The Grinnell College Guide to

Writing, Research, and Speaking

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This guide was composed by Vincent Benlloch ‘18 and Helen Eckhard ‘18 as a mentored advanced project during the summer of 2017 under the direction of Timothy D. Arner, Associate Professor of English and Janet Carl, Director of Academic Support for Writing and Speaking.

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Academic Writing at Grinnell College - Foreword

Why We Write

Why do we write? We write to get what we want.

We write because we want to convey information, because we want to establish and maintain relationships, because we want other people to understand something about ourselves. We write to persuade someone to believe something or to pursue a course of action. We write because we want to make a difference.

At Grinnell College, you will be expected to do a lot of writing in a lot of different contexts for a lot of different audiences. Whether you're majoring in English, History, Philosophy, Music, Economics, Biology, Math, or Computer Science, you will be required to write various types of academic essays as part of your liberal arts education. According to Grinnell's mission statement, "The College aims to graduate individuals who can think clearly, who can speak and write persuasively and even eloquently, who can evaluate critically both their own and others' ideas, who can acquire new knowledge, and who are prepared in life and work to use their knowledge and their abilities to serve the common good." Grinnell College is a community of writers dedicated to helping people learn to communicate as effectively as possible.

When it comes to academic writing, students sometimes think that they're writing in order to get an A and that getting an A depends on producing exactly what the professor wants. But students will develop more completely as writers and, in turn, produce better writing if they think about academic writing as a process for acquiring, demonstrating, and producing knowledge. Developing your skills as a writer will help you succeed at Grinnell and in whatever you want to do throughout your life.

Much of the writing you do at Grinnell will be in response to assignments designed by your professors to help you achieve the learning goals for the course. While the specific expectations and requirements for your writing will differ among courses and individual assignments, it is useful to keep in mind that all academic writing serves three primary purposes: writing to learn, writing to demonstrate knowledge, and writing to contribute to a scholarly conversation.

1. **Writing to learn**

However much time you spend reading, analyzing data, or otherwise taking in information, you will often attain a better understanding by articulating ideas in your own words. The writing process involves slow and careful thinking about your subject, providing opportunities for you to discover new perspectives and ask new questions. Professors design assignments that will help students achieve the learning objectives for the course, and this often includes developing writing skills as well as mastering the course content. Many assignments will allow you to pursue your own interests and deepen your investigation of a topic within the course. The one-page response paper, the lab report, the fifteen-page research paper: all of these assignments will foster a range of skills and enhance your understanding of your subject.

2. **Writing to demonstrate knowledge**

Students attend college in order to acquire knowledge and skills. The role of the professor is to help students achieve these goals and to evaluate their performance of these skills. Writing assignments serve as one important tool for students to demonstrate their understanding of course material and their ability to communicate their ideas effectively. The more clearly you can articulate your ideas, the better your professor can respond with feedback to help you continue to learn and develop as a writer.

3. **Writing to contribute to scholarly conversation**

When you take a course, you are entering a scholarly conversation with your classmates, your professor, and with scholars in the field. In many courses, class discussion will allow students to analyze material together by considering the different perspectives and questions raised by the diverse group of people in the room. Your professors will participate in these discussions and lecture about key topics. Writing assignments will allow you to process the knowledge developed during class sessions and in conversation with your professor during class or in office hours. Course readings and research projects will allow you to engage in the conversation that scholars have been having about a particular topic over the years and to contribute your own ideas.

Types of Writing

You will write at Grinnell for various purposes. Knowing your purpose for a specific assignment or for a specific type of non-academic writing (keeping a journal, blogging, composing a personal statement as part of an application) will help you understand how to approach your paper.

Occasionally, a professor will ask you to describe something—the relationship of polar bears to their environment, the kind of K-12 education you received, the instructions for how to operate a piece of scientific equipment. These are examples of **expository** writing, that is, writing in which you explain something to the reader. In this type of writing, you don't take a side or make a claim, you simply, objectively explain in a logical, comprehensive way what the reader needs to know on that topic. Argumentative essays usually include some expository writing—that is, writing that explains something in order for the reader to understand the known facts of a given issue—before going on to claim something about that topic. Textbooks and entries in encyclopedias or Wikipedia are common examples of expository writing.

Professors may sometimes ask you to **analyze** a written or visual text. To analyze something means to take it apart, look at it, think about its parts and how they contribute to the whole. This type of writing is exploratory; you are less in need of a strong, unbending claim and more in need of a curious and tentative mindset that will allow you to think more deeply about even ordinary things, rather than to simply quickly agree or disagree, like or dislike. For instance, if you see a movie that appeals to you, you're likely to sum it up simply by saying "I liked it!" That's an opinion statement, and as far as they go, opinions are fine. But in the analytic frame of mind you would ask yourself, "But why did I like it? Was it the plot? The acting? The visual language of the filmmaking?" You might further inquire, "What was the director trying to say, and how did she or he say it?" Typically, you will encounter analytic writing assignments when a professor asks for a book or movie review, a review of a dance performance, an analysis of a poem. But analytic writing and thinking are tremendously useful tools in a variety of other situations—from looking at an international incident to exploring what's good or not so good in a personal relationship.

Most of the time, professors will ask you to make an **argument** in response to a prompt. Argument in the academic sense does not mean being angry at someone or something. It means taking a stand and supporting that stand with evidence. If the professor asks a question within the prompt—something like, "who had more power in England in the early 1530s: Henry VIII or Thomas More?"—you are going to respond by making an argument. With a prompt like this,

your possibilities for your claim or thesis are fairly clear cut. You could argue that Henry maintained firm control over national policy, or that More had tremendous influence over Henry's decisions, or perhaps (after analysis of the meaning of the word power and review of historical events) you might argue that they both had power, just of different types. Conversely, sometimes you will receive a very non-specific prompt, such as "write a 10-page paper on a topic of interest related to this course." With this type of prompt, you will want to determine whether the professor is looking for an expository or argumentative essay. If the latter, ask yourself some questions about the topic you have picked, then try to find the answers to one or more of these questions. Remember that the answer to a question, along with a brief summary of how you are going to support this answer, is your thesis.

Occasionally, professors will ask you to write a **reflection**—on a book, an article, an experience. A reflection is a very personal kind of writing; it asks you to think deeply about the impact of something on you and perhaps why it had that particular impact. This type of writing requires the skill of metacognition—that is, thinking about thinking. But reflections need to be backed up with evidence, too. They are not just a series of (perhaps unrelated) thoughts that you throw together at the last minute. For instance, a professor might ask you to identify the best paper you have written over the course of the semester and tell her or him what makes that paper the best. Or the professor might ask you to reflect on the style of parenting your parents used and the impact of that style on the choices you have made so far in life. Again, this type of writing and thinking is not limited to academia. Your ability to reflect on your life, your experiences, your values, and your goals will help you make thoughtful decisions in many life areas.

Finally, you will need to learn something about non-academic writing, something we might call **business or professional** writing. This type of writing is what you will use in business letters, applications, reports, grant proposals, and personal statements, to name to a few. Professional writing is characterized by concision and clarity. When you use this style of writing, you are keenly aware of your purpose and your audience—an audience that, unlike your professors, doesn't *have* to read your writing. That means engaging the reader immediately, stating your points clearly and succinctly, and ending persuasively but briefly. The Center for Careers, Life and Service offers a number of handouts on this type of writing; the Writing Lab staff are happy to read such writing as well.

College-level Writing

At Grinnell, you will build on the kinds of writing you did in high school by learning how to construct more sophisticated arguments and articulate your thoughts with conscious attention to stylistic principles. You will have the opportunity to deeply investigate single topics, and you will hopefully appreciate their complexity as you engage with conflicting evidence and points of view. All of your courses are designed to sharpen your analytical and reasoning skills, allowing you to think carefully through complicated problems and examine the assumptions upon which arguments rest. Working with your professors, the Writing Lab staff, writing mentors, and other resources on campus, you will develop a writing process and a set of skills that will help you learn, demonstrate, and produce knowledge in a range of courses.

Particularly in upper-level courses, students are expected to show some originality in their approach to a topic and to address issues currently being debated by the scholarly community. Every field has its own language and writing conventions that are particular to it, and students learn to assert their own scholarly authority by using the terms and conventions appropriate for the discipline.

Writing Across the Curriculum

Prior to the 1970s, most colleges and universities offered a required English composition course, and in that course (and often that course alone) students were expected to "learn to write." However, over many years, faculty came to see that 1) teaching writing should not be the responsibility of only one department and 2) the way students learn to write in their discipline is by writing in their discipline. Obviously, that meant that faculty all across campus in all the disciplines had to become teachers of writing. At Grinnell, you will find that you will do writing of some sort in virtually every class you take. It also means that the faculty who teach Tutorial—a class that focuses a great deal of attention on college writing—will be taught by scientists, musicians, social scientists, librarians, as well as English professors. All faculty at Grinnell are committed to helping you develop your writing (and speaking) skills. Whatever your previous views, opinions, and feelings about writing, we invite you to open yourself up to all the challenges and opportunities that await you as you enter the community of writers at Grinnell. We confidently predict—whatever your current skill level, you will be a better writer at the end of your four years here than you are now.

— Timothy D. Arner, Associate Professor, Department of English
Janet Carl, Director of Academic Support for Writing and Speaking

A Note from the Authors

This guide is intended as a writing and research resource for Grinnell College students of all skill levels. We structured this guide with our fellow students in mind and were wary of making the already intimidating process of college writing more daunting through lengthy prose and heavy theory. As such, the guide is divided into short sections that can be read chronologically or consulted whenever—and in any order—necessary. We also include quick tips to keep in mind, relevant quotes from acclaimed writers, and exercises for you to practice the skills discussed in this text.

This guide is the product of collaboration across time, space, and discipline. We consulted faculty, staff, and the wisdom of prominent academic writing guides, from those written decades ago to websites updated daily, in order to offer a comprehensive introduction to writing and research at Grinnell College and beyond. As you will soon discover, writing at the college level involves a whole community of people and scholarship devoted to helping each writer develop their own style of effective argument, well-founded persuasion, and accessible communication.

Learning how to write analytically and speak publicly will serve you regardless of your career path or life goals, as we all live in a world made up of and built by others. The more effective and accessible your engagement with writing and oral communication, the more people you can connect with, whether they be policymakers across the world, programmers on the other side of a screen, or thinkers long dead. As is often said, scholarship is the life of eternal conversation, and the intent of this guide is allow each of you to cultivate the tools and capacities necessary to enter the conversation in an impactful way while at Grinnell.

For every writer there is a unique writing process, so we encourage you to use this guide however you see fit. Students with less experience in writing at the college level, for example, may find that reading this guide (or at least the sections where they might feel they need improvement) before beginning an assignment will help them adopt better writing habits and avoid common errors from the start. Whether you've written one college essay or one hundred, we do recommend keeping a link to this guide handy throughout every stage of your research and writing processes. Then, if you're feeling stuck, simply scan the table of contents and identify your area of concern.

Writing this guide revealed much to both of us not only in terms of the scholarship and practical knowledge surrounding academic writing, but also in regards to our own writing. We uncovered our own idiosyncrasies, reckoned with our own patterns and habits, and melded our own voices

and sense of creativity into something cohesive. Even as we strived to foreground the intimacy and personal nature of writing for you, we also came face-to-face with it on a daily basis.

To end with some inspiration from Jacques Derrida, each of us has something within that compels us to write as we must write. It is our hope that this guide, either by teaching new lessons, providing key reminders, or presenting alternative paths to writing, can help each of you to produce something in your time at Grinnell that will make you proud, not because of a grade, but rather because you can see yourself reflected in your work.

Vincent Benlloch, ‘18
Helen Eckhard, ‘18

The Writing Process

The Prompt

Few professors you encounter during the course of your academic career will assign a writing exercise with the simple directive to "just write." Instead, because written assignments are typically given to test competency regarding one or more learning goals, students will almost certainly come across more than a few essay prompts. These prompts set the parameters of an assignment and help you determine what skills you will need in order to demonstrate your understanding of the course materials.

Despite being an often overlooked portion of a standard assignment, the essay prompt can be an invaluable tool at every stage of the writing process. But how can you understand the prompt's instructions in order to best use it to your advantage? The following sections provide ways of thinking about prompts in a broader context, as well as recognizing and keeping track of their various demands.

