

Chapter 1

WRITING AND THINKING

You are not likely to produce clear writing unless you have first done some clear thinking, and thinking can't be hurried. It follows that the most important step you can take is to leave yourself enough time to think. Psychologists have shown that we can't always solve a difficult problem by "putting our mind to it"—by determined reasoning. Sometimes when we're stuck it's best to take a break, sleep on it, and let the subconscious or creative part of our brain take over for a while. Very often a period of relaxation will produce a new approach or solution. Just remember that leaving time for creative reflection isn't the same thing as sitting around listening to the stereo until inspiration strikes out of the blue.

INITIAL STRATEGIES

Writing is about making choices: choices about what ideas you want to present and how you want to present them. Practice makes the decisions easier to come by, but no matter how fluent you become, with each piece of writing you will still have to choose.

You can narrow the field of choice from the start if you realize that you are not writing for just anybody, anywhere, for no particular reason. With any writing you do, it's always sound strategy to ask yourself two basic questions:

- What is the purpose of this piece of writing?
- What is the reader like?

Your first reaction may be, "Well, I'm writing for my instructor to satisfy a course requirement," but that's not specific enough. To be useful, your answers have to be precise.

THINK ABOUT THE PURPOSE

Depending on the assignment, your purpose in writing an essay may be any one (or more) of the following:

- to show your knowledge of a topic or text;
- to show that you understand certain terms or theories;
- to show that you can do independent research;

SYMBOLS FOR COMMON ERRORS

NOTE: If any of the following markings appear on one of your essays or reports, consult Chapters 11, 12, and 14 or the Glossary for help.

<i>ag's</i>	agreement of subject and verb
<i>amb</i>	ambiguity
<i>awk</i>	awkwardness
<i>cap</i>	capitalization
<i>cs</i>	comma splice
<i>dang</i>	dangling modifier (or dm)
<i>d</i>	diction
<i>gv</i>	grammar or usage
<i>mod</i>	misplaced modifier
<i>n</i>	new paragraph
<i> </i>	parallelism
<i>ref</i>	pronoun reference
<i>p</i>	punctuation
<i>quot</i>	quotation marks
<i>rep</i>	repetition
<i>ro</i>	run-on sentence
<i>frag</i>	sentence fragment
<i>ss</i>	sentence structure
<i>sp</i>	spelling
<i>split</i>	split infinitive
<i>sub</i>	subordination
<i>t</i>	tense
<i>trans</i>	transition
<i>trns</i>	transpose (change order of letters or words)
<i>w</i>	wordy
<i>w/w</i>	wrong word

- to show that you can apply a specific theory to new material;
- to demonstrate your ability to evaluate secondary sources;
- to show that you can think critically or creatively.

An assignment designed to see if you have read and understood specific material calls for a different approach from one that's meant to test your critical thinking. In the first case, your approach will tend to be *expository*, with the emphasis on presenting facts. In the second case, you will probably want to structure your essay around a particular argument or assertion that other people might dispute. Your aim in this kind of *argumentative* or *persuasive* essay is to bring your reader around to your point of view. (Argumentative essays are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.)

THINK ABOUT THE READER

Thinking about the reader does *not* mean playing up to the instructor. To convince a particular person that your own views are sound, you have to consider his or her way of thinking. If you are writing a paper on the effects of terrorism for a sociology professor, obviously your analysis will be different from what it would be if you were writing for an economics or history professor. You will have to make specific decisions about the terms you should explain, the background information you should supply, and the details you will need to convince that particular reader. In the same way, if you plan to write a paper defending tax credits for families paying private school tuition and your reader is a big supporter of public education, you will have to anticipate any arguments that he or she may raise so that you can address them. If you don't know who will be reading your paper—your professor, your tutorial leader, or a marker—just imagine someone intelligent, knowledgeable, and interested, skeptical enough to question your ideas but flexible enough to adopt them if your evidence is convincing.

THINK ABOUT THE LENGTH

Before you start writing, you will also need to think about the length of your assignment in relation to the time you have to spend on it. If both the topic and the length are prescribed, it should be fairly easy for you to assess the level of detail required and the amount of research you will need to do. If only the length is prescribed, that restriction will help you decide how broad or how narrow a topic you should choose (see pages 12–14). You should also keep in mind how much the assignment is worth. A paper that is worth 50 per cent of your final grade will merit more of your time and effort than one that is worth only 10 per cent.

THINK ABOUT THE TONE

In everyday writing to friends you probably take a casual tone, but academic writing is usually more formal. Just how formal you need to be will depend on the kind of assignment and instructions you have been given. In some cases—for example, if your psychology professor asks you to describe certain personal experiences in a journal—you may be able to use an informal style. Essays and reports, however, usually require a more formal tone. What kind of style is too informal for most academic work? Here are the main signs:

Use of slang

Although the occasional slang word or phrase may be useful for special effect, frequent use of slang is not acceptable in academic writing. The reason is that slang expressions are usually regional and short-lived. They may mean different things to different groups at different times. (Just think of how widely the meanings of *hot* and *cool* can vary, depending on the circumstances.) In a formal essay, where clarity of expression is important, it's better to use words with well-established meanings that will be understood by the greatest number of readers.

Excessive use of first-person pronouns

Since a formal essay is not a personal outpouring, you want to keep it from becoming *I*-centred. There is no need to begin every sentence with “I think” or “In my view” when the facts or arguments speak for themselves. It's certainly acceptable to use the occasional first-person pronoun if the assignment calls for your point of view—as long as your opinions are backed by evidence. Also, if the choice is between using *I* and creating a tangle of passive constructions (for example, “It is hoped that it can reasonably be concluded, based on the evidence that has been presented, that . . .”), it's almost always better to choose *I*. (A hint: when you do use *I*, it will be less noticeable if you place it in the middle of the sentence rather than at the beginning—a point that is especially useful when writing resumés as well as essays.) Here are some examples of ways to avoid both *I*-centred and unnecessarily passive sentences:

- ✗ Having analyzed the new legislation, I believe it is flawed.
- ✗ The new legislation, having been analyzed, appears to me to be flawed.
- ✓ When analyzed, the new legislation seems flawed.
- ✗ In this essay, Atwood's portrayal of wilderness will be investigated, and the repeated conflict between wilderness and civilization will be discussed.

- ✓ [better] In this essay, I will investigate Atwood's portrayal of nature and discuss the repeated conflict between wilderness and civilization.
- ✓ [best] This essay will investigate Atwood's portrayal of nature and discuss the repeated conflict between nature and civilization.

Frequent use of contractions

Generally speaking, contractions such as *can't* and *isn't* are not suitable for academic writing, although they may be fine for letters or other informal kinds of writing—for example, this handbook. This is not to say that you should avoid using contractions altogether: even the most serious academic writing can sound stilted or unnatural without any contractions at all. Just be sure that when you use contractions in a college or university essay you use them *sparingly*, since excessive use of contractions makes formal writing sound chatty and informal.

Finding a suitable tone for academic writing can be a challenge. The problem with trying to avoid excessive informality is that you may be tempted to go to the other extreme. If your writing sounds stiff or pompous, you may be using too many high-flown phrases, long words, or passive constructions (see Chapter 10). When in doubt, remember that a more formal style is the best option.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING

Whenever you embark on a writing project, try to keep the following guidelines in mind:

- Think about your audience, the reader or readers of your writing.
- Be clear about your subject and your purpose, what it is you hope to achieve.
- Define your terms.
- Include only relevant material; don't pad your writing to achieve a certain number of words.
- Strive for consistency of expression throughout the work.
- Make sure you are accurate in all of your statements, in your analysis and presentation of data, and in your documentation of sources.
- Order your information logically.
- Be simple and clear in expressing your ideas.
- Make sure that your argument is coherent.
- Draw conclusions that are clearly based on your evidence.
- Allow yourself lots of time to work on drafts before completing the final copy.

- Make sure to edit and proofread your work carefully.
- In the chapters that follow we will consider these guidelines in greater detail.

USING BIAS-FREE LANGUAGE

As our concern with political correctness has increased, it has become more important than ever to avoid any element of bias in the language we use—both spoken and written. Just as you give thought to your reader(s) and to the kind of tone you wish to create, you will also want to take pains to use language which steers clear of any suggestion of bias, no matter how unintentional it may be.

The potential for bias is far-reaching, involving gender, race, culture, age, disability, occupation, religion, and socio-economic status. Although our society hasn't come up with ideal solutions in every case, developing an awareness of sensitive issues will help you to avoid using biased language.

GENDER

At one time, it would have been acceptable to refer to a person of either sex as “he”:

If an employee becomes redundant, he will receive a severance package.

But as sensitivity to sexist language has increased, we have become more careful about this use of a generic pronoun. Here are some options for avoiding the problem:

- Use the plural form:
If employees become redundant, they will receive a severance package.
- Use the passive voice:
A severance package will be given to an employee who becomes redundant.
- Restructure the sentence:
An employee who becomes redundant will receive a severance package.
- Use *he or she*, although this is cumbersome and annoying and should be used as a last resort.

Another trouble spot involves gender-specific nouns, such as *stewardess*, *waitress*, or *fireman*. The solution in these cases is to look for gender-free words, for example *flight attendant*, *server*, and *firefighter*.

RACE AND CULTURE

The names used to describe someone's racial or cultural identity often carry with them negative connotations, for example the term *Negro*. The search for neutral language has produced alternatives such as *black* and *coloured*, but these have not been universally accepted as bias-free. We have similar problems with the term *Indian*, with alternatives such as *Aboriginal*, *Native*, and *First Nations* each having its share of critics. The best approach is to find out what the racial or cultural group in question prefers. Even if there isn't an easy answer, being aware of a potential problem is already part of the solution.

There are many other areas where the effort to develop and use neutral language has made an impact. We refer not to *old people* but to *seniors*, and to someone as having *special needs* rather than being *handicapped*. Whatever the situation, be sensitive to the power of the words you use and take the time to search for language that is bias-free.

chapter 2

WRITING AN ESSAY

If you are one of the many students who dread writing an academic essay, you will find that following a few simple steps in planning and organizing will make the task easier—and the result better.

THE PLANNING STAGE

Some students claim they can write essays without any planning at all. On the rare occasions when they succeed, their writing is usually not as spontaneous as it seems; in fact, they have thought or talked a good deal about the subject in advance and have come to the task with some ready-made ideas. More often, students who try to write a lengthy essay without planning just end up frustrated. They get stuck in the middle and don't know how to finish, or they suddenly realize that they're rambling.

In contrast, most writers say that the planning stage is the most important part of the whole process. Certainly the evidence shows that poor planning usually leads to disorganized writing. In the majority of students' essays the single greatest improvement would not be better research or better grammar but better organization.

This insistence on planning doesn't rule out exploratory writing (see page 22). Many people find that the act of writing itself is the best way to generate ideas or overcome writer's block; the hard decisions about organization come after they've put something down on the page. Whether you organize before or after you begin to write, however, at some point you need to plan.

READ PRIMARY MATERIAL

Primary material is the direct evidence—usually books or articles—on which you will base your essay. Surprising as it may seem, the best way to begin working with this material is to give it a fast initial skim. Don't just start reading from cover to cover: first look at the table of contents, scan the index, and read the preface or introduction to get a sense of the author's purpose and plan. Getting an overview will allow you to focus your questions for a more purposeful and analytic second reading. Make no mistake: a superficial reading is not all you