

# 1 Academic Writing

1a

When you write in college, you work within a community of teachers and students who have specific aims and expectations. The basic aim of this community—whether in English, psychology, biology, or some other discipline—is to contribute to and build knowledge through questioning, research, and communication. The academic disciplines do differ in their conventions for writing (see Chapter 3, p. 31), but many academic papers share the features discussed in this chapter.

## 1a The writing situation

Any writing you do for others occurs in a **writing situation** that both limits and clarifies your choices. You will most likely have an assignment, and to fulfill it you will communicate something about a subject for a specific reason to a particular audience of readers.

### Assignment

When you receive a writing assignment, study its wording and requirements:

- **What does your writing assignment tell you to do?** Words such as *discuss*, *report*, *describe*, and *analyze* ask you to explain something about your subject. Words such as *argue* and *evaluate* ask you to make a case for your opinion.
- **What kind of research is required?** An assignment may specify the kinds of sources you are expected to consult.
- **What other requirements do you have to meet?** When is the assignment due? How long should your writing be? What format does the assignment require—a printed paper? a digital project? an oral presentation?

### Subject

Most writing assignments give at least some latitude for choice of subject. Consider the following questions to find your approach:

- **What subject do you want to know more about?** A good subject is one that interests you. Consider something that you are willing to learn more about, even something you care about.

- **Is your subject limited enough?** Choose a subject that you can cover in the space and time you have, or narrow a broad subject by breaking it into as many specific subjects as you can think of.
- **Is your subject suitable for the assignment?** Review the assignment to ensure that the subject fulfills the requirements.

### Purpose

For most academic writing, your general purpose will be mainly **explanatory** or mainly **argumentative**: you will aim to clarify your subject so that readers understand it as you do, or you will aim to gain readers' agreement with a debatable idea about the subject. The following questions can help you think about your purpose:

- **What aim does your assignment specify?** For instance, does it ask you to explain something or to argue a point?
- **Why are you writing?** What do you want your work to accomplish?
- **How can you best achieve your purpose?**

### Audience

Most academic writing assignments specify or assume an audience of educated readers or even experts in your subject. Use the questions below to adapt your writing to the needs and expectations of your readers:

- **Who will read your writing?** What can you assume your readers already know and think about your subject? How can your assumptions guide your writing so that you tell readers neither too little nor too much?
- **What are readers' expectations?** For the discipline in which you're writing, what claims and evidence, organization, language, and format will readers look for?
- **What is your relationship to your readers?** How formal or informal should your writing be?
- **What do you want readers to do or think after they read your writing?**

### Genre

Writers express their ideas in familiar **genres**, or types of writing—for instance, essays or letters to the editor. In academic writing, the genre conventions of each discipline help to further the discipline's aims. Be sure you understand any requirements relating to genre:

- **Is a particular genre assigned?** An assignment that asks you to write an analysis, an argument, or a report has specified the genre.

- **What are the conventions of the genre?** Your instructor and/or your textbook will probably outline the requirements for you.
- **What flexibility do you have?** Within their conventions, most genres still allow plenty of room for your own approach and voice.

1b

## 1b Thesis and organization

Much academic writing is organized to develop a main idea, or thesis.

### Thesis

The **thesis** is the central idea or claim in a piece of writing: the entire work develops and supports that idea. Often, a thesis starts out as a question that guides a writer's research and drafting. In the final paper, the thesis usually appears in a **thesis statement**.

Here are pairs of starting questions and eventual thesis statements from various disciplines:

<b>Literature question</b>	What makes William Shakespeare's comedy "The Merchant of Venice" fascinating?
<b>Thesis statement</b>	Shakespeare's comedy "The Merchant of Venice" is fascinating because it portrays a clash between an emotional and an intellectual character.
<b>History question</b>	How did World War II impact the lives of people in Japan?
<b>Thesis statement</b>	The unfortunate bombings of over 66 Japanese cities including Hiroshima and Nagasaki not only destroyed over 40% of the urban habitation but also rendered 30% of the people homeless.
<b>Psychology question</b>	To what extent is drug abuse prevalent among children living in emotionally disturbed households?
<b>Thesis statement</b>	The survey states that over 28% of the children hailing from emotionally disturbed households were found to be addicted to psychotropic drugs.
<b>Biology question</b>	Does the same physical exertion have the same or different effects on the blood pressure of men and women?
<b>Thesis statement</b>	After the same physical exertion, the average blood pressure of female participants increased significantly more than the average blood pressure of male participants.

Most of the thesis statements you write in college papers will be argumentative or explanatory. Of the preceding

examples, the first two are argumentative: the writers mainly want to convince readers of something. The last two examples are explanatory: the writers mainly want to explain something to readers.

**ESL** In some other cultures it is considered unnecessary or impolite for a writer to express an opinion or to state his or her main idea outright. When writing in American academic situations, you can assume that your readers expect a clear expression of what you think. They will not consider you rude if you give your opinion.

### Organization

An effective paper has a recognizable shape—an arrangement of parts that guides readers, helping them to see how ideas and details relate to one another and contribute to the thesis. Some writers like to use an informal or a formal outline to organize their ideas and plan their writing before they start to draft. An informal outline includes key points and may suggest specific evidence. A formal outline uses letters and numbers with indentions to show the relative importance of ideas and their support. Either type can show patterns of general and specific ideas, suggest proportions, and highlight gaps and overlaps in coverage.

Below is the thesis statement and informal outline for the student paper on pages 27–31.

#### Thesis

This campus needs a program to increase awareness and prevention of cyberbullying and to support its victims.

#### Informal outline

##### Introduction

- Roommate's experience with cyberbullying
- New program needed on this campus (thesis)

##### Body

- Published research on cyberbullying
- Campus survey on cyberbullying
- Proposal for a new program on this campus
- Possible objections to proposed new program

##### Conclusion

- Argument for new approach to cyberbullying
- Summary of benefits of proposed new program

Many academic papers follow the pattern above in having an **introduction**, which presents the subject and often states the thesis; the **body**, which contains the substance of the paper; and a **conclusion**, which ties together the parts of the body. Beyond this basic scheme, organi-

zation in academic writing varies widely depending on the discipline and the type of writing. Whatever framework you're using, develop your ideas as simply and directly as your purpose and content allow. And clearly relate sentences, paragraphs, and sections so that readers always know where they are in the paper's development.

### 1c Evidence and research

The thesis statement of your paper will be based on evidence, drawn sometimes from your own experience but more usually from research. Ask these questions to determine the kind of research you may have to do:

- **What kinds of evidence will best suit your writing and support your thesis?** Depending on the discipline you're writing in and the type of paper you're working on, you'll use a mix of facts, examples, and expert opinions to support your ideas. See page 24 for more on evidence in argument papers and pages 31–33 for more on evidence in the disciplines.
- **Does your assignment require research?** Will you need to consult sources or conduct interviews, surveys, or experiments?
- **Even if research is not required, what information do you need to develop your subject?** How will you obtain it?
- **What documentation style should you use to cite your sources?** See pages 167–69 on source documentation in the academic disciplines.

**ESL** Research serves different purposes in some other cultures than it does in the United States. For instance, students in some cultures may be expected to consult only well-known sources and to adhere closely to the sources' ideas. In US colleges and universities, students are expected to look for relevant and reliable sources, whether well known or not, and to use sources mainly to support their own ideas.

### 1d Synthesis

Academic writing often requires you to read, analyze, and expand on the work of others. Using **synthesis**, you select and respond to others' ideas and information in order to support your own conclusions. The following example uses a pattern common in academic writing: it opens with the writer's own idea, gives and interprets evidence from a source, and ends with the writer's own conclusion.

## 18 Academic writing

Thomas Sowell claims that government money goes to waste on student loans because many recipients do not need or deserve the help. But his portrait of recipients is questionable: it is based on averages, some statistical and some not, but averages are often deceptive. For example, Sowell cites college graduates' low average debt of \$7,000 to \$9,000 (131) without acknowledging the fact that many students' debt is much higher or giving the full range of statistics. Similarly, Sowell dismisses "heart-rending stories" of "the low-income student with a huge debt" as "not at all typical" (132), yet he invents his own exaggerated version of the typical loan recipient: an affluent slacker ("Rockefellers" and "Vanderbilts") for whom college is a "place to hang out for a few years" sponging off the government, while his or her parents clear a profit from making use of the loan program (132). Although such students (and parents) may well exist, are they really typical? Sowell does not offer any data one way or the other—for instance, how many loan recipients come from each income group, what percentage of loan funds go to each group, how many loan recipients receive significant help from their parents, and how many receive none. Together, Sowell's statements and omissions cast doubt on the argument that government loans are wasted on well-to-do and undeserving students.

Writer's idea

Evidence

Interpretation

Evidence

Evidence

Interpretation

Writer's conclusion

### 1e Responsible use of sources

You are free to borrow from sources *if* you do so responsibly, not misinterpreting or distorting what they say and not **plagiarizing**, or presenting sources' ideas and information as if they were your own.

**ESL** Cultures have varying definitions of a writer's responsibilities to sources. In some cultures, for instance, a writer need not cite sources that are well known. In the United States, however, a writer is obligated to cite all sources.

### Perspective on sources

Considering your own perspective on a subject before you start to research will allow you to recognize others' views and to treat them fairly in your writing, whether or not you agree with them.

- **Gauge what you already know and think about your subject.** If you know your own mind before you look at sources, you'll be able to reflect on how they reinforce, contradict, or expand on your knowledge.
- **Evaluate sources carefully.** You need to recognize and weigh other writers' biases and positions and consider

multiple perspectives. See pages 143–52 for a discussion of evaluating sources.

- **Treat sources fairly.** Be careful not to misrepresent the source author’s meaning when quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing.

1f

### Handling of sources

You can avoid plagiarism by keeping close track of the sources you consult, the ideas that influence your thinking, and the words and sentences you borrow.

- **Keep track of source information.** Always record the publication information of sources you consult: author, title, date, and so on. See page 131 for a list of what to record.
- **Be careful with quotations.** If you cut and paste a portion of a source into your document, put quotation marks around it so that you don’t mix up your words and the source’s words. For more on quoting sources, see page 156.
- **Use your own words in paraphrases and summaries.** You will be less likely to use the source author’s words if you look away from the source while you write down what you remember from it. You must still cite the source (see below). For more on summarizing and paraphrasing sources, see pages 154–56.

### Citation of sources

As you draft, be conscious of when you’re using source information and be conscientious about clearly marking where the borrowed material came from. In your final draft, you’ll use a particular style of citation within your text to refer to a detailed list of sources at the end.

Most disciplines have a preferred style of source citation. For lists of disciplines’ style guides, see pages 168–69. For documentation guidelines and samples, see pages 170–207 (MLA style), 211–24 (APA style), 228–38 (Chicago style), and 241–47 (CSE style).

## 1f Language

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

## 1g

For academic writing, use these guidelines:

- **Follow the conventions of standard American English for grammar and usage.** These conventions are described in guides to the dialect, such as this handbook.
- **Use a standard vocabulary,** not one that only some groups understand, such as slang, an ethnic or regional dialect, or another language.
- **Create some distance between yourself and the reader.** Generally, prefer the third person (*he, she, it, they*), not the first (*I, we*) or the second (*you*).
- **Write authoritatively and neutrally.** Express yourself confidently, not timidly, and refrain from hostility or overt enthusiasm.

### Checklist for academic language

Rapid communication by e-mail and text or instant messaging encourages some informalities that are inappropriate in academic writing. Check your academic papers especially for the following:

- **Complete sentences:** Make sure every sentence has a subject and a verb. Avoid fragments such as *Observing the results* and *After the meeting*. For more on fragments, see pages 89–91.
- **Punctuation:** Use standard punctuation between and within sentences. Check especially for missing commas and apostrophes. See pages 95–111.
- **Spelling:** Use correct, standard spellings, avoiding spellings such as *enuf* for *enough*, *cuz* for *because*, *nite* for *night*, *u* for *you*, and *wl* for *will*. See pages 115–17.
- **Capital letters:** Use capital letters at the beginnings of sentences, for proper nouns and adjectives, and in titles. See pages 118–20.
- **Standard abbreviations:** Use only conventional abbreviations for the discipline you are writing in. Avoid short forms such as *2* for *to* or *too*; *b4* for *before*; *bc* for *because*; *ur* for *your*, *you are*, or *you're*; and *+* or *&* for *and*. See pages 122–23.

### 1g Revision

In revising, you adopt a critical eye toward your writing, examining it as readers will for ideas and evidence, their relationships and arrangement, and the degree to which they work or don't work for your thesis.

Whenever possible, let a draft rest for a while to get some distance from it and perhaps to gather comments from others, such as your classmates or instructor. Then revise the draft with the following checklist, focusing on the effectiveness of the whole. (Leave correctness and other specific issues for editing, discussed opposite.)



## Checklist for revising academic writing

1h

### Assignment (p. 11)

- How have you responded to the assignment for this writing?
- Do your subject, purpose, and genre meet the requirements of the assignment?

### Purpose, audience, and genre (pp. 14–15)

- What is your purpose? Does it conform to the assignment?
- Who are your readers? Will your purpose be clear to them?
- How does your writing conform to the conventions of the genre you are writing in?

### Thesis (p. 15)

- What is your thesis, or central claim?
- Where in the paper does your thesis become clear?

### Development

- What are the main points supporting the thesis?
- How well do the facts, examples, and other evidence support each main point?

### Use of sources

- Have you used sources to support—not substitute for—your own ideas? (See pp. 17, 18–19, 152–53.)
- Have you integrated borrowed material into your own sentences? (See pp. 154–61.)
- Have you fully cited each use of a source? (See pp. 161–69.)

### Unity

- What does each paragraph contribute to the thesis?
- Within paragraphs, what does each sentence contribute to the paragraph's idea? (This paragraph idea is often expressed in a **topic sentence**.)

### Coherence

- Will the organization be clear to readers?
- How smoothly does the paper flow?
- Have you used transitions to link paragraphs and sentences? (See p. 269 for a list of transitional expressions, such as *first*, *however*, and *in addition*.)

## 1h Editing and proofreading

Much of this book concerns editing—tightening or clarifying sentences, polishing words, repairing mistakes in grammar and punctuation. Leave this work until after revision so that your content and organization are set before you tinker with your expression. For editing guidelines, see the lists on pages 42 (effective sentences),

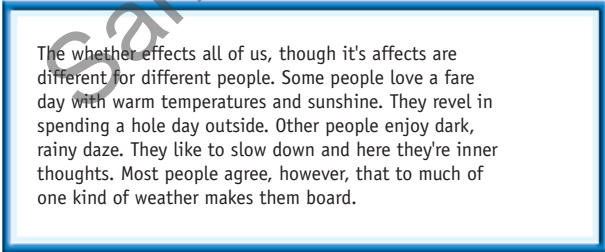
62 (grammatical sentences), 94 (punctuation), and 114 (spelling and mechanics).

Most writers find that they spot errors better on paper than on a computer screen, so edit a printout if you can. And be sure to proofread your final draft before you submit it, even if you have used a spelling checker or similar aid (see below).

### Spelling checkers

A spelling checker can be a great ally: it will flag words that are spelled incorrectly and will usually suggest alternative spellings that resemble what you've typed. However, this ally has limitations:

- **The checker may flag a word that you've spelled correctly**, just because the word does not appear in its dictionary.
- **The checker may suggest incorrect alternatives**. Before you accept any highlighted suggestion from the checker, you should verify that the word is actually what you intend. Consult an online or printed dictionary when you aren't sure of the checker's recommendations.
- **Most important, a spelling checker will not flag words that appear in its dictionary but you have misused**. The paragraph in the following screen shot contains eleven errors that a spelling checker failed to catch. Can you spot all of them?



The whether effects all of us, though it's affects are different for different people. Some people love a fare day with warm temperatures and sunshine. They revel in spending a hole day outside. Other people enjoy dark, rainy daze. They like to slow down and here they're inner thoughts. Most people agree, however, that to much of one kind of weather makes them board.

### Grammar/style checkers

Grammar/style checkers can flag incorrect grammar or punctuation and wordy or awkward sentences. You may be able to customize a checker to suit your needs and habits as a writer—for instance, instructing it to look for problems with subject-verb agreement, passive verbs, or apostrophes in plural nouns.

Like spelling checkers, however, grammar/style checkers are limited:

- **They miss many errors** because they are not yet capable of analyzing language in all its complexity.
- **They often question passages that don't need editing**, such as an appropriate passive verb or a deliberate and emphatic use of repetition.

2a

Each time a grammar/style checker questions something, you must determine whether a change is needed at all and what change will be most effective, and you must read your papers carefully on your own to find any errors the program missed.

## 2 Writing Arguments

**Argument** is writing that attempts to solve a problem, introduce and defend a particular interpretation, shape or change readers' opinions, or move readers to action. Many of the academic papers you write in college courses will be arguments.

### 2a Elements of argument

All arguments have four main elements: subject, claims, evidence, and assumptions.

#### Subject

A subject for argument should meet the following requirements:

- **It can be disputed:** reasonable people can disagree over it.
- **It will be disputed:** it is controversial.
- **It is narrow enough:** it can be researched and argued in the space and time available.

#### Claims

**Claims** are statements that require support. In an argument, the central claim is the thesis, asserted outright in the thesis statement. (See p. 15.) An argumentative thesis statement is always an opinion, a judgment that you have made based on facts and that is arguable on the basis of facts. It may be one of the following:

- **A claim about past or present reality**, such as *Academic cheating increases with students' economic insecurity*.

- **A claim of value**, such as *Considering the hike in school-  
fees earlier in the year, a midterm hike is unjustified.*
- **A recommendation for a course of action**, such as *The  
safety of women travelers at night could be ensured if  
law enforcement implements night patrols.*

The backbone of the argument consists of specific claims that support the thesis statement. These claims may also state opinions, or they may state facts or beliefs.

### Evidence

**Evidence** shows the validity of your claims. There are several kinds of evidence:

- **Facts**: statements whose truth can be verified.
- **Statistics**: facts expressed as numbers.
- **Examples**: specific instances of the point being made.
- **Expert opinions**: the judgments formed by authorities on the basis of their own analyses of the facts.

Evidence must be reliable to be convincing. Ask these questions about your evidence:

- **Is it accurate**—trustworthy, exact, undistorted?
- **Is it relevant**—authoritative, pertinent, and current?
- **Is it representative**—true to its context, neither underrepresenting nor overrepresenting any element of the sample it's drawn from?
- **Is it adequate**—plentiful and specific?

### Assumptions

An **assumption** is an opinion, a principle, or a belief that ties evidence to claims: the assumption explains why a particular piece of evidence is relevant to a particular claim. For example:

<b>Claim</b>	The college needs a new chemistry lab.
<b>Evidence (in part)</b>	The testimony of chemistry professors.
<b>Assumption</b>	Chemistry professors are reliable evaluators of the present lab's quality.

Assumptions are always present in arguments, even when they are not stated. In writing an argument, you need to recognize your own assumptions. If you think that readers may not agree with an assumption, you should make it explicit and establish its validity.

### 2b Balance in argument

Balance is essential if an argument is to establish common ground between you and your readers. You need to

make appropriate appeals to readers and treat opposing views fairly.

## Appeals

In presenting your claims and evidence, you'll make three kinds of appeals to readers:

- **A *rational* appeal calls on readers' sense of logic.** It requires reasonable claims and sound evidence to support the claims.
- **An *emotional* appeal calls on readers' feelings.** You strengthen support for your claims by encouraging readers to feel empathy, pride, anger, or some other emotion.
- **An *ethical* appeal is the sense you give of being reasonable, fair, and competent.**

Appeals require balance. Emotional appeals in particular can be risky if they misjudge readers' feelings or are inappropriate to the argument (for example, creating fear to force agreement with a claim).

## Opposing views

If your thesis is arguable, then others can provide their own evidence to support different views. Dealing with these views fairly, giving them their due, shows your responsibility and gives you a chance to deal with objections your readers may have. Find out what the opposing views are and what evidence supports them.

A common way to handle opposing views is to state them, refute those you can, grant the validity of others, and demonstrate why, despite their validity, the opposing views are less compelling than your own.

Another approach emphasizes the search for common ground. In a **Rogerial argument** you start by showing that you understand readers' views and by establishing points on which you and readers agree and disagree. Creating a connection in this way can be especially helpful when you expect readers to resist your argument.

## 2c Organization of argument

Argument papers all include the same parts:

- **Introduction:** Running a paragraph or two, the introduction establishes the significance of the subject, provides background, and generally includes the thesis statement. If readers are likely to resist the thesis statement, you may want to put it later in the paper, after the evidence.

2d

- **Body:** In one or more paragraphs, the body develops each claim supporting the thesis with sound evidence.
- **Response to opposing views:** Depending on what you think readers need, this response may come early or late in the paper or may be covered point by point throughout.
- **Conclusion:** Usually one paragraph, the conclusion often restates the thesis, summarizes the supporting claims, and makes a final appeal to readers.

## 2d Visual arguments

A visual argument, such as an advertisement, uses an image to engage and convince viewers. The claims, evidence, and assumptions of written arguments also appear in visual arguments, as illustrated by the ad below from the “Army Strong” series that the United States Army runs for recruitment.



**BELIEVING IN YOURSELF IS STRONG.  
ACHIEVING WHAT YOU NEVER  
BELIEVED POSSIBLE IS ARMY STRONG.**

There's strong. And then there's Army Strong.  
There is no limit to the things you can learn from one of over 150 career opportunities available to you in the Army. You can also receive money for college.  
Find out more at [goarmy.com/strong](http://goarmy.com/strong).

Sergeant James Jamison  
©2007. Paid for by the United States Army. All rights reserved.

**U.S. ARMY**  
**ARMY STRONG.**

Advertisement by the United States Army