' by being true to his nature. On the contrary, Conrad has shown in Kurtz the moral defeat not only of one individual but of European civilization in general. One implication of this defeat stems from the fact that it is highlighted by the contrast between the hypocrisy of the Europeans and utter honesty of the savages. Those who have denounced *Heart*

of Darkness as racist seem to assume that Conrad denigrates the native Africans. The question of Conrad's racism becomes much more complicated if we understand that the savages of the novel stand in contrast to the object of the book's true condemnation. The honesty of the savages only intensifies Conrad's moral condemnation of his own European culture.

- Another way of thinking about your conclusion is to try to say what further questions your paper raises--what would you like to know more about, what puzzle remains--better yet, what *bigger* puzzle do you now have?
- The last thing you might add to your conclusion is a quotation from the text that brings your paper to a graceful close. The quotation should be striking, gnomic, epigrammatic--a quotation that is especially graceful or figurative.

An effective title: previewing your key concepts

After you've revised the text and, especially, *after* you've reworked both your introduction and your conclusion, you're ready to write (or revise) your title. The least useful kind of title is one that anyone knowing your assignment could predict from the language of the assignment. If the assignment is, "Discuss the logical structure of the Declaration of Independence, particularly those assumptions on which Jefferson based his argument," do not create the title:

The Assumptions behind the Logic
of The Declaration of Independence

A useful title tells the reader what the central conceptual elements in your paper are. Those elements are most likely to appear in your conclusion. So go to your conclusion, particularly to the main point sentence in your conclusion, and circle six or seven key words, particularly words that did not appear in the assignment. Now out of those words, construct a two-part title on the model of

XXXXXXXXXX:
YYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY

Something like:

Logic in the Declaration:
Timeless Ideals and Immediate Realities

The first line ends in a colon, the second line can be longer or shorter than the first. The reason for writing a two-part title is that if you don't get it right in the first part, you might get it right in the second. Avoid using words in your title if those words are not prominent in your paper. The point of a title is to anticipate key concepts, not to be clever.

The last tasks: proofreading and formatting

Your last task may seem trivial, but for a good many of your teachers, it will determine whether they judge you to be careful, thoughtful, and mature writer, or sloppy, careless, and thoughtless: You have to proofread your paper to be certain that you have no spelling errors, your grammar is acceptable, the sentences are reasonably punctuated, and your paper is in the right format.

At least run your spell-checker. (Beware of grammar checkers; all those we've tested to date [September, 1998] have proved unreliable.) Better yet, put your paper aside for an hour, then return to it to catch the kinds of errors that spell-checkers can't find: wrong words, sentence fragments, mish-mashes of sentences and paragraphs that you created when you were deleting, cutting, and pasting. Do your subjects and verbs agree? If you are working on a computer, do global searches for these words to be certain that you are using them correctly: *there, their, they're; its, it's; your, you're*.

Have your roommate read your paper. It is not dishonest to ask a friend to read over a paper to catch typos and so on. We all do it.

Before you run off your last draft, make sure of all this:

1. Pick a standard type font, preferably a "serif" type. (Serif fonts like Garamond or Times are easier to read over long stretches than sans serif fonts like Helvetica or Ariel.) Unless you're willing to bear unpleasant consequences, you shouldn't choose this moment to express your creativity using one of the ornate or bizarre fonts on your computer. Pick a standard font like Times, Palatino, or Garamond.
2. Use a 12 point font.
3. Be sure your printer will produce a clear, dark *black* type. Don't turn in a paper printed in green, red, blue, etc. Black and only black.
4. Double-space (except for block quotations; single space them).
5. Margins all the way around of no more than 1.25 inches.
6. Number your pages in the upper right hand corner. In all forms of Microsoft Word, you may learn how to do this by consulting the online help on "headers." More recent versions of Word will allow you to add page numbers directly from the "Insert" menu.
7. Put your name at the top of every page. Again, you may use Word's "headers" function to do this.
8. On the first page, in the upper right hand corner, put your name, the date, your class number and section (if any), and the name of your instructor:

Chris Smith
February 14, 1999
Humanities 140, Section 9
Mr. Williams

9. After you print it out, staple the pages together.
 10. **Be sure that you have made two copies of your paper, and that you have backed up your file on a separate floppy, optical disk, or zip disk.**
-

So! Now your task is done. Or maybe not: for most writers, the process isn't always a uniformly smooth and happy one. If you get blocked, or if you get stuck, you may be afraid you'll have no pages to number; perfect formatting is pointless when there's nothing there to format. In our next section, therefore, we warn against one bad way to get out of blocks and suggest one good way to help the writing process move along. Go to "But what if you get stuck?"