1. Contextualizing Prompts

It's happened to all of us: you sit at your computer staring at a blank page, watching the time slowly tick away and asking yourself "Why do I have to write this thing?" Whenever this feeling strikes, remember that a writing assignment is never independent from the class in which it was assigned. Your professor created this assignment because they believe that writing it will help you better understand the course material and because every paper is a chance to develop your skills as a writer.

Keep the learning goals of an assignment in mind as you read your prompt. Going into a paper understanding the rationale behind what you're being asked to do can give you important information about how to go about doing it. Remind yourself what was going on in class when the assignment was first handed out: had your professor been emphasizing one or two important ideas repeatedly during a lecture? Did they hand out relevant discussion questions in class, or spend a lot of time focusing on a particular reading? Look back at your notes and try to find concepts or questions that seem to repeat frequently. All of these things should relate to the major themes or learning goals of the course, which, in turn, provide useful lenses through which to consider your prompt.

2. Specific vs. Open-Ended Prompts

Writing prompts can range from the very specific to the very vague—neither of which is necessarily any easier or harder to tackle than the other. It is useful, however, to familiarize yourself with various prompts on the spectrum of specificity in order to understand what is being asked of you. Take a look at the two excerpts of prompts below and our annotations of them.

The Specific Prompt:

This prompt from Professor David Harrison's course "Family Tragedy in Literature" provides very precise guidelines for the assignment, including a predetermined analytical approach and detailed parameters regarding passage selection. Consider ways that you might put your own creative spin on the assignment while still fulfilling the requirements of the prompt.

> For your third formal writing assignment, you will choose a sentence from In Cold Blood and analyze it. Your analysis should discuss the structure of the sentence as well as the specific words that compose it. The purpose of this assignment is to show the richness of the sentence—how even a few, well-chosen words convey a great deal of information about a particular character.
>
> You can select any sentence in the book, provided that it fulfills the following four criteria:
>
> The sentence must have more than one clause. For example, this sentence insufficient: "The question aroused Mrs. Hickock (171)."
>
> The sentence must not be direct discourse. 'Are you sure you won't have a cup of coffee, Mr. Nye?' (171)"—not an option. Choose a sentence that is told by the narrator, even if the narrator is adopting the perspective of a particular character.
>
> The sentence must be about a specific character in the book. The descriptive sentences about the Kansas landscape are beautiful, but I want you to select a sentence dealing with a person.
>
> The sentence must not be one that we have already analyzed in class.
>
> Please type the sentence at the top of your analysis, indicating the page number in parentheses.
>
> This assignment should be about a page in length (or longer, if you wish), double-spaced and turned in no later than 4 p.m. on Tuesday, November 3.

Predetermined Topic:
When given an assignment such as this, refer back to the prompt frequently to ensure that you're staying on topic.

Content Requirements:
Just because a prompt is specific doesn't mean you can't still get creative. Brainstorm interesting angles from which to approach requirements and, if appropriate, insert your personal voice.

The Open-Ended Prompt:

This prompt from a section of HIS 235: Britain in the Modern World, taught by Professor Michael Guenther, is more open-ended than the previous one. Though it also specifies a text that must be analyzed, it is considerably more flexible in the methods of analysis you might employ and the tools you might use to do so.

> Over the past few weeks, we have been discussing a relatively new piece of scholarship by Alison Games that attempts to revise our historical understanding of English expansion in the formative century between 1560 and 1660. Your assignment for the first paper is to identify an important aspect of Games' work—whether this be a specific argument or her methodological approach or the way she frames a certain issue—and evaluate this aspect of her work in light of your own analysis of a relevant historical document of your choosing.

Course Relevance: Notice that even though this prompt is considerably more open, students are still asked to draw on their knowledge of a topic that has been a key focus of class discussion. Though selecting an "important aspect of Games' work" offers more freedom than if it had been predetermined, it will also likely require students to use knowledge from the course to make a convincing argument for its significance.

Freedom of Sources:
Allowing students to use a second source of their choosing creates infinite possibilities for analysis. While this might mean writing a paper that interests you more, be careful—it also means allotting more time for research!

You'll likely encounter prompts like both of the above (as well as some that are more or less specific) during your time at Grinnell. Keep in mind that regardless of a prompt's length or specificity, taking a moment to consider the assignment in the context of your class is a great first step to determining what your professor is looking for. If you're still having trouble, check out our next section, "Reading the Prompt," for some useful tips for understanding assignments of almost any length, genre, or discipline.

3. Reading the Prompt

Our quick tips for reading and understanding any prompt are simple:

1. Read it **early**.
2. Read it **often**.
3. Ask **questions**.

Read it early. We've all done it: your professor hands out an essay prompt and you immediately scan for the due date. *I don't have to turn this in for another three weeks,* you think. *Excellent.* The assignment sheet is stuffed in your backpack and forgotten until forty-eight hours before the deadline. Suddenly you are scrambling to find the primary sources you didn't realize you needed and frantically sending an email to your professor at one in the morning.

But there are clear benefits to reading a prompt early (and we mean *really* reading it): the sooner you know what is expected of you, the easier it is to plan for it. Not only that, but being proactive and making an appointment with your professor to discuss the paper long before the pre-deadline rush will probably help you do better research and drafting, making the writing process much easier.

Read it often. Just because you've started drafting your paper does not mean it is time to discard your prompt. Even if you don't receive a formal rubric from your professor, the prompt will likely contain important information about what they will look for when grading. Read the prompt several times before, during, and after your actual writing to make sure you fulfill every requirement.

Ask questions. The earlier and more often you read your prompt, the more opportunities you will have to ask clarifying questions. Is an instruction vague or unclear? Are you unsure if you should use a source that wasn't explicitly mentioned? The prompt can often be a great guide for starting to think about an assignment, but it is by no means your only resource. After you've read the prompt once or twice, make note of any questions you have and take them to your professor. They wrote the prompt, so they will have the answers you need.

Annotate the Prompt

Reading a prompt is not the same as reading your favorite novel or the menu at a restaurant. Rather, probably like most readings you've done in class, it requires you to read and think critically. Otherwise, you risk missing core components of your assignment.

To best make sense of your prompt, try annotating it for the following:

Parts of a Prompt

Not every prompt will contain every one of these features, but look out for these common components of a prompt and their characteristics.

- **The Overview:** the prompt briefly summarizes recent major themes in the course in order to help contextualize your assignment.

- **The Task:** the prompt tells you what to do in your paper and explains the learning goals of the assignment.
- **The Food for Thought:** the prompt offers questions, quotes, or other ideas to consider when conceptualizing your response to **The Task.**
- **The Technical Details:** the prompt provides parameters for the assignment, including page length or word count, typeface, deadline, citation format, etc.

Action Verbs

Pay attention for words that ask you to *do* something. Action verbs can clue you into what your main priorities should be when writing and, often, what genre you're being asked to write. Some of the most common action verbs include

- Analyze
- Argue
- Compare/contrast
- Define
- Describe
- Evaluate
- Research
- Summarize

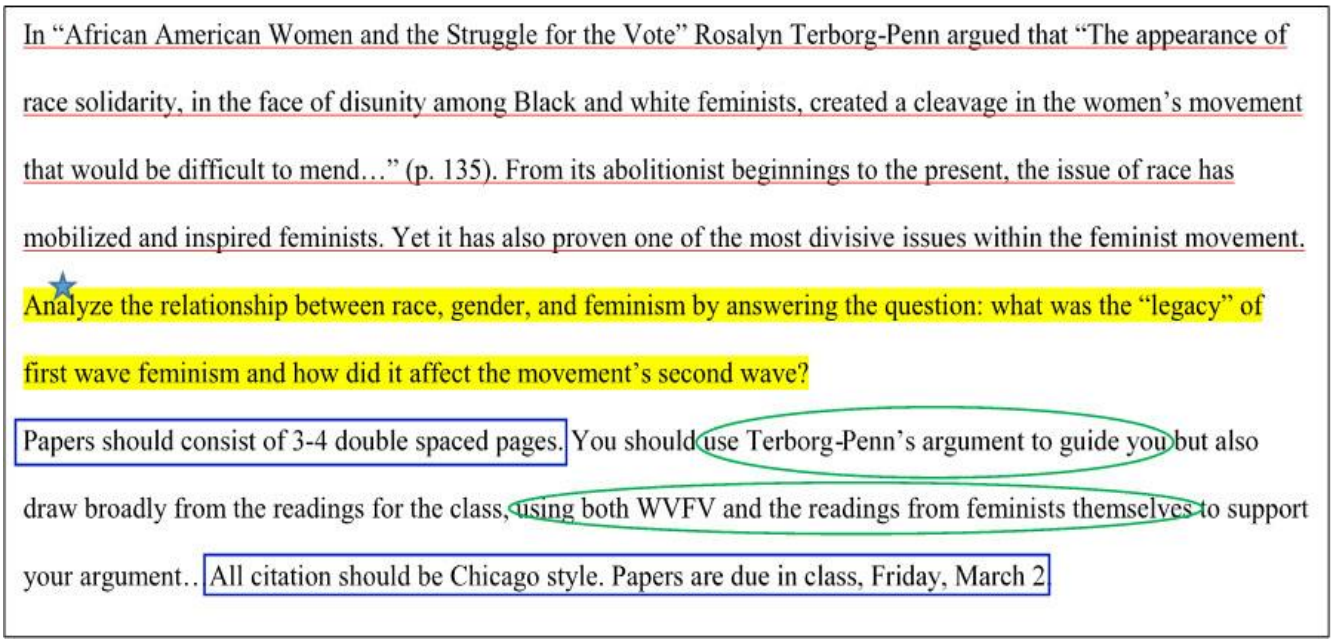
Try This

The prompt below is from one professor's introductory course on Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies. Print it and practice annotating it using the following guidelines. Then continue to the following page to see how we annotated the same prompt.

1. **Underline** any information that contextualizes the assignment or provides the overview.
2. **Highlight** the primary task(s) of the paper.
3. **Circle** any "food for thought"—ideas you should consider but that are not the central task of the paper.
4. **Put a box** around any technical details about the paper.

Put a star above any key action verbs you see.

In “African American Women and the Struggle for the Vote” Rosalyn Terborg-Penn argued that “The appearance of race solidarity, in the face of disunity among Black and white feminists, created a cleavage in the women’s movement that would be difficult to mend…” (p. 135). From its abolitionist beginnings to the present, the issue of race has mobilized and inspired feminists. Yet it has also proven one of the most divisive issues within the feminist movement. Analyze the relationship between race, gender, and feminism by answering the question: what was the “legacy” of first wave feminism and how did it affect the movement’s second wave?
Papers should consist of 3-4 double spaced pages. You should use Terborg-Penn’s argument to guide you but also draw broadly from the readings for the class, using both WVFV and the readings from feminists themselves to support your argument…All citation should be Chicago style. Papers are due in class, Friday, March 2.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Prewriting Strategies

Why prewrite? The simple answer is that pre-writing, in any of its many forms, will save you time! We are all familiar with the pain and anxiety of trying to cobble a paper together near, on, or past an imposing deadline: an incomplete thesis, ragged and scattered sources, a lost prompt, and thousands of words yet to grace an intimidating white page. Thankfully, you will write many papers as a student; conversely, and perhaps unfortunately at some point, those papers will all get graded.

In order to maximize your time and ensure that you are putting concerted effort into your draft, the practice of prewriting grants you a way through the blockade that awaits all writers: getting started. Prewriting itself means nothing more than any kind of work one does that precedes actual paper writing; however, the magic of prewriting is that it will usually provide you with some fundamental aspect of your paper, whether it be the seed of a thesis, a working structure, or even the title. It is precisely this "magic," or uncovering, that makes prewriting the invention stage of the composition process.

Two benefits tie all pre-writing strategies together: they allow you to (1) take inventory of your ideas and (2) to bypass the intimidating monolith of a blank page and actually start on your paper. Just as all writing, even more formal or prompt-driven work, is inevitably personal, your selection or deployment of different composition tools will always be up to you.

The main goal is to find a set of strategies that best allows you to work from a prompt to a workable draft. By outlining the prewriting strategies below, we aim to show how one can begin a successful paper without having a "clear" idea of the content or structure of the assignment, much in the same way that a gold miner would need to sift through rock and mud in order to find those few crucial nuggets of gold.

Quick Tip
Set a time limit or goal for yourself. Commit to listing for five minutes, or until you have ten ideas on paper. Whether you are having trouble getting the first words down on your blank page, or knowing when to end your rapidly growing list, having an end goal can offer a much-needed push at the beginning of the process and a sense of completion at the end

Brainstorming

Any good piece of writing begins with a good idea. Whether you have too many ideas or none at all, brainstorming can help you choose a topic, organize your thoughts, and approach your ideas from new perspectives.

Brainstorming can also be fun. There are no rules to this portion of the writing process, so if you already have a way of exploring ideas that works for you, stick with it! If not, try your hand at one or a few of the techniques below to help jumpstart your creativity.

1. The List

Who: The writer with a lot of ideas
When: Any stage of the writing process, but especially during the beginning
Why: To keep track of *all* of your ideas and discover possible relationships between them
How: Grab a pen and paper or your computer and begin listing anything that comes to mind-- without censoring yourself. The list is one of the easiest brainstorming methods and one of the most flexible—you can write a list about almost anything! If you're unsure where to begin, try making one of these commonly used lists:

Quick tip
Try not to self-censor while using the listing method. Even if an idea seems useless in the moment, you may find it offers something fruitful later, and pausing to deliberate or going back to erase will only slow you down.

- **Interest Inventory:** A list of possible writing or research topics that interest you, or that you may already know something about. If you need a bit of guidance to get started, create headers using key themes from your prompt or, if you don't have a prompt, create your own. Try broad headers such as "places," "things," "technologies," or "controversies" to foster creativity.
- **Free Association:** A list built on the relationships between topics or ideas. When brainstorming with this method, begin with a topic or question that interests you and continue to list the first thing that your most recent addition(s) make you think of. For example, if you were creating a supply list for a birthday party and began with "cake," you might then be reminded that you also need candles to go on the cake, and add that to your list as well. Continue in this fashion, writing down whatever comes to mind, until you exhaust all of your ideas or are happy with the length of your list.
- **Questions or Question/Answer:** Similar to an interest inventory, a list of questions (or questions and answers) can help you compile topics that you might be interested in investigating further. Simply list any questions or curiosities you may have, returning to your list at the end to mark your favorites. Alternatively, if you already have a tentative research question, make a list of all possible answers that come to your mind. By incorporating questions into your listing strategy, you open your project to new avenues of potential discovery that you might miss by only listing things that you already know.

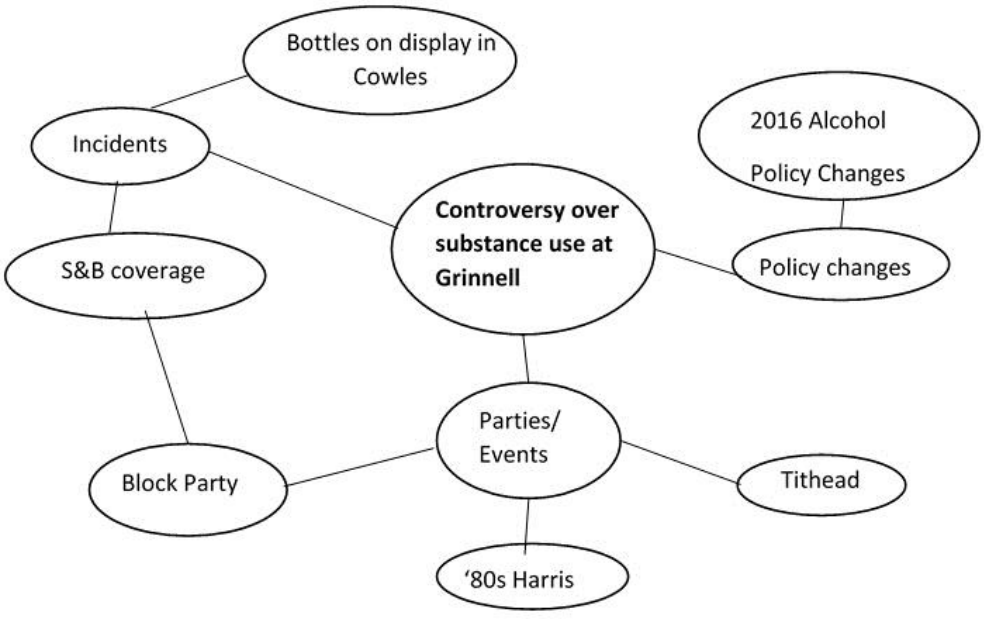
2. The Mind Map

Who: The visual learner
When: You have an idea (or several!) but don't know what to do with it/them
Why: To connect ideas in a nonlinear way and explore/develop possible subtopics
How: Using a blank sheet of paper (make sure it's big enough for all of your ideas), write your topic in the center, circling it. Now write any ideas relating to your topic outside the central node and connect them with a line—some of these might become a subtopic or focus of your paper later. Continue this process, expanding outward with ideas, facts, questions, or details related to each new node and connecting them to each other. Take a look at the example below.

Quick Tip
Leave plenty of space between your initial ideas so that you have room to expand on them and add more as others occur to you.

From the Experts
"How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"
—E.M. Forster

Example: Imagine you are writing about controversies around substance use on campus. Your mind map might look something like this:



3. Freewriting

Who: The writer who edits constantly; the writer with writer's block
When: The stress of deciding which direction to take your topic or crafting the perfect sentence has left you with a blank page
Why: To discover your own ideas through uncensored exploration

Quick Tip
The nodes or bubbles in your mind map are not limited to being connected to only one other node. Draw lines between any topics on any level(s) that you think have a significant relationship. Often, the more lines connected to an idea indicates a high level of relevance to your topic.

How: Just write. Write whatever your topic or research question inspires you to say. Write what you know—write what you don't. Write without erasing or re-reading or pausing to correct yourself. Write when you have no idea what to say or how to say it. The important thing is not to stop. Set a timer for at least ten minutes and promise to keep your hands moving until the time is up. At the end, you will likely find new ideas or directions for your project that might surprise you. For a model of freewriting's informal nature and "train-of-thought" style, see the example below.

Example: Imagine you are given a vague assignment about social media's role in contemporary culture. Your freewriting exercise may look something like this:

> Social media has become an integral part of millennial culture, as evidenced by its universality. It is impossible to walk across campus these days without seeing somebody tweeting, scrolling Facebook, or swiping through Tinder. Millennials are often criticized for a reliance on social media platforms and supposedly related antisocial tendencies, but I wonder where these critiques originate. And do they have any actual merit? Aren't we in some ways more connected now than prior to the development of social media? Some would argue that the relationships forged online are somehow more superficial. I wonder how issues of self-representation fit into this discussion…

It is unlikely that your final paper would take this informal tone or touch on every idea mentioned here, but rereading what you've written may offer a point or two of inspiration for further research or elaboration. From this small passage of freewriting alone, you might decide to pursue your assumption of social media's "universality" by reconsidering its use in a global context, analyze the causes of generational criticisms of social media and their differences, or use it as a lens through which to explore sociological or psychological theories of self-representation.

Alternate Forms of Freewriting

Passage-Based Method: Some assignments that require a more direct analytical approach will ask you to examine a reading or a short passage. For such assignments, a *passage-based* approach to freewriting can be useful. Pick a paragraph or a sentence that is of particular interest to you, then follow the same steps as if you were doing a more open freewriting exercise. Grounding your writing in a passage from the beginning can help you find a starting point for your analysis.

Quick Tip
If you find yourself at a loss for what to write, establish a safety net to keep you going. Write "I don't know what to write" or a random word like "elevator" over and over again until another idea comes to you.

Looping Method: Within freewriting, looping is a technique that allows for a narrowing of focus in terms of the ideas that arise from the chaotic free association of free-writing. As its name suggests, you would loop your freewriting segments together one after another to produce an ever-more specific sequence of compositions that all follow the same guidelines for freewriting: speed, the absence of editing, and continuity until either the time or page limit has been reached. One way of looping together the segments is to stop between each sequence and identity their major themes, ideas, or thoughts as well as any recurrent phrases or thought patterns by circling, underlining, highlighting, etc. It follows that your next moment of freewriting will keep those topics in mind and cause you to consider them more deeply, ideally so that you will find a nugget or two of useful information that could inform your argument in a meaningful way.

4. The Journal

Who: The "go-getter" who wants a head start
When: As soon as you get an assignment, or even before
Why: To record your first impressions of material and keep track of the material's most meaningful, important, or thought-provoking aspects
How: Keep a notebook or open document on hand any time you're doing research or an assigned reading. Any time you come across something that strikes you as interesting, puzzling, contradictory, or otherwise noteworthy, record it in your journal. Be sure to note *why* you find what you record remarkable, so that later you have a record of first impressions that can provide some compelling moments for opening your essay or simply putting words to the page.

5. Cubing

Who: The writer with writer's block who appreciates a physical or mental model
When: You have selected a solid topic or idea, but it has still not been fully fleshed out.
Why: To pick apart and think around a topic in order to better understand its complexity
How: This strategy is based on the idea that in order to describe each side of a cube you would have to change your perspective on the same object in order to properly grasp it in its entirety. Just as a cube has six sides that each require particular attention, this method entreats you to consider your topic at hand from six different perspectives or commands. Either on a piece of paper or in your Word document, assign a few minutes to respond to each of the following commands concerning your topic:

- Describe it
- Compare it
- Associate it
- Analyze it
- Apply it
- Argue for and against it

After writing and taking a small break, reconsider what you have written. Often, you will find some sort of discrete pattern, emergent themes or motifs, or overwhelming focus on a specific aspect or issue. Depending on the nature of the paper, some commands may end up being more compelling or fruitful than others, but all of them are useful in kicking your mental gears into motion, and some of the seemingly less applicable or more difficult commands may end up eliciting a more compelling interpretation or argument.

6. Stasis Theory

Who: Those in need of help with more abstract theories or issues; conversely, also those working within policy or cost-benefit frameworks—this helps the stuffy philosopher and the policy wonk alike!
When: You are trying to outline both the nature of the argument or topic at hand, as well as the main sides e.g., a persuasive essay or even compare/contrast
Why: Stasis theory is especially useful for arguments where you attempt to reconcile opposing positions by helping you identify primary points of disagreement or common ground between parties.
How: Developed in antiquity first by Aristotle and Hermagoras before later refinement by Roman rhetoricians such as Cicero and Quintilian, stasis theory is an invention process that revolves around four central categories:

1. The facts (conjecture)
    - What happened? Is there a problem/issue?
    - How did it begin and what are its causes?
    - What created the problem/issue? Can it be changed?
2. The meaning or nature of the issue (definition)
    - What kind of problem is it?
    - What are the parts of the problem? How do they relate?
3. The seriousness of the issue (quality)
    - Is the problem good or bad for some parties?
    - How severe is it currently? Could that severity change?
    - What is the cost-benefit analysis? What happens if nothing happens at all?
4. The plan of action (policy)
    - Should action be taken?
    - Which parties should be involved or have a voice?
    - What would need to happen to resolve the issue completely?
    - What are the obstacles to that perfect solution?

The stasis categories and their sub-questions will prompt you to think of answers that are as complete as possible, which will aid your development of a plan of action for strengthening your argument.

Quick Tip
If you're having trouble putting the stasis theory to work, try thinking of the 5 W's (and one H) of journalism. If you can clearly discern the "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," and "how" of the issue in question, you are on your way to developing a solid understanding of your topic.

Still Stuck?

If you're still struggling to get over that initial writer's block, try one of the following quick tips:

- **Begin in the middle:** Don't feel constrained to write your paper in chronological order. If you have a great idea about how to start off your third paragraph, go right ahead!
- **Talk out the paper:** Sometimes forcing yourself to articulate your thoughts aloud to a friend or colleague can illuminate the starting point you've been looking for.
- **Record the paper:** Take a few minutes to brainstorm aloud and record everything that comes to mind. Return to the recording later in the day (or at any point during the writing process) to tease out any interesting ideas you might have had.
- **Change the audience:** Don't get hung up on the idea that your professor is the only person who will ever read your paper—even if they are. Try writing a section of the

paper as if it were going to be read by your younger sibling, your grandparent, or a friend in a completely different major. Changing your imagined audience can keep you from writing a paper that is overly technical or hasn't been contextualized.

- **Change your perspective:** Starting to write a paper when its direction is already set in stone can often trap writers. Play "devil's advocate" and approach your topic from alternate perspectives. Above all, be open to change.

Outlining

Even if it may feel like it at times, no assignment is pointless. More importantly, each assignment invites a set of personal inquiries concerning how you will make it meaningful to yourself when writing, essentially asking you to identify your purpose in composing the essay. In order to understand this purpose, you will need to create your own plan of action.

One part of this plan is to ask yourself two corresponding questions: (1) "what must I answer or reckon with in order to fulfill the assignment?" and (2) "what must I answer or reckon with in order to fulfill the assignment as to make it meaningful for me?" How to answer the first question was addressed in Section 1 ("Reading a Prompt"), and in this section we will deal with laying the groundwork for that crucial moment between the prompt and the first draft: outlining.

If you think of understanding the prompt as your first order of business and prewriting as the next step in grappling with your assignment, then you can think of outlining as the last preliminary measure before drafting the paper. With each process, you are approaching the task with more depth and consideration, and the more time you invest in these earlier stages (which should be planned well before the deadline), the less time you will need to polish your thesis and your draft.

When should you start outlining? The exact moment may differ with each researcher, but it is always good to start outlining when you have a workable thesis--whether you have finished your research or are still in the middle. It is also good to be reminded of the fact that there is a fine line between a plan and something that could change, to recognize that most parts of your paper will change in one way or another, and to be comfortable with editing while not falling into the trap of constant tinkering with no progress.

While this may sound like hyperbole, the best outlines can almost feel like you are cheating at writing your first draft. In fact, you should feel proud of the ease and straightforward

development of your first draft, as it shows that you have put the best effort forward during those early organizing strategies and are now reaping the benefits:

- A clean, sharp thesis
- Well-organized research
- A paper that reads as a progression of ideas and not as a bulleted list
- The feeling that you can meet your deadline comfortably and with a final product to be proud of

Just as there are a variety of different prewriting strategies, there are quite a few different types of outlines, in terms of both form and content, that you can employ during the writing process.

1. Storyboard Outline

Who: The visual thinker
When: During the first stages of the research process--when you have an argumentative idea, but do not know how to make everything fit
Why: Use as a preliminary base for the structure of your argument and not necessarily for the structure of your paper
How: Put your main claim or thesis and each of the supporting or developing sub-claims on its own page or card. Then put all of the evidence that supports an individual reason or subreason on its own page. Once the note-cards are finished or the pages printed, arrange them on a table as a first attempt at organizing your argument in a consistent and coherent way. It is important to arrange and rearrange the cards/pieces of paper until you start to find a structure that best matches your working conception of your argument. You should repeat this process until you feel as if all of the different moves and connections within your argument flow in the most consistent way possible at that stage in your process.

2. Classical or Formal Outline

Who: The linear, process-oriented writer who prefers a more consistent structure to their thinking
When: In general, the classic outline is a reliable frame that you can apply to nearly any extended writing assignment from short summaries and responses to extended research papers.
Why: In order to map out the precise linear development of your main idea, as the classic outline will provide a skeleton of a paper that most closely matches the structure of the paper itself. When completed, the outline would only need to be filled in with prose and transitions in order to turn into a working draft.

How: See below for an adapted outline of the *Guardian* article, "How to Teach Graphic Novels."

Introduction: Should comic books be taught in the classroom?

- Working Thesis:
    - Comic books should be used in classrooms at all levels because they are both accessible to new readers and challenging to seasoned analytic thinkers.

Main Point/Topic Sentence:

- Comic books can be both simple and complex, which makes them scalable to a variety of grade levels and learning styles.
    - Supporting claims:
        - Simple language and vivid illustration
        - Still contains complex themes, ideas, and assumptions
        - Evidence
            - *Spiderman*
            - *Watchmen*
                - Analysis of evidence that links to thesis statement
                    - The simple and direct language of an early Spiderman or Superman comic can allow readers who are not native English speakers an easy way into English usage, while simultaneously allowing for insights into American pop culture history.
                    - Conversely, the complex thematics of Alan Moore's *Watchmen* allow for philosophical debates and inquiries into existentialism, nuclear disarmament, and western exceptionalism.

Main Point/Topic Sentence:

- Especially in primary classroom settings, comic book adaptations of classic literature can allow new or young readers a certain level of access or interest that the originals may not.
    - Supporting claims:
        - Classic literature can often be hard to grapple with for younger students with little context or a developing reading ability. Comic book adaptations can provide good entry points into harder literature, either as supplements or introductory texts.

- Evidence
    - Article from the National Council of Teachers of English
        - Analysis of evidence
            - Comic books prove to be helpful in kick starting student interest in classic texts and allow for vibrant classroom discussions to take place.

Main Point/Topic Sentence:

- In older classroom settings, comic books allow for key literacy skills to be taught and developed, such as summarizing, sequencing, and predicting.
    - Supporting claims
        - Not everyone learns the same way or has the same interests in texts or materials.
            - Comic books add another dimension to instructing necessary skills for analysis and composition.
        - Evidence
            - Scottish Book trust
            - Education studies
                - Analysis of evidence that links to thesis statement
                    - Even in higher grades, comic books serve students who need to develop or fortify necessary literacy skills within a medium that may be more accessible or interesting for students.

Main Point/Topic Sentence:

- Comic books are not simple or abridged pieces for they can also be complex, provocative, and challenging.
    - Supporting claims
        - Comic books such as *Maus* and *Persepolis* tackle difficult and harrowing experiences in a medium that allows for a more personal or impactful reader experience.
        - Evidence
            - Art Spiegelman interview
            - Summary and analysis of *Persepolis*
            - Analysis of evidence that links to thesis statement
                - Comic books such as *Maus* and *Persepolis* allow for necessary conversations over major historical events, such as the Holocaust and the Iranian Revolution, in a way that both supplements existing literature and history,

while providing a richer and more intense experience through their form and composition.

Conclusion:

- Comic books can be incorporated across grade levels
- Comic books can serve as helpful introductions to the English language, either for young speakers or new learners.
- Comic books can act as useful primers for more complicated texts, or even act as vital texts for talking through historical tragedies, complex political situations, or intimate narratives.

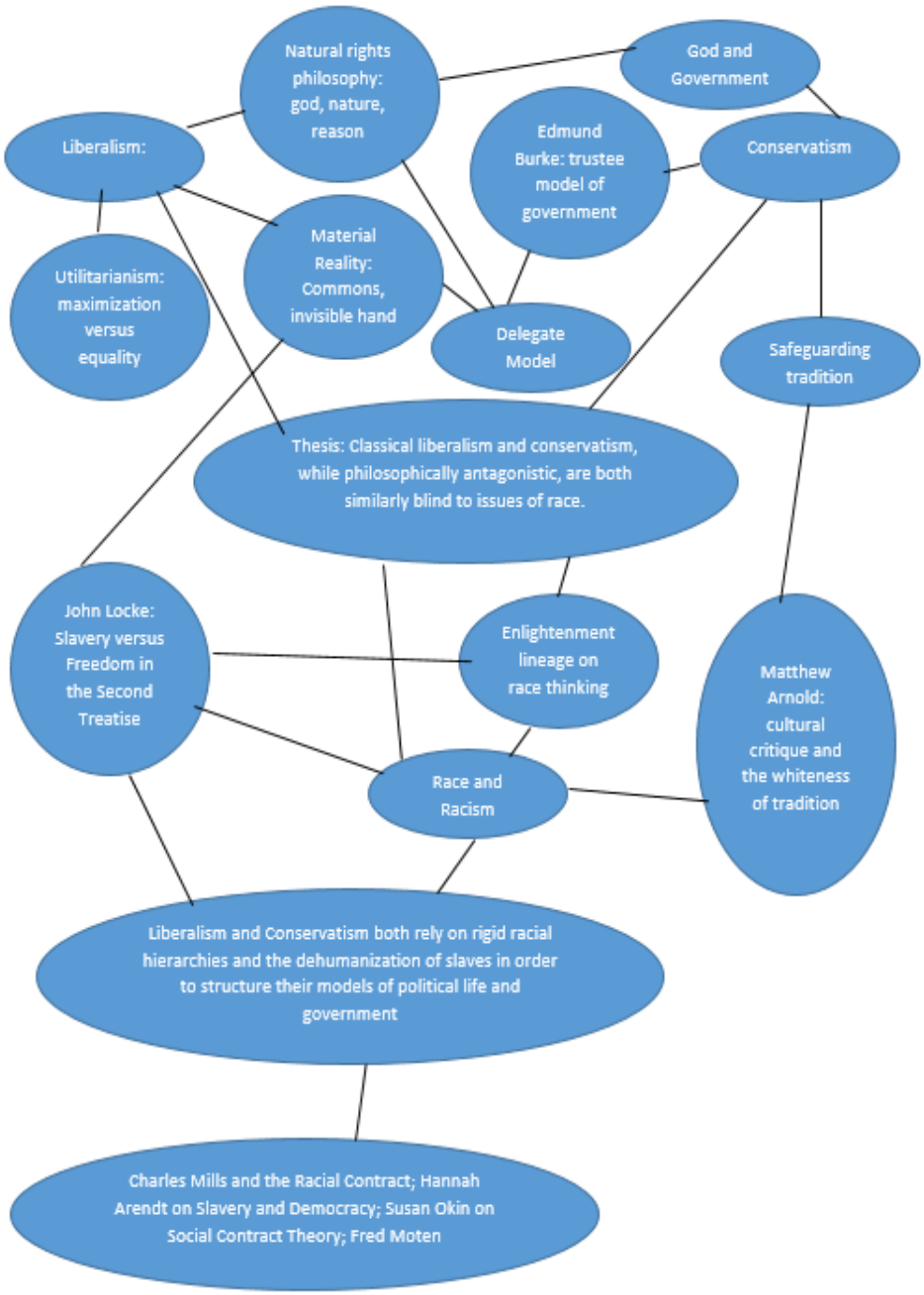
3. Bubble Map

Who: The visual learner

When: You are given an assignment with less rigid formal constraints and more freedom in handling the prompt, or you are dealing with a larger research assignment with a lot of moving parts.

Why: Bubble maps allow for a more organic or dynamic visualization of your thesis, main points, and evidence. Rather than depicting a progressive buildup or development in a linear fashion, bubble maps allow you to work through how the different aspects of your argument inform and build off one another without the more rigid input-output or recipe-like relationship of ideas presented in the formal outline. Bubble maps are especially helpful if you are dealing with a more robust or abstract thesis or with an interdisciplinary array of evidence.

How: Bubble maps are formally similar to mind mapping or clustering wherein the center bubble becomes your working thesis. It then follows that the various other claims and support for your argument are connected to both the thesis and other claims without following a direct flow per se.



Flowchart

Who: The writer who enjoys visual models but also needs more structure or linear flow when outlining

When: You have a robust but clear argument with many steps and claims that shade into another and need a way to make each piece distinct yet connected.

Why: In many ways, the flowchart allows for a synthesis of the best aspects of both the classical outline and the bubble map. Like an intermediary between the two different forms, the flowchart keeps the organizational structure of the classic outline--a linear and progressive development of a claim--while concurrently allowing for more dynamic, organic relationships among topics.

How: You would orient your thesis as the top bubble in a descending vertical chain of other bubbles that contain your support, evidence, and other topics of discussion. You would then draw arrows or lines to show how each of the ideas connects back to your thesis and to highlight how they build off of and inform one another within the body of the paper. You can also replicate the flowchart structure within your topic sentences or other main claims, so as to connect, compare and contrast, or sharpen other ideas that exist within specific body paragraphs.

Topic-based vs. Point-based outlines

Not only are there varieties of outline forms, but there are also varying types of content that your outline will consist of, depending on where you are in the writing process. In earlier stages, you will most likely draft a topic-based outline (see below) that will be made up of various fragments, noun phrases, and incomplete ideas that are roughly organized into the general structure of a paper. Topic-based outlines then act as broad sketches of your draft and are especially useful at providing you with the skeleton of your paper. However, you will eventually have to transition into a point-based outline, which will transform your simple phrases and organization into a progressive and robust argument. It is helpful to think of the difference between the two as the difference between a sketch and a finished drawing insofar as you cannot have a complex and textured work without first getting the bones of it onto paper, just as you cannot simply hang a rough sketch in a gallery and call it finished.

Topic-Based:

1. Introduction: Classical Liberalism vs. Classical Conservatism, A Survey
    - Topic: The Differences between two political philosophies
2. Liberalism
    a. Ethics: John Stuart Mill
    b. Government: John Locke
    c. Material and Moral sentiments: Adam Smith
3. Conservatism

a. Ethics: Edmund Burke
b. Government: Alexander Hamilton
c. Tradition: Matthew Arnold

4. Conclusion

Point-Based:

1. Introduction:
   - Thesis: Divided responses to the enlightenment produced divergent political philosophies in the forms of liberalism and conservatism that are both fundamentally antagonistic while remaining similarly blind to issues of race and race-thinking.
2. Liberalism prizes equality, natural rights, and rule of law
   a. Utilitarianism and the problem of maximization versus equality
   b. The foundations of our natural rights: God, nature, and reason
   c. The commons, the invisible hand, and how we treat material reality in liberal contexts
3. Conservatism
   a. Edmund Burke and the trustee model of political representation: hierarchy of voices
   b. The role of God in the State
   c. The safeguarding of tradition and the conservation of certain ways of life and being across time
4. The Problem of Race
   a. Dominant theories of race-thinking that come out of the enlightenment
   b. John Locke, the Fundamental Constitutions of the Carolinas, and Slavery
   c. Matthew Arnold, Cultural Critique, and the Conservation of White tradition
   d. Liberalism and conservatism both rely on rigid racial hierarchies in order to properly support their philosophies
      i. Charles Mills
      ii. Susan Okin

Conclusion:

How have these divergent political philosophies informed our modern right-left ideological distinctions? How does my thesis inform the issue of race in American party politics today?

Drafting

While in earlier sections we have discussed the structural aspects of drafting an essay – the parts of the essay, prewriting and outlining strategies, and argument formation – there is still more to be said concerning the style, pace, and once again, time, that goes into producing a

workable first draft. Remember that whatever you are writing is *not* your final draft--everything can be edited and every piece of writing can be improved.
As in the various moments that have gotten you to drafting, you have started to understand and know yourself as a writer. That knowledge points to the larger reality that writing is always already a personal act, regardless of the prompt or topic. However, much of how you will discover the strategies, timeline, and stylistic choices will come from the help of your professors, peers, and the Writing Lab. Just as writing is deeply personal and singular in moments, in many ways it is also an incredibly collaborative act. Discovering the right balance between the personal and collaborative for yourself early on in the drafting process will allow your writing to be effective, polished, and personally fulfilling.

The Two Major Tendencies

One of the first moments of self-discovery in drafting a college paper will be finding out which type of drafter you are. Whether you are tortoise or a hare, all papers require preparation and a proper allotment of time. Neither of the two main drafting styles listed below are intrinsically better, quicker, or singularly successful; rather, they represent two dominant tendencies in drafting style that can both generate worthwhile and interesting papers. Let's consider what pitfalls and considerations accompany each tendency.

The Fast and Furious:

On one end of the spectrum are the speed drafters, those writers who, on a first draft, will tear through a blank page, ensuring that every single one of their thoughts and turns of phrase exist somewhere on the page. This drafting style, which is well aligned with those who get a lot out of freewriting in particular, is all about flow and continuity. These drafters will not stop for purposes of grammar, clarity, or citation; they are instead predominantly concerned with getting as much of what is in their head onto the paper as fast as possible.

Quick Tip
If you identify as one of the fast and the furious drafters, it is always important to remember that no one just gets in a car and drives without an idea of where they are going. In short, you always need a map, or at the very least, directions, and an effective outline will act as your roadmap to a successful draft.

Benefits:

- Produces a lot of content at one time, which also means a lot more alternative ideas and avenues to pursue
- Allows you to push aside your internal editor and get your ideas onto the page without getting tripped up by structure or technical issues
- Ensures that you will not lose an idea or get lost in the weeds

Drawbacks:

- Necessitates a lot of editing eventually, whether it be for grammar, style, structure, or citations
- Requires a more comprehensive level of proofreading to move from a first draft onward
- Leads to a false sense of progress in a paper (i.e., all papers!) that still needs more work

Time Component:

- For you speedsters, the majority of the time spent on your draft will need to be spent at the back end, as the time you make up for in content generation will need to be equally distributed to subsequent revisions and refinement.

The Slow and Steady:

On the other end of the drafting spectrum are the slow drafters. Moving methodically, if not at a glacial pace at times, these writers cannot move on to even the next line without ensuring that what they have written is perfectly polished, crisp, and nearly finalized. Going over each line with a fine-toothed comb, these drafters must do each word, clause, and citation correctly in order to proceed to the following lines and sections of their paper.

Quick Tip
Before starting any draft, ensure that you have printed your prompt, working thesis, and outline. It is imperative that you have them to refer to as you draft, in case you get stuck or need to locate something quickly. Even if you have read over those materials before, when you print them, quickly outline or otherwise annotate each document in order to refresh your memory, organize your thoughts, and focus yourself for the task ahead.

Benefits:

- Ensures that whatever is on the page will be near to the final version
- Necessitates that each line aligns the with standards of grammar, citation, and presentation required
- Requires that you consider every possible phrasing or idea before moving on to the next one and thus keeps you grounded in the immediate task at hand

Drawbacks:

- Does not allow for much to be put on the page and could suggest to the writer that they have much more development to do than is actually the case
- Keeps a writer stuck on a sentence or idea when they could better spend their time moving on to more important or easier sections
- Limits the extent to which you can change either your topic, structure, or approach as you have locked yourself into whatever you have worked so hard over, which in turn transforms otherwise helpful or inspiring alternatives into small defeats.

Time Component:

- For the glaciers, the majority of the time spent on your draft will need to be spent at the front end, as you will need to invest a lot of time at the beginning in order to get a first draft as perfect and precise as possible.

Facing the Blank Page Yet Again

Once you have a better sense of what kind of drafter you are, you can then start to develop the strategies and rituals that will allow you to move from preliminary writing and outlining to drafting. We have already gone over some of the strategies before in terms of starting the writing process to begin—**prewriting and outlining**—which are themselves useful to refine, revise, and revisit as you sit down to draft your essay as it will actually appear.

See Somebody! (Almost) Anybody!

When drafting, it is always good to get feedback from persons whom you trust. Even if your professor will not always look at a draft, you can still attend office hours after outlining or prewriting to discuss your argument in a new light. Similarly, the Writing Lab is open to reviewing all forms of writing at all stages, so do not hesitate to come in even if you do not have a finished draft in hand.

Calendars, Your New Best Friend

Time can be your best friend or your greatest enemy, depending on how you approach writing assignments. After getting the prompt, make sure to write a tentative schedule that outlines

everything you must do in order to start and finish the paper before the deadline: reviewing readings, attending office hours, prewriting, outlining, drafting, revisions, more office hours, etc. There are a variety of free scheduling apps and software online, and academic advising can provide you with free paper calendars!

Here are some other helpful kick-starters for drafting:

Start in the Middle:

Just because your final draft will have an introduction, body, and conclusion does not mean that you have to start at the beginning. Often, you will end up discovering a more refined version of your thesis statement after you have written your first conclusion. It is always acceptable to start your draft in the body paragraphs if you have a better idea about what you want to say there than in any other section.

Use an Epigraph:

Some upper-level paper assignments will either ask for or allow for an epigraph/introductory quotation. The purpose of the quote is to both frame your analysis and spark the attention of your reader. Similarly, you can use an epigraph or two to inspire your draft, either by freewriting on why it fits with your paper or through using it as anchor to keep your focus and attention on developing basic theme of your paper. If your professor will not allow for a formal epigraph, copying some especially evocative quotes and then writing around them on the page will allow you to think out from the text and undoubtedly enhance your own level of consideration for the topic.

Reviewing Your Draft

You've finally crossed the finish line and completed a draft of your paper—congratulations! At this point, it can be tempting to hit the "submit" button without giving your paper another thought, but don't. Having enough words on the page does not mean the writing process is over yet. It is now time to review your draft in order to make sure that your argument is clear and your prose is polished before submission.

1. Structure

Are all the core components of a written assignment present in your paper? You'll want to make sure that the basic structural elements of a paper—an introduction, thesis statement, topic sentences, and a conclusion—are all there before you turn it in.

If you have time, try making a reverse outline. To begin, count the number of paragraphs in your paper and write a numbered list that long. Next to the first and last number, copy your thesis statement. By the remaining numbers, copy the corresponding topic sentence for that paragraph. If you discover paragraphs without a topic sentence, now is your chance to make sure you write one. (Alternatively, you can simply copy and paste your thesis statement, topic sentences, and concluding paragraphs into a separate document.) Read through your reverse outline once it's complete. Does your argument still make sense when the rest of the body is removed? It should. If it doesn't, you may find it easier to edit your draft using the reverse outline first, then make changes to the larger paper.

Quick Tip
If you don't have time to make a reverse outline, highlighting or underlining your thesis statement and topic sentences on a hard copy of your draft can help you follow your paper's organization.

Whether you create a reverse outline or work off your original draft, asking yourself the following questions can help you improve the organization of your paper.

- Are my ideas arranged in a logical sequence? Should I move any paragraphs to improve the trajectory of my argument?
- Do I make clear and logical transitions between body paragraphs?
- Does my thesis articulate the argument I present in my paper?
    - If not, consider whether it is best to change your body paragraphs to reflect the initial promise of your thesis or change your thesis to match the argument laid out in your body paragraphs.
- Does each body paragraph stick to one main idea? Is that idea presented by a topic sentence?

2. Grammar and Spelling

Proofreading is not the entire review process, but it is an important part. Don't let a misspelled word or improper punctuation distract your reader from the ideas at the heart of your paper. See our section on grammar to familiarize yourself with the most common grammatical pitfalls, then try the technique below to help you recognize errors as you proofread.

- **Read your paper aloud.** Read your paper at a conversational volume and pace, either to yourself or a willing friend. Are there places where you stumble over words or run out of breath? You may notice when reading aloud that you need to rephrase a section, adjust punctuation, or break up an overly complicated sentence.
- **Mix up your medium.** If you tend to proofread on the computer, try printing your paper and using a pen to mark mistakes on a hard copy, or vice versa. Presenting the paper in a different format can convince your mind it's reading an unfamiliar document, so you're more likely to recognize mistakes.
- **Take it one error at a time.** Proofreading a paper for one thing is far easier than proofreading a paper for twenty different things. Each time you review your paper, decide on a single type of error to look out for. Read through once looking for misspellings, a second time for comma errors, and so on. By focusing on one type of error each time you read through your paper, you increase your chances of catching them all. This technique is especially helpful if you know what kinds of mistakes you commonly make.
- **Get a fresh pair of eyes.** Writers often become so familiar with their own prose that they miss obvious errors during the proofreading process. Try having a friend or parent who's unfamiliar with the document read over your draft once you've finished. A second reader is likely to catch the things that you skimmed over.

Quick Tip
Don't rely solely on spell- and grammar-checking software. Programs like Microsoft Word and Grammarly are a useful first step, but remember that they can make mistakes too! These programs often miss errors such as omitted words and misused homophones, so be sure to proofread yourself.

3. Content

Flawless grammar and a solid structure are important, but clearly articulated ideas are what really make your paper stand out. This assignment is your chance to demonstrate what you've learned and how you think, so make sure your words are doing your ideas justice. Ensure that you're making a compelling argument by asking yourself the following questions:

- Have I met all the requirements of the assignment? (See our section "Reading the Prompt" for a more detailed discussion of this question.)
- Are the claims I make...
  ...accurate? Do I support them with appropriate evidence?
  ...consistent? Does my argument stay on track or take unnecessary detours?
  ...convincing? Do I demonstrate the relationship between my evidence and my claims and offer my own analysis?
- Are there ideas I should include that aren't currently present in my paper? Conversely, are there ideas I include that detract from my main argument? Are there any ideas I

should either omit or address? For more information on discussing ideas that don't conform to your thesis, see our section on incorporating conflicting evidence.

In addition, be aware of transition paragraphs (paragraphs that recapitulate what you've already said and describe what you plan to say next) in your writing. These paragraphs can be useful for organizing your thoughts during the drafting process, but often contain redundant information and can be struck during the revision phase.

Quick Tip
Now is also the time to make sure your citations are correct. Do you provide citations where necessary? Are the citations you provide matched with the appropriate sources?

Seeking Feedback

While there is no "best time" to get feedback during the writing process, many students find it useful to seek a second opinion after they have a finished draft. Getting feedback at this stage allows you to see how effectively your paper communicates your ideas to your audience and offers you the opportunity to correct and clarify things in your paper that stand out to the unfamiliar eye.

Academic Honesty

Getting feedback can be an extremely useful component of the writing process, so it's important to give any collaborators the proper credit. Failing to properly cite or acknowledge the sources you received help from while writing your paper could mean violating the rules of academic honesty. Some professors, for example, will require that students acknowledge any consultation with the Writing Lab or a writing mentor. Check with your professor to see how they would like you to credit the feedback you receive during the writing process.

Questions to Consider

The fact that you've put your words on paper does not mean your job is done. It is important that you continue to think critically about your work, even as you seek feedback from others. Make a list of concerns you have or parts of your paper you are unsure about and take it with you to share with the person giving you feedback. It may help to ask some of the following questions of your reviewer during your feedback session:

- Are there places where my paper doesn't make sense? What could I add or change to make those parts easier to understand?
- Have I proven my thesis statement? Are you convinced by the evidence I use?
- Is the organization of my paper logical? Are my transition sentences clear?

Sources of Feedback

The Problem: You need somebody to proofread for basic elements of grammar and style
Who: Your roommate
Why They're Useful: Your roommate (or any friend who isn't in your class) can offer a fresh pair of eyes with which to read your paper. They are unlikely to be invested in the finer details of your argument if they are not in your class, meaning they can devote more attention to making sure your prose is grammatical and flows smoothly.

The Problem: You want to see if your argument is convincing.
Who: Your classmate
Why They're Useful: Your classmate is familiar with the course material and is probably working on the same assignment. They will likely be able to offer ideas or critiques regarding the content of your argument that somebody who isn't in the class might not be able to.

The Problem: Worry about the structure of your paper or the framing of your thesis
Who: The Writing Lab
Why They're Useful: Reviewing your draft is what the Writing Lab staff are trained to do! While they may not be intimately familiar with your paper topic, they can offer useful input on your paper's organization, grammar, and/or style. Additionally, because they are likely not experts in the topic your paper concerns, Lab instructors can help you locate and revise parts of your paper that may not be clear to the general reader.

The Problem: All of the above
Who: A writing mentor
Why They're Useful: Writing mentors have the advantage of being trained in teaching the basics of composition *and* of being in the classroom with you. This means they will be fairly well-versed in the topic of your paper and able to evaluate it for content, while also helping with more universal components of well-written papers, such as structure and style.

The Problem: All of the above
Who: Your professor

Why They're Useful: Your professor is an expert in the course material and will be able to tell if your understanding of the subject matter is accurate. Your professor also wrote the prompt, so they will be looking to make sure you understood the task and used the appropriate sources. If you finish your draft in plenty of time, see whether your professor will meet to discuss your ideas or answer a few specific questions—there are few people who can give more valuable feedback.

Revision

Defining Revision

What it is: The word *revision* literally means to see or look at something again. When a professor asks you to revise, they are asking you to look at your paper from a fresh perspective. Revision is your chance to *re*think your main ideas, *re*vive any dull or lifeless prose, and *re*organize your argument to reflect what you've discovered. Look again at your paper and see how it can be improved.

Remember that writing is an integral part of the learning process. As you were writing your first draft, you may have discovered new ideas that helped you to fine-tune or even change your argument. Revision gives you the opportunity to consider the new things you learned while writing your first draft and improve your second draft by altering it to reflect these ideas.

From the Experts

"I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers."

—Vladimir Nabokov

"The more you leave out, the more you highlight what you leave in."

—Henry Green

What it is not: Revision is not just proofreading or any other form of editing that doesn't require you to critically reflect on the *content* of your writing. Fixing commas and spelling errors or rewording a messy sentence can be useful, but these methods cannot replace taking the time to really evaluate what you've written.

When can it happen: Ideally, after you finish a draft of your paper, you will set aside time for revision before submitting the paper to your professor. Remember that the best revision takes time—time that you may not always have between finishing your draft and turning it in. (If you want to fine-tune your paper before turning it in, but don't have time for true revision, see our section "Reviewing Your Draft" for approaches you can use.) Also, recognizing the tremendous value of revision, professors will often ask students to revise their papers after receiving their feedback.

Responding to Feedback

If you're revising your paper after having already turned in your first draft, you have likely received feedback from your professor, the Writing Lab, your class writing mentor, or a peer—or possibly some combination of the three. The following strategies can help you make the most of the feedback you've been given:

1. **Read *all* the feedback.** This one seems obvious, but many students tend to skim over the feedback they're given. Whoever took the time to offer you feedback also took the time to think critically about what you've written, and their comments will reflect that. Committing to reading and being receptive to those comments now will likely save you time later on in the revision process.
2. **Don't be intimidated.** Just because your professor wrote all over your paper does not mean that the paper was bad. Many professors offer extra feedback if they feel a paper has potential, and it can often be easier to revise when starting off with ample feedback anyway.
3. **Ask questions.** Having trouble reading your professor's untidy scrawl? Unsure exactly what they mean by "wordy" or "ineffective"? If you find any feedback to be unclear, be sure to ask your professor what he or she meant by a question or piece of advice. Often the Writing Lab or a writing mentor can also help you process the feedback you've received. In talking it out, you may even find that there is a simpler way to resolve an issue or discover new directions for your project.
4. **Know when to say "no."** If you simply return to your paper and systematically change everything that your professor marked, you are not truly revising. Of course, if your professor notes that you need a comma in a certain place or more convincing evidence to support a claim, you'd do well to take their advice. However, remember that revision asks you to think critically about what you've written. If after doing so, you still stand by the argument your professor questioned or a source they were unsure about, don't always feel pressured to change it. Do, however, make sure to justify in your paper whatever you decide to do. Your writing should reflect what you believe, but it should also be able to communicate those beliefs to your audience convincingly.

Quick Tip
Read any comments you've been given even if you received a grade you're satisfied with or weren't asked to do a revision. This feedback can still help you recognize areas in your writing that are in need of improvement or strengths you

should utilize more frequently.

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Substantive vs. Surface Revision

As we've explained above, revision consists of two distinct processes: (1) engaging with the *content* of your writing, and (2) checking prose for errors and revising for clarity. The former is what we call substantive revision (which relates to substantive issues, called higher order concerns, or HOCs), while the latter is called surface revision (often related to relatively simple issues known as lower order concerns, or LOCs). Both are important for improving the overall quality of your paper though your approach to each method will differ slightly.

Quick Tip
Throwing out sentences or whole sections of your draft is a likely outcome of revision and will ultimately improve your paper. If you are struggling to get rid of something you've written, try saving it to a separate word document on your computer. You'll free up space and be able to do the revision you need, but your carefully-crafted prose won't have disappeared forever.

Substantive Revision

Substantive revision will be more time-consuming than its counterpart, but it will also do far more to improve your writing. Feedback is a great place to start if you're planning on doing substantive revision, but if you don't have much feedback to go on or just want some additional things to consider, take a look at the following:

- **Thesis Statement:** Ask yourself whether your thesis statement is the most important and engaging claim of your paper. Is it so broad that it loses all meaning? Is it so narrow that it fails to accurately foreshadow the contents of your paper? Do you even still agree with your main claim? Your thesis tells the reader what to expect from your argument, how you prove it, and why it is significant, so any revision you do will likely impact how you present your thesis. Now is the time to push beyond your first idea (or second, or third) and make sure that your thesis accounts for everything you have learned and does not avoid evidence that might complicate or contradict it. Click here for a more in-depth discussion of thesis statements.

- **Development:** Make sure you do in your paper what your thesis promises you will. Ensure that each of your claims is stated clearly and supported by appropriate evidence. Each piece of evidence must be accompanied by your own textual analysis. Finally, ask

yourself whether the development of your discussion follows the most logical arc for the case you are trying to make. Are there places where the reader would benefit from more details or specific language? Does your paper seem unbalanced, with some of your points receiving far more attention than others? If so, can you flesh out these smaller paragraphs, or are they minor enough that it is better to omit them from your paper entirely?

- **Audience:** If you haven't done so already, take the time to consider your audience. Even if your professor will be the only other person reading your work, chances are your imagined audience is somebody less familiar with the material. When in doubt, follow this advice: write a paper that your peer or colleague could understand without too much difficulty (i.e., avoid sections loaded with too much disciplinary jargon), but not so introductory that it fails to say anything new and meaningful.
- **Style:** Make sure that your writing style does not interfere with your ability to communicate ideas effectively. Structure your sentences in a way that is clear and easy to follow and offers variation in structure when possible. Evaluate your word choice and keep an eye out for common pitfalls such as a reliance on the passive voice. See our section on style for more ideas on how to communicate your ideas effectively and with flair.

Quick Tip
After finishing a draft, writers will often find the most well-articulated version of their thesis statement in the conclusion. Consider revising your thesis by drawing on what you say in the conclusion and see our section on paper conclusions for ways to fill that new empty space at the end of your paper.

Try This: What is it saying? What is it doing?

This exercise from the Stanford Teaching Commons asks writers to think critically about the organization and wording of their paper by pausing after every paragraph to answer two basic questions:(1) What is the paragraph saying? (2) What is the paragraph doing?

Take the time to read through your paper and answer these two questions for every paragraph. First, describe what the paragraph *says* by articulating what it literally means. Then, describe what the paragraph *does* by explaining what purpose the paragraph serves in furthering your argument. Write the answer to each question as a complete sentence, and make note of any paragraphs where you have difficulty answering one or both of these questions. Once you've finished, return to the paragraphs you had difficulty with—if it is a challenge to figure out what a paragraph is saying or doing, your ideas in that section likely need to be fleshed out in further detail or reworded to be conveyed more clearly.

Try This: Make a reverse outline. Click here to learn how.

Surface Revision

Once you've taken care of your substantive revision, you'll want to make sure you give your paper its final polish. Check your writing for errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation, and make sure your citations are correct and formatted properly. Double- or triple-check for any mistakes you make frequently so that your paper reads as smoothly as possible. For more ideas about surface revision, visit our section on grammar to familiarize yourself with some of the most common errors writers make, then head here for some useful proofreading techniques.

Quick Tip
A Good Paper is a Good Paper
At one time or another, most students have felt that there is nothing wrong with their writing, and that the professor just doesn't like it or understand it. However, that feeling is simply stubborn and false. Every professor works from criteria for what a good paper is, criteria that any student can find out and apply. While it is true that all professors are different and have different expectations or standards, most professors are willing to tell you what they want in a paper and to talk over your individual areas of strength and weakness as a writer.

What Do with Feedback From Professors:

Feedback from your professors will be one the most rewarding and frustrating aspects of your academic experience at Grinnell. Whether it be constructive criticism or outright praise, your professor's comments will guide your learning process and push your development as a thinker. However, it is common for students to receive feedback and either do nothing with it or be so focused on it, regardless of whether it was positive or negative, that they let one piece of feedback dictate the rest of their writing for a long time. For this reason, you should always reciprocate the time and energy that your professors put into their comments by making sure that you read and consider this feedback carefully and with an eye toward continuous improvement. This process of production, critique, and revision is all a necessary and ultimately beneficial part of academic writing.

Different Levels of Feedback

In order to better understand and respond to feedback, every student should realize that there is no correlation between grade and amount or intensity of feedback. Some papers that are practically journal-ready receive copious amounts of comments and critiques; conversely,

some weak papers receive very little commentary. One of the main reasons for the lack of relationship between feedback and grading is that there are different levels of feedback on any given assignment and different considerations or intentions that a professor may have. A professor's comments could focus on anything and everything from grammar and sentence-level considerations and the structure and clarity of your argument to how you conducted and then presented your research, or even more subjective consideration of style, diction, and tone. Because feedback can cover so many different aspects of the writing and research process, the single best thing you can do with feedback after reading it is to consult someone, whether it be your professor or someone at the Writing Lab, in order to talk it all through.

Office Hours

While it is, of course, advisable to talk over your comments *after* you receive your paper, also talk to your professor *beforehand*. Countless students have experienced that moment when they get their graded paper back and approach the professor in order to say, "What I really meant to write was…." The problem with this approach is that the professor could not know what you really meant to say when reading your paper unless you already said what you meant to begin with--all your professor has in order to evaluate your paper is whatever you turn in.

The easiest way to avoid this situation is to come to office hours well before the deadline**.** Even if you do not have a first draft or your professor would not read a draft to begin with, you can usually talk through your thesis or any of your other main ideas with almost any professor. In fact, professors enjoy hearing students talk about their work as Grinnell is in an undergraduate-focused college filled with faculty who like guiding student research and writing. Likewise, the Writing Lab is always open to helping students on any part of the writing process, from working through a prompt to polishing a final draft.

Quick Tip
Science Versus Humanities
Titles are meant to be evocative, precise, and descriptive. However, they serve different functions in different disciplines. For the purposes of most humanities and social science papers, titles should be concise and intriguing. Conversely, titles in the sciences are often much longer and more involved due to how specific they have to be in describing what has been researched.

Parts of a Paper

Title

Even though it sits on the top of the paper and will be the first thing that the audience or professor encounters, titles can be overlooked by writers. Your title will not only frame your analysis by signaling the content of your paper or the focus of your argument, but it will also show your audience how much time and effort you have put into considering your topic.

Questions for Drafting an Effective Title

1. **Is it specific to *my paper?***

Whether you are writing an essay for a class, for a conference presentation, or for publication, chances are someone else has written on your topic. Some scholars, either through experience or hubris, choose to title their works in vague or sweeping language, but it is best practice for undergraduate writers to prize specificity, both for your own writing and for your professors who have read piles and piles of similar papers. Titles such as "United States Foreign Policy and War," "Love in Shakespeare's Dramas," or "Satire in Boccaccio's *Decameron*" tell your audience very little about *your* understanding or ideas on any of those topics. These examples present the topic of a paper without depicting the writer's own angle or specific view.
Here are some good examples of specific academic titles from humanities and social science papers:

- "A Very Poisoned Cream Puff: The California Eugenics Movement Through Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*"
- "The Six-Shooter Market: 19th Century Gunfighting as Violence Enterprise"
- "Thousands of New *Sankaras*: Resistance and Struggle in Burkina Faso"
- "The Tyranny of the Gift: Sacrificial Violence in Living Donor Transplants"
- "The Trials of Frederick Hollick: Obscenity, Sex Education, and Medical Democracy in the Antebellum United States"

2. **Is it too long or too short?**

The following formula for constructing titles has become a popular practice in academic writing: **quotation/ question/interesting phrase: more specific phrase about the topic.** This style of titling papers can be effective in delivering a compelling, robust, yet focused title; however, there is always the danger of overdoing either the quotation or the phrase after the colon, thus producing an overly lengthy title. Conversely, one or two word titles such as "War," "Religion and Politics," or "Two Theories on Government" are far too vague even

within the confines of a prompt to adequately tell your audience what your specific paper is about. Here are just a few examples of some (intentionally) unruly academic titles:

- "SearCh for humourIstic and Extravagant acroNyms and Thoroughly Inappropriate names For Important Clinical trials (SCIENTIFIC): qualitative and quantitative systematic study"
- "I Kant Smile Without Hume: Variations on a tune by Barry Prolegomanilow"
- "Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly"

3. Would I or someone interested in the topic find the title compelling or significant?

A final litmus test to run when drafting your title is the more subjective question of whether someone with a general interest in the topic will be intrigued enough to keep reading. For instance, if you were writing a paper on *Beowulf*, and you simply titled it "Beowulf: A Tragic Hero," someone with a general knowledge of the work may already know about its tragic elements and not be interested in reading your paper. Titles should be a little evocative, either through the subject matter, the themes presented, or through a particular wording or turn of phrase. J.R.R. Tolkien's "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" is a great example of this kind of title, as Tolkien slyly introduces the topic of his essay—the poor critical reception of *Beowulf* in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—by implying in the title that the critics are monsters.

If It's First, Write It Last

Practically every part of your first draft will be revised to some extent, including your title, so do not fret if you cannot think of an effective one right away. Because the title should reflect the final version of your argument, if you try to constrain the paper to fit your preliminary title, you will probably limit yourself unnecessarily. The best titles are usually conjured last, once you have the clearest idea about what your argument is and how it develops.

Introduction

Opening the Dam (Without the Flood)

Even after effective prewriting and outlining, student writers often dread having to compose the first line of the paper. Everyone wants to have the perfect, crisp, and attention-grabbing opener from which the rest of the paper will flow with ease. If we think of writing as a flow,

much like thinking, then introductions can feel like a dam that is stopping all our interesting ideas from coming out. However, you are the architect of this dam. You can tear it down, rebuild it, and refine it, brick-by-brick, so that it channels, rather than blocks, your flow of ideas.

In order to overcome this dilemma, you have to recognize that whatever introduction you draft will be just that, a draft. Once drafted, most introductions seem to entrench themselves in the page as if written in stone. Writers then become unwilling to change or alter their introductions because it feels like starting over after some kind of defeat. Instead, you should think of revision as a necessary and beneficial part of the process that is equally applicable to all parts of the paper, especially in regards to how you start and finish it. After that calming moment of acceptance, you can slowly start to take down the dam, brick-by-brick, until you have a well curated flow of ideas that will become your paper.

Quick Tip
Finding Your Idols
Whether in a class or through personal reading, we are all drawn to certain styles of academic and analytic writing. Depending on your discipline, select the introductions from pieces by a few of your favorite thinkers and annotate them for what you find effective in their style, precision, or presentation.

In order to do so, it is necessary to know what an introduction is, how it functions in your paper, and some of the major tendencies and bad habits that all of us have when we draft introductions.

Anatomy of an Introduction

In its most basic form, the introduction is the first paragraph or set of paragraphs that begins any essay. At the minimum, introductions should contain the following: (1) an opening line or lines that will capture the reader's interest while setting the stage for what follows; (2) some discussion of either the background of your topic, the summary of a problem, a review of past literature or thinking, or the contours of a question that you intend to answer; (3) a thesis statement that acts as your answer, analysis, or solution to the background or problem you provided earlier.

Quick Tip
Getting Traction
When drafting your introduction, it is okay to start off sounding broad, sweeping, or imprecise. Whatever will help you get started on drafting and organizing your ideas during the early stages is great! Just make sure to refine, sharpen, and specify your introduction as you progress.

Function of an Introduction

Introductions are vital to the structure and integrity of your paper for two reasons: they act as first impressions, and they invite your reader to consider your analysis. Regardless of how novel your thesis, how solid your evidence, or how compelling the remainder of the paper may be, your reader or audience cannot access any of those aspects of your work without something to bring them in. Introductions are often referred to as the roadmap for your paper precisely because they allow the audience to navigate a broad field of knowledge.

The Gift of Revision

The necessity of revision is something that we stress throughout this guide. For many writers, the parts of their papers that will change the most will be whatever they write first, namely the title, introduction, and thesis. Accepting revision for what it is early on in the writing process—the gift of a second chance or new idea—will allow you to take advantage of its benefits. One strategy for sharpening early essay sections would be to draft a working thesis statement, outline your body paragraphs, try your hand at a conclusion, and then and only then, return to your introduction and title. By that point, you will have already worked your way through the substantive parts of your essay and will have a clearer idea about your argument, as well as what its major themes and motifs are and how it fits into a larger discussion over a more general topic.

The First Line:

Just as you must narrow your topic down in order to begin to work on it or write within it, your introduction must do the same work of guiding you and your audience through uncertain terrain. Your audience will always be more likely to follow your argument or be persuaded if they know where you are taking them.

The first line, often the cause for much anxiety or planning, is truly the first opportunity your paper has to hook an audience. Thankfully, there are many types of hooks available depending on the discipline and topic:

1. Anecdote

Depending on the type of paper, either a personal anecdote or one borrowed from an ethnographic testimony, interview, or survey could provide an intimate or evocative beginning to your paper.

- "Driving into Iraq just after the 2003 invasion felt like driving into the future." —Roy Scranton, *Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene*
- "I am competitive. I try to keep this to myself, but oh, in my heart of hearts, I want to win anything that can be won." —Roxane Gay, "Food TV's Sadistic Glee"

2. Fact or Statistic

A properly contextualized historical fact or statistic can open your paper in an immediately intriguing way. Additionally, it can be helpful for when you, the writer, get stuck, as you will have to spend some time explaining or framing the fact or statistic in your introduction.

- "When most people consider the ten largest economies in the world, few of us would think to include the state of California."
- "Despite the scope of Britain's colonial legacy, the British empire's forced famine campaigns in India often go unmentioned, even though between 12 million and 29 million Indians lost their lives due to starvation alone."

3. Quotation

Quotations can be especially effective for opening lines, whether from the class material or an outside source. A good opening quote will often highlight your close reading of the material, as well as set the stage for the remainder of your paper in an interesting way.

- The following examples are from recent Grinnell student essays:
    - "Film, as a marker for a society's 'attitudes, beliefs, and standards, as well as projections of desired realities,' acts as an example for what an audience is willing to consume, and what they are willing to 'digest as truth'" (Bazzini et al. 1997:532).
    - "Ruminating on the great shifts in his writing career, John Steinbeck remarked pointedly in a 1939 radio interview that 'present-day kings aren't very inspiring, the gods are on vacation, and the only heroes left are *scientists and the poor'* [emphasis mine] " (Astro 429).

4. A Bold Claim, Interesting Take, or Contrast

Finally, an interesting comparison, shocking argument, or hard-hitting claim can pique your audience's interest and draw them into your analysis. Just as in the previous section, each of the following examples comes from Grinnell students' papers.

- "Like children playing with their tin soldiers and painted dolls, the gods in the *Iliad* toy with their earthly subjects, dipping in and out of the narration with the ease and fluidity of those not bound by mortal chains."

- "The end of the Civil War ushered in a slow decline of the elite, white southern plantation owners, a loss bitterly felt and poorly understood by those who experienced it."

Common Tendencies, Better Practices:

Some writers develop some bad impulses for starting essays that fall into the clichés outlined below. The majority of the impulses that spark bad openings are in fact rooted in good ideas, curiosity, or genuine thinking, so it is important to move on from these common tendencies and develop better practices rooted in those same impulses.

1. The Copycat

- What It Looks Like: copying the language of the prompt verbatim or practically verbatim in the introduction and in the language of the thesis.
    - Below is a prompt from an introductory Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies Class:
        - In "African American Women and the Struggle for the Vote" Rosalyn Terborg-Penn argued that "The appearance of race solidarity, in the face of disunity among Black and white feminists, created a cleavage in the women's movement that would be difficult to mend..." (p.135). From its abolitionist beginnings to the present, the issue of race has mobilized and inspired feminists. Yet it has also proven one of the most divisive issues within the feminist movement. Analyze the relationship between race, gender, and feminism by answering the question: What was the "legacy" of first wave feminism and how did it affect the movement's second wave? Papers should consist of 3-4 double spaced pages. You should use Terborg-Penn's argument to guide you but also draw broadly from the readings for the class, using both WVFV and the readings from feminists themselves to support your argument...All citation should be Chicago style. Papers are due in class, Friday, March 2.
    - A "copycat" introduction would resemble something like this:
        - "In analyzing the different waves of feminist thought and practice, race arises as a central issue that has spawned both mobilization and interior division. It is clear that the relationship between race, gender, and feminism as found in feminism's first wave affected the movement's second wave. The legacy of first wave feminism is X… and it in turn affected second wave feminism in Y ways…"

- Better Practices:
    - Dissect the prompt to understand what it is asking for:
        - What is the relationship between race, gender, and feminism as seen in the transition from the first to second waves?
        - What is the first wave's legacy?
            - Support essay with Terborg-Penn's argument and class readings
    - Incorporate the language of the prompt without directly copying it
    - Use your source material and your own interpretations to balance where you incorporate the language of the class or the jargon of the discipline and where you introduce your own analysis of the common concepts
        - The professor will need to recognize core concepts and key ideas early on, but you can always structure your analysis of them without copying the prompt.

2. The Grand Historian

- What It Looks Like: beginning with a history of the world, of humankind, or of your thought process in arriving at your idea.
    - "Humankind has always moved towards progress…"
    - "In the history of the modern world, we have seen many wars…"
    - "When researching this topic, I first considered X before moving on to Y and eventually settling on Z…"
- Better Practices:
    - Use a more specific historical or contextual frame
        - "England's 'Glorious Revolution' set the stage for the development of parliamentary government in a once monarchical state."
        - "Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* forces analysts of slavery to consider the horrid practice with a comparative and trans-historical lens."

3. Merriam Webster:

- What It Looks Like: opening the essay with the hackneyed phrase, "Webster defines X as…"
- Better Practices:
    - Define jargon or discipline specific terminology within the context of the essay or literature at large:
        - "Levitsky and Way implicitly incorporate Foucault's notion of bio-power into their analysis of the "fourth face of a power," which they define as…"

- "Civil society for Tocqueville in the American context differs greatly from Sheri Berman's application of the term to post-Weimar Germany in the following ways…"

Write What Must Be Changed (Adapted from University of Chicago's "Writing in College" series)

One way to ensure that you will go back and edit your introduction while still making solid analytic headway on your draft is to write a sentence or two about what exactly your paper is about in the most formulaic or straightforward terms possible. You will have to change what you write eventually, but it will provide a direct layout of what you are trying to say that will in turn allow you to be more polished and precise later on.

- Example: **"My analysis addresses X in order to show why/how/what is or what is not the case about Y."**
    - "My analysis addresses references to Greek mythology in T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland' in in order to show how Eliot conceives of the moral and intellectual decline of Western civilization."

Thesis Statements

What is a thesis statement?

Any argument that you have ever read or heard has been driven by a thesis statement; in fact, it would not have been an argument without one. Usually written in one or two sentences found at the end of an introduction, a thesis statement delivers the crux of your analysis and will act as the point around which the rest of your essay revolves. **The thesis will tell your audience the point of your argument, why that point matters or should matter, and the significance of your point.** In sum, your thesis is both your roadmap to the rest of your paper when you draft and the binding statement that holds the rest of your paper together and makes it comprehensible to an audience.

Quick Tip
No Code-Cracking!
A common mistake in thesis statements is that they incorporate coded or unexplained language that the reader will not understand at that point in the paper. It is always important to use language in your thesis that a reader, having only read your introduction, could understand the meaning or importance of.

A Checklist for a Strong Thesis Statement

1. Have I responded to the prompt?

Every paper you will write at Grinnell will come to you first as a prompt [link to prompt section]. Whether vague or extensive, prompts require answers, and your answer will provide the basis for your thesis statement. It follows then that the first thing you should ask yourself is "have I done what is asked of me by the assignment?" If you have been assigned a prompt asking you to compare presidential and parliamentary political systems and you hand in a paper on why presidential systems are so great without any mention of parliamentary systems, then you have only written half of the paper. Even if your thesis matches the rest of the checklist criteria, without answering the question or fully responding to the prompt, your thesis will be incomplete.

2. Does My Thesis Present an Argument?

A thesis articulates an argument. That means that a thesis statement does not merely summarize the topic, but provides a claim that an audience can either choose to adopt or dispute. In short, a thesis requires support. Your thesis should then encapsulate all of the elements of an argument: **claim, evidence, and significance.** Without a thesis that makes a claim, directs the reader towards evidence, and points to its significance, you will have nothing substantial to elaborate on or develop in the remainder of your essay.

3. Does My Thesis Show the Audience that I Know My Topic?

A strong thesis will demonstrate that you have command over your topic. In order to highlight your knowledge, your thesis should use **specific language**, be **limited in scope,** and **direct your audience** towards the rest of the paper. You can think of your thesis as a guide, which means that it should know the territory, know where within the territory it is headed, and be able to tell others how to get there. Even if you know the topic very well, you need to ensure that your argument is consistently accessible to your audience.

If you need more help or suggestions, English professor Erik Simpson has put together a very useful guide to developing a strong thesis statement: "Five Ways of Looking at a Thesis."

The Three "Magic" Questions

Outside of the checklist provided above, three simple questions can transform almost any weak working thesis into a strong final thesis: **"how?" "why?" and "so what?"** As simple as they may be, each of those questions connects to some of the most common issues regarding thesis statements, such as unspecific language, overly broad scope, lack of significance, and aimlessness.

Quick Tip
No Need to Show, Just Go!
A common fallback for writers who get stuck drafting their thesis is to go with the "I will show X" thesis. The problem with that construction is that it does not actually tell anyone your argument—it only tells people that you are telling them about your argument! In short, saying, "I will show" is only describing your argument, without actually making one.

Let's take a weak thesis statement and show how it transforms after answering each one of these necessary questions:

- Weak Thesis Statement: I will show that John Steinbeck's tragic novella *Of Mice and Men* depicts popular eugenic ideas of the 1930s.
    - How?
        - ~~I will show that~~ John Steinbeck's tragic novella *Of Mice and Men* highlights popular eugenic ideas of the 1930s through his depiction of Lenny, Crooks, and Curley's wife.
            - See the above quick tip for why "I will show" must go!
    - Why?
        - During the peak of Steinbeck's writing career, eugenics was one of the mainstream forms of race science in the United States. Though a eugenic reading has been applied to *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck's tragic novella *Of Mice and Men* is also rife with popular eugenic ideas concerning heredity, the effects of dysgenic partnership on heredity, and essentialist race-thinking as found in his treatment of Lenny, Crooks, and Curley's wife.

Quick Tip
Write It First, Write It Last
When drafting your introduction, think of it as a prewriting exercise. Write anything and everything you think should or might be included in an introduction to your topic onto a Word document: sentences, fragments, lists, etc. After that, do not touch your introduction again until after you have drafted at least a few of your body paragraphs and gathered your supporting evidence.

- So What?
    - During the peak of Steinbeck's writing career, eugenics dominated mainstream race science and captivated the public across the nation. Though a eugenic reading has been applied to *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck's tragic novella *Of Mice and Men* is also rife with popular eugenic ideas concerning the selection of partners, the effects of dysgenic partnership on genetic purity, and the primordial differences between white and non-white races, as found in his treatment of Lenny, Crooks, and Curley's wife. In addition to fleshing out how these notions work within the novella, a eugenic reading of *Of Mice and Men* also reorients common readings of Lenny's and Crooks' relationship away from solidarity and towards irreconcilable division, as well as allowing newer sociological theories of hobo and tramp archetypes that reckon with race to be applied to the novella.

Clearly, each of the three questions caused the thesis to change form, expand in length, and cover new considerations. However, the original "weak thesis"—"I will show that John Steinbeck's tragic novella *Of Mice and Men* depicts popular eugenic ideas of the 1930s"—would still be an effective working thesis for a draft or outline, as it requires the author to gather evidence, consider the contours and key ideas of the thesis, and eventually turn it into something argumentative as opposed to merely descriptive.

Body Paragraphs

If the thesis acts as a guide or roadmap to your paper, then your body paragraphs are key stops and landmarks along the way that make the trip worthwhile. Seeing as they make up the bulk of your essay, each paragraph has to have an intended purpose and function well enough to achieve that purpose within the argument. Even though the number, length, and content of each of these paragraphs will change with every assignment, it is nonetheless important to remember that **each paragraph must work in some way to assist or strengthen your thesis statement**.

Quick Tip
Write To Think, Not How You Think
It is very common for writers, especially during earlier drafts, to write like they think. In fact, writing like you think will probably be the easiest and most advisable way to get your thoughts on the paper! However, even if you believe that you are the most methodical and clear thinker out there, it is more than likely that no one else will be able to follow your thought process without the aid of transitions and a more general eye to organization that considers an audience.

Anatomy of a Body Paragraph:

Just as all body paragraphs will have to support your thesis despite variable content, all body paragraphs also retain specific structural elements that have to be included and organized in order for them to function in their supporting role:

- **Transition (s)**
- **Topic Sentence**
- **Evidence**
- **Analysis of Significance**

One popular and effective way of visualizing the flow of these components within body paragraphs is as a **funnel or inverted triangle.** The triangle is turned on its head because it moves from its broadest part, which in this case would be the general introductory information and guiding point of the paragraph, to narrower and more specific elements, such as the direction of your argument, the evidence that allows your argument to move forward, and a statement of significance as to why and how this paragraph supports your thesis. Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL) has a good representation of this model.

General Criteria for Powerful Paragraphs

When drafting your body paragraphs, consider some general criteria for what makes a paragraph especially effective:

1. Organizational Coherence/Unity

Each paragraph in your essay should revolve around one central claim or idea. In order to promote coherence or unity in your paragraphs, you will have to structure the order and interaction of each of your sentences in such a way that they keep the guiding claim of your paragraph singular and clear.

2. Content Cohesion

In order to achieve internal cohesion for your paragraphs, you should strive to have the content of each of your sentences serve that unifying idea by providing information or evidence that supports the claim, makes the claim more robust, or states how the claim is significant for your overall argument.

3. Clear Relation to Thesis

It is always important to keep in mind why you are writing body paragraphs to begin with: **to support your thesis and further explain your argument to an audience.** It is very easy to

draft grammatically sound and conceptually interesting paragraphs that have little to do with your central argument. In short, each of your body paragraphs must relate back to your thesis, so that they are not floating in the white space of your paper, untethered to anything else.

4. Full Development of Ideas

While this may be more difficult to discern than some of the other criteria, you should always be asking yourself if the way that you are presenting your ideas is adequate in terms of evidence, explanation, and relevance to the rest of your argument. In general, be wary of a series of short paragraphs. If a paragraph is only 2-4 sentences long, it is likely undeveloped. Ask yourself whether you can combine a series of short paragraphs, using a broader topic sentence. If not, either develop each paragraph more fully, or move the point you are making to another paragraph.

Quick Tip
Paragraph Length
Typically, a strong, fully developed paragraph takes up a half of a page of written text. Much longer than half, or even three quarters of a page, and you have likely slid into another topic or repeated yourself in some way. Conversely, if your paragraph is much shorter, then you have likely not fully developed the idea. With paragraph length in mind, you can better discern how many paragraphs a given paper's page length requires.

Transitions

It is easy for writers with good, robust arguments to have a solid idea of where their papers are headed and how they will get there; however, many of us can lose our audience if we do not ensure that we make it clear to others how we move within our own argument. This tendency to assume the direction or development of your paper can lead to writers leaving key transitions or connections in their minds and off the page.

Transitions can take the form of full sentences, short phrases, or even single words. Even though they may only take up a small amount of your overall paper, they are as important to the function of an essay as turn signals are to a car or signs are to a road: they allow your audience to follow the path you set for them and understand how your evidence leads to your conclusion.

Common Categories of Transitions

Here is a table of a few common categories of transitions and what they signal to a reader:

Transition Type	Examples
Location	against, alongside, amid, behind, beside, between, into, near, throughout
Time	after, before, during, first, prior to, until, meanwhile, in the meantime
Comparison	also, as, similarly, like, in the same manner
Contrast	but, however, even so, yet, on the contrary, conversely, counter to, still
Emphasis	again, to repeat, with this in mind, for this reason, in fact
Conclude/Summarize	as a result, consequently, therefore, due to, all in all, in short
Add Information	additionally, besides, equally important, moreover, together with
Clarification	that is, in other words, put another way, to clarify, for instance

Additionally, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of North Carolina's Writing Center, and Michigan State University all have more comprehensive tables of transitions grouped by logical relationship that will be sure to help you as you organize your essays.

Topic Sentences

Usually located as the first or second sentence following a transition, topic sentences state the main idea or argument of the body paragraph. Your topic sentence will serve as the best representative for the unifying thought of each paragraph. In order to organize the remainder of your paragraph—evidence, analysis, and significance—around the topic sentence, it needs to relate to or develop your thesis while still presenting an argument that can be supported through evidence. The more compelling and tight the topic sentence, the easier it is to support, show the significance of, and link back to your thesis.

Here are some examples of how to develop a topic sentence from a more general topic as would be found in an outline or early draft:

- From the outline:
    - “For the entirety of the Burkina Faso’s independent history, its teachers’ unions resisted autocratic take over.”
    - “In its current form, this working topic sentence reads more like a statement of fact or historical summary than an argument.”
- “How?”
    - “Burkina Faso’s labor and teachers’ unions were not co-opted by autocratic pressures due to the rise of civil society power and social movements after the country’s independence.”
- “Why?”
    - “After Burkina Faso gained independence from France, the political makeup of the state shifted equal power to civil society actors and to the fledgling local government in the absence of the colonial occupier.”
- “So What?”
    - “After Burkina Faso gained independence from France, the political makeup of the state shifted equal power to civil society actors and to the fledgling government. In the vacuum of colonial oversight, this newfound capacity ensured that informal civil society actors and organizations would always be considered a part of governance alongside the formal state, a public consideration that ensured the survival of the teachers’ unions and labor unions during the waves of autocracy that befell the country between the 1960s and 1980s.”

Evidence

For practically all academic writing, any argument that you make will require evidence. Whether quantitative or qualitative, evidence is required across the disciplines in order for an argument to be made at all, let alone effectively. Further, the type, quality, and presentation of that evidence will be key criteria in determining the legitimacy and effectiveness of your claims. The bulk of your body paragraphs will be concerned with presenting evidence, discussing the relevance of that evidence to your topic thesis, and arguing for the relative significance of that evidence to both your thesis and the topic or discourse at large.

Quick Tip
Paragraphs Are Mini Essