

OVERVIEW

What is Academic Writing?

Academic writing is jumping into an ongoing conversation with other writers who, like you, seek to eliminate myths and advance understanding in their readers. Other writers include not only authors of books and articles but your instructor (in printed lectures) and fellow students (in their papers and online discussions).

Engagement

Your writing should “engage” not just your immediate reader but also the many people who have pursued the conversation. When you write a paper or post a discussion comment, aim to deal with the issues already addressed in the lecture, by students earlier in the discussion, by experts in the discipline of your course (through reading articles), or by any other writers.

Opinions

Everyone is free to have an opinion. In academic writing, some opinions are quite familiar (“The highest value for most people is their family.”) But others may meet objection (“I think Medicare was a big mistake.”) As a general rule, you should give some reasons for any objectionable opinions you express. There are five kinds of reasons to consider:

- **Experience.** Support your opinion by your personal experience. (“I object to our involvement in Iraq because I served there; I spoke to several dozen Muslims, and they all strongly opposed American interference.”)
- **Logic.** Draw logical conclusions or contradictions from certain statements. (“Joe, you say that you are against all killing except in self-defense. Yet further down you seem to support capital punishment.”)
- **Experts.** The opinion of respected experts can support your own view. (“Alan Greenspan, for one, believes that we have no commonly accepted theory of economics.”)

- **Data.** Giving statistical data gives good evidence for your opinion. (“According to a national survey in Canada, one in four women has been assaulted by a current or previous intimate partner.” Reported in Karen Hodges, “Wife Assault: The Findings of a National Survey,” *Juristat*, Vol.1, no. 9, March 2013, 24.)
- **Creative Proposal.** Support a proposal for a new way of approaching a problem. (“If we lower the age for Medicare eligibility by one year every three months, we’ll have national health care in about 12 years—giving ample time for employers to adjust their benefits.”)

Posing Questions

To advance understanding, it is best to avoid “rhetorical” questions and to ask questions for understanding.

Rhetorical questions are used for expressing *concerns* (“Will we allow Congress to continue sitting around like this?”). They are also used for expressing *opinions* (“Is the death penalty immoral? Certainly not in the case of serial killers!”). Notice that rhetorical questions are not really questions in the author’s mind or questions the author proposes to answer further down.

Be careful of questions that, technically speaking, ask for just Yes or No. (“Should all tests in college should be open-book?”) Instead, ask the question in a way that seeks some explanation. (“What criteria are best to determine what tests in college should be open-book.?”)

Questions for understanding are real questions in the author’s mind. The author genuinely seeks an explanation. They usually are posed using the words *What* or *Why* or *How* or *For What Purpose*. The answer to a question for understanding is an *explanation* of what or why or how or for what purpose.

For example, compare these questions:

For Understanding	Rhetorical or Yes/No
<i>What</i> steps are firefighters taking to reduce injuries?	When will our fire departments pay attention to injuries?
<i>How</i> can we use geothermal energy to heat homes?	Can we use geothermal energy to heat homes?

<i>Why</i> is the pollution of our inland lakes growing worse?	Are we ever going to stop polluting our inland lakes?
<i>For what purpose</i> does the college offer so many art courses?	Should the college really be offering so many art courses?

For papers, prefer the questions in the first column and make sure that these are the questions you intend to answer in the paper. Your answer to these questions will seldom be some indisputable fact. Usually your answer will be your opinion, supported by experience, logic, experts, data or a creative proposal.

Protocols

- **Clear.** Your writing should always be clear. Your grammar and spelling should be correct.
- **Fair.** Your engagement should always be fair. Show respect for views you disagree with.
- **Word-Limited.** It is important to observe the word limits in an assignment. It helps your instructors to grade fairly. It also forces you to keep your focus on the assignment directives. In fact, the effort to be concise often reveals some confusion in your own mind that you need to clear up. In any case, you want to avoid irritating your instructor who has a stack of papers to read.

DOCUMENTATION

When you cite the views or words of others, remember that your reader (usually the instructor) is likely interested not only in your ideas but also in the ideas of people you cite. So it is important to "document" your source in a way that makes it easy for your reader to find it. For digital papers, make sure the links work, and that no passwords are involved.

Since academic writing is jumping into an ongoing conversation with other writers, most teachers are not interested in your personal opinions unless they clearly relate to the views of others. They genuinely expect you to rely on other sources, but to do so intelligently. This means using what other sources say to *support* or *contrast* with your own views. This means *not using a quotation to make your point*. Rather, make the point in your own words and

support it with a quote. Also, it should be clear to your reader *how* the source material contributes to your idea, so avoid just pasting quotes without integrating them into your paper.

Here are some strategies for integrating source material:

- Avoid “pasting” citations.

“Pasted” citation:

I believe success usually involves pain. Montaigne believed that we should learn to suffer whatever we cannot avoid (de Botton, 224).

Integrated citation:

I know from first-hand experience what Montaigne himself believed, that we must learn to suffer what we cannot avoid (de Botton, 224).

- Weave quoted text into the logic of your sentence:

The author suggests using “a pricing mechanism that reflects the full social cost,” which may be a viable, long term solution to resource depletion (Simon 1997: 54).

- Use a full independent clause to introduce the source material:
For example:

Morrow (1999, 23) views personal ads as an art form: “The personal ad is like a haiku of self-celebration, a brief solo played on one’s own horn.”

- Use strong lead-in verbs:

Instead of weak lead-in verb such as, “The author says ...” use a verb that conveys the author’s attitude toward the material, as in, “The author *questions* ...” or, “The author *feels strongly* that ...”

Internet Sources

The Internet gives us immediate access to great sources. Unfortunately it also gives us immediate access to unreliable sources. So citations should ensure that your reader is aware of the difference.

Factual material housed in government, university, or encyclopedia sites may be cited without comment. Opinions expressed by recognizable leaders in any field may also be cited without comment.

However, when you cite sources that others may not recognize or that are not juried (reviewed by an editorial group) you must add a comment about the *reliability* of this source, often naming the *sponsors* the site that houses the material. (This applies to any site aimed to sell products or to encourage people to join a club, movement, or religion.)

Be careful of non-juried sites—where anyone can freely post. (Blogs, Wikipedia, etc.) If some non-juried material is particularly relevant, include a comment on the reliability of the source.

If you cite an Internet source where the relevant material is beyond the home page, give readers the exact location. For example:

“... under the subhead, ‘Mood Disorders’”

“... in the paragraph beginning, ‘Much research has been done’”

Rules for Citations

Provide citations whenever you use:

- Direct quotations
- Paraphrases and summaries
- Borrowed ideas
- Facts that are not common knowledge

Direct Quotations

Direct quotations can be an excellent way to support the point you are making in a text. But you must make clear to the reader which words are your own and which are another writer’s.

For direct quotations within a paragraph, you must enclose the quoted material in quotation marks. For longer quotations you may use an indented paragraph without quotation marks, provided that you make it clear that it is a direct quotation. Ilene Dover says this well:

Filching a well-crafted sentence without attribution is a sign of a lazy mind. (Dover, 1973:4)

Use quotation marks and a citation (indicating your source) when you use another writer's exact words even when using only a short phrase:

Jones (2002) described Medicare as "horrendously stupid."

Your quotations should be an integral part of your discussion. Generally, use a direct quote to support a point you make, or provide an example, or provide a memorable quotation. Avoid using direct quotes to thicken a thin argument or to impress your teacher.

Paraphrases and Summaries

Paraphrasing is the rewriting of an author's idea in your own words. Paraphrase rather than quote when you want to present an author's idea but not the author's exact language. But even when you paraphrase, *you must cite the source*. You also must *fully rewrite* the original language and original sentence structure. A common mistake is partial paraphrasing. Do not use the author's exact wording or even the same sentence structure. If you retain even a *short phrase* or a *distinctive word*, use quotation marks.

Notice the difference in these examples of paraphrasing:

Original text:

Descartes introduces the possibility that the world is controlled by a malicious demon who has employed all his energies to deceive him (Lu 24).

Incorrect paraphrase:

Descartes suggests that the world is controlled by an evil demon who may be using his energies to deceive (Lu 24).

What's wrong this paraphrase? Even though the citation is provided, the sentence still has much of the *exact wording* as the original.

Correct paraphrase:

Descartes suggests that the evil power who rules the world may be attempting to mislead him (Lu 24).

Why is this better? The language is fully rewritten, and a citation is provided.

Another correct paraphrase as including a quotation:

Descartes suggests that the evil power who rules the world may be using "all his energies to deceive him" (Lu 24).

Borrowed Material

Acknowledge sources of your ideas even when you don't directly quote the text. Borrowed materials come in many forms. Include a citation when you use:

- Another author's tables, maps, or graphs
- Another author's data, even if using the data for a different purpose
- The organization or logic of another author's argument

These guidelines include the use of reference materials such as encyclopedias and study aids.

These standards apply to academic writing in general. Legally, it is not a violation of copyright to borrow *ideas* without attribution.

Common Knowledge

You do *not* need to cite an idea that is standard information of the discipline, such as material discussed in class or general information your reader knows or can locate easily. Such information is widely available and not disputed.

You *do* need to cite a fact that is not common knowledge. For example: "Moi's election came after a heated succession struggle that allegedly included an assassination plot against Moi himself" (Karimi and Ochieng 1980:109).

Documentation Styles

Each discipline uses a style of documentation that best serves its purposes.

Two styles focus on the *author* because the content is presented as informed opinions, creative viewpoints, or scholarship (biography, cultural study, historical accounts). Readers are interested in "**Who** says this?"

- **MLA.** For arts and humanities. Modern Language Association supports parenthetical citation with author and page number (Flynn 41). Requires a list of references.
- **CMS.** For philosophy, history, cultural studies, and some business and communications materials. The Chicago Manual of Style (University of Chicago Press) prefers footnotes or endnotes, rather than parenthetical citations. It is simpler and more concise than MLA. It may not be necessary to attach a list

of references list if complete information is given in the notes.

The next two focus on the *date* because the content is scientific studies, where discoveries and theories are constantly changing. Readers are interested in "**When** was this discovered/proposed?"

- **APA.** For behavioral and social sciences. American Psychological Association supports author, date, and page (Lugar 1997: 156) when referring to a specific point in a text; they prefer author and date when referring to an entire text (Lugar 1997). Requires a list of references.
- **CSE.** For the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.). The Council of Science Editors supports using one of two possible styles: (1) parenthetical citation with author and year of publication (Beck 1999) and a References list in *alphabetical* order; (2) a superscript number in the text and a list of references in *citation* order.

For course assignments, confirm with your instructor whether you must use a specific documentation style or may use one you prefer. If you're writing for publication, ask your editor which style is preferred and where you can obtain a style sheet.

Taking Notes

The failure to clearly cite an original author often starts in this note-taking stage. You can save yourself trouble by taking good notes. As you do your research, copy quotations exactly as they appear, and record all the information you will need for citations and a list of references. Also, distinguish between paraphrases and direct quotations. Some writers use only direct quotations when taking notes and decide later whether or not to paraphrase. If using an on-line source, you may cut and paste text directly into your own draft, but be sure to cite the source. Be conscientious and consistent in whatever note-taking strategy you use.

RESPONSIBLE AUTHORSHIP

Because you are engaging other writers in an ongoing conversation, it's important that your reader knows which materials are yours and which are borrowed. So whenever you cite an outside source, you must give sufficient information to enable others to find it.

Failure to give sufficient information about sources may be intentional, which is a serious breach of professional conduct. Or the failure may be unintentional, which still not acceptable. Both failures are sometimes defined as “plagiarism.” SHU's official definition is:

... failure to give credit for the use of material from outside sources, including the Internet. It includes, but is not limited to, verbatim use of a quote without quotation marks and adequate documentation, submission of a paper prepared by another person as one's own work, using the ideas, facts, words, or data of someone else and claiming them as your own, or not documenting ideas, facts, words, or data gathered during research. (*Siena Heights University Undergraduate Catalog: 2004-2006*, p. 168)

Texts borrowed verbatim from others without clearly indicating they are direct quotes are not acceptable in academic papers. Colleges regard this as a serious matter because the exact wording of passages is evidence of the depth of a writer's thinking and hard work. Students who include passages without letting the reader know that the exact wording was the work of someone else violate standards of intellectual honesty and often receive a grade higher than they deserve.

In college, intentionally presenting someone else's work as your own is grounds for failing a class. If you are uncertain whether you need to reference an outside source, play it safe and include the reference. It is at the instructor's discretion whether you will be permitted to redo the assignment. In that event, the grade will be lowered.

Be aware that Siena Heights subscribes to an originality-detection service that is integrated with the eCollege platform.

EVALUATION

Below are general guidelines on how papers you submit will be evaluated. Grades may be further reduced for poor organization, unclear writing, and for errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. They may also be reduced for unfair or inflammatory statements.

Inadequate (D): The assigned issues are not addressed. Or your treatment gives opinions without support.

Adequate (C): You just skim the surface of the assigned issues. Documentation of the words or views of others is incorrect or missing.

Very Good (B): You explore the assigned issue in depth. You support your opinions. You make clear reference to course

materials (lecture, readings, discussion) when your concepts are either supported by or are in opposition to them. Documentation of the words or views of others is correct and complete.

Outstanding (A): You also move the discussion forward by critical thinking, by familiarity with additional sources, or by adding information relevant to the assigned issue.

*The above materials were taken from commonly available guidelines and from guidelines developed by teachers in the College of Professional Studies.
– Tad Dunne*