Part V

But what if you get stuck? A good solution and a terrible solution

The original of this document can be found on the Web at http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/but_what_if_you_get_stuck.htm.

At some point, you may find yourself staring at the screen or paper, utterly blocked. You can think of nothing to say that does not sound stupid. You are overwhelmed by the task of assembling evidence for your point, or you are so overwhelmed by little pieces of evidence that you can't imagine a way to make them cohere into a single point. This happens to everyone: the key is to find a productive way out of the situation.

A productive solution to a block: ways to prepare for a meeting with the writing lab

To help with a writing block or to get suggestions for revising a draft, you might want to visit the writing lab. The writing lab staff are trained to help you get over crisis moments in your writing and to help you improve their writing. While they have many hours, slots do fill up; if you'll think you need to see one of the writing lab staff, sign up for a slot as soon as possible.

Before you see someone for help, though, be sure that you can describe what you have done, what not, and what parts of the task trouble you. The clearer you can be, the better advice you will get.

First, prepare an outline that shows where your paper stands. A sentence outline that lists main points is better than a topic outline, but any outline is better than none. It should show which parts you have drafted, which you are relatively sure of, and which are only guesses. If you are at the earliest stages of research and cannot formulate an outline, sketch your specific topic, either in a paragraph or two or as a list of topics you have begun to investigate.

Next, prepare a clean copy of your draft (if you have one), marked to show its key elements. Bring two copies (double-spaced). One should be clean, ready for the writing lab staff to mark up. The other you should mark up as follows:

1. Make sure that you understand the assignment, and are able to explain it to the writing lab staff.
2. Draw a line between the introduction and the body of the paper and another between the end of the body of your paper and your conclusion. If the body is long enough to divide into two- or three-page sized sections, put lines there as well.
3. Highlight the main point of your paper. If you have divided the paper into sections, highlight the main point of each section.
4. Circle the words near the end of the introduction that name the key concepts you will develop as themes in the rest of the paper. Then circle those words and words similar to them throughout.
5. If you have divided your paper into sections three pages or longer, repeat steps 2 and 3 for each section.

6. Mark in the margins any problem areas where drafting was particularly difficult or where you are dissatisfied with what you've done.

Be sure to take your assignment sheet and anything else you have in writing from your instructor. The writing lab staff can't help you solve every problem, but there are times when the opportunity simply to talk out loud about your problem will help.

Before you leave, get a plan of action *in writing*. Many students discover that while they are talking about their work, they think they understand what to do next, but that plan evaporates a few hours later when they sit down to work. Before you leave the lab, write a plan of specific ways to improve your paper. If the writing lab staff does not recommend specific actions, ask, so you can get a plan that you can understand and can follow.

The pitfall to avoid at all costs

In an effort to find your way out of a block as you draft, you may risk doing the worst thing that can happen to a writer. In the heat of drafting, you may find yourself confidently plowing through your notes, finding good things to say, filling up the page or screen with lots of good words. *But those words belong to someone else.*

Plagiarism is a topic that embarrasses everyone, except, perhaps, the successful intentional plagiarist. But every researcher needs to give it serious thought. Some acts of plagiarism are deliberate. No one needs help to know that it is wrong to buy a term paper, copy a paper from a fraternity's files, or use large chunks of an article as though the words were your own. But most plagiarism is inadvertent, because the writer was not careful when taking notes because he does not understand what plagiarism is, or because he is not conscious of what he is doing.

You *don't* plagiarize when you ask the writing lab staff for writing advice. The writing lab is a service provided by the college to help you improve your writing. But you *do* plagiarize when, intentionally or not, you use someone else's words or ideas but fail to credit that person:

- You plagiarize when you paste material from the Internet into your own text without attribution (that may *feel* less like plagiarism than copying from a print source, but it is appropriating someone else's work and thus is plagiarism nonetheless).
- You plagiarize even when you do credit an author but use his or her exact words without so indicating with quotation marks or block indentation.
- You also plagiarize when you use words so close to those in your source, that if your work were placed next to the source, it would be obvious that you could not have written what you did without the source at your elbow.

When accused of plagiarism, some writers claim, "I must have somehow memorized the passage. When I wrote it, I certainly thought it was my own." That excuse convinces very few.

When you want to use the exact words you find in a source, stop and think. Then,

- type a quotation mark before and after, or create a block quotation;
- record the words *exactly* as they are in the source (if you change anything use square brackets and ellipses to indicate changes);
- cite the source.

Those are the first three principles of using the words of others: unambiguously indicate where the words of your source begin and end, get the words right (or indicate changes), and cite the source. Omit the first or last step, and intentionally or not, you plagiarize. You also plagiarize when you use someone else's ideas and you do not credit that person.

It is trickier to define plagiarism when you summarize and paraphrase. They are not the same, but they blend so seamlessly that you may not even be aware when you are drifting from summary into paraphrase, then across the line into plagiarism. No matter your intention, close paraphrase may count as plagiarism, even when you cite the source.

For example, this next paragraph plagiarizes the last one, because it paraphrases it so closely:

It is harder to describe plagiarism when summary and paraphrase are involved, because while they differ, their boundaries blur, and a writer may not know that she has crossed the boundary from summary to paraphrase and from paraphrase to plagiarism. Regardless of intention, a close paraphrase is plagiarism, even when the source is cited.

This is borderline plagiarism:

Because it is difficult to distinguish the border between summary and paraphrase, a writer can drift dangerously close to plagiarism without knowing it, even when the writer cites a source and never meant to plagiarize.

The words in both these versions track the original so closely that any reader would recognize that the writer could have written them only while *simultaneously* reading the original. Here is a summary of that paragraph, just this side of the border:

According to Williams and McEnerney, writers sometimes plagiarize unconsciously because they think they are summarizing, when in fact they are closely paraphrasing, an act that counts as plagiarism, even when done unintentionally and sources are cited (p. xx).

Here is a simple test for inadvertent plagiarism: be conscious of where your eyes are as you put words on paper or on a screen. If your eyes are on your source at the same moment your fingers are flying across the keyboard, you risk doing something that weeks, months, even years later could result in your public humiliation. Whenever you use a source extensively, compare your page with the original. If you think someone could run her finger along your sentences and find synonyms or synonymous phrases for words in the original in roughly the same order, try again. You are least likely to plagiarize inadvertently if as you write, you keep your eyes not on your source, but on the screen or on your own page, and you report what your source has to say after those words have filtered through your own understanding of them.

We take plagiarism seriously because it is a kind of theft: By not acknowledging a source, the plagiarist steals some of the little reward that an academic community has to offer, the enhanced respect that a researcher spends a lifetime trying to earn. The plagiarist steals from his community of classmates by

making the quality of their work seem worse by comparison and then perhaps steals again by taking one of the few good grades reserved to reward those who do good work. By choosing not to learn the skills that research can teach him, the plagiarist not only compromises his own education but steals from the larger community that devotes its resources to training students to do reliable work later.

But plagiarism is worse than mere theft, because like theft among friends, it shreds the fabric of community. When intellectual thievery becomes common, the community grows suspicious, then distrustful, then cynical--*So who cares? everyone does it.* Members of the community then have to worry as much about not being tricked as about teaching and learning.

Good luck

Here at the end, we can say only if you are like many students no part of your education will prove more useful to you than your ability to write well and quickly. When we have asked graduates of the College what they value most about their education here, they invariably mention three things: the ability to think critically, the ability to solve problems, and the ability to write well. We believe that these three things are part of the same thing.

Appendix A

How are things different at Grinnell? Some local notes

by Samuel A. Rebelsky

The preceding sections were written by faculty at the University of Chicago for students at the University of Chicago. While many things are the same at all institutions, you will find that some things are different at Grinnell and in this course. Please consider these differences as you reflect on the earlier sections.

Some differences

At Chicago, writing assistance is generally handled on a fairly “local” basis. Each dorm has a writing tutor with regular hours, and some courses also have a designated writing tutor. These tutors are typically graduate students from disciplines with some emphasis on writing. At Grinnell, writing assistance is primarily handled at both a local basis (through the faculty) and a college-wide basis (through the writing lab). Previous sections have been updated to reflect some of these differences, but references to the Chicago system may still exist.

Chicago and Grinnell also have somewhat different perspectives on early writing experiences. Chicago students are rarely called on to write papers of less than five pages. Grinnell students often begin with one and two page papers. Neither system is necessarily better, but you need to realize that the previous sections’ emphasis on five page papers may not always apply.

Recommendations

At Grinnell, we expect our students to produce a serious draft of every paper at least a few days before the paper is due. By serious, we mean one that is more than just free-writing or a set of notes. Your serious draft should be a significant and serious effort at reaching your final paper. That means it should be good enough that you’d be comfortable turning it in to your faculty member if you are unable to make future changes (but you should tmake changes).

Once you have reached this stage, you may take advantage of the faculty member who teaches your course, the staff of the writing lab, or even your advisor. In all cases, your preparation of a serious draft makes it easier for you and those helping you to bring your paper to the high level we expect at Grinnell.

Of course, you may also consult with faculty and the writing lab staff earlier in the writing process. (The writing lab staff note that you may visit at any stage of writing.) If you are stuck on an assignment, you should feel free to make an appointment to visit and consider techniques for approaching the assignment. If you’ve gotten started, but are having difficulty with some part, you should also feel free to get some help.

Often, though, you should begin by taking advantage of a group of fellow students. We strongly recommend that you develop a set of *trusted readers*: colleagues who you can trust to read your work, give you helpful criticisms, but not make you feel uncomfortable. Note that there are three attributes you should look for in these readers: They should (1) be willing to read your work, even if it is not always in

an ideal state; (2) have the ability to give real critiques of your work, critiques that are both detailed and that don't pull punches; and (3) be people you trust enough as colleagues that you feel comfortable receiving such critiques from them. It takes some time to develop such a group. Begin early, with your colleagues in tutorial.

Academic honesty

Although Grinnell's high standards of academic honesty suggest that you should cite whenever possible, you typically need not cite your editors. (If you write a professional paper, common courtesy suggests that you should cite them in an acknowledgements section.) However, if you get a significant idea from a colleague during the writing of a paper, many faculty will expect you to cite that idea in the text. When following APA format, include an in-text citation of the form

(Name. Personal Communication. Date.)

For example,

(Friend, U. R. A. Personal Communication. August 15, 2005)

Because using the writing lab or friends as editors means the work you submit is not completely your own, different faculty members may have different perspectives on how much help students may receive from the writing lab or from peers. Make sure to check with them before obtaining help. In my classes, feel free to get as much editing help as you feel you need, but also make sure to cite any significant contributions of ideas your editors make.

Labeling your papers

At the top of most papers, you should include a variety of contextual information, including the author (that is, your name or names), the date, the course, the instructor, and the assignment. For example

Jane Doe 15 August 2005 Onerous Ownership? Intellectual Property in the 21st Century Mr. Rebelsky

Formatting, revisited

In "The last tasks: proofreading and formatting", Williams and McEnerney give a number of recommendations for formatting your papers. In this class, you may necessarily violate a number of their recommendations, partially because we will be posting information to a Wiki later in the semester. When working on the Wiki,

1. Whenever possible, do not assign a type font to the text. The font choice should be up to the reader. While American readers tend to find serif fonts easier to read over long stretches, European readers tend to find sans-serif fonts easier to read.
2. Do not assign a font size to the text. Again, this should be up to the reader.
3. Do not attempt to double-space the text. Double-spacing doesn't work well on the Web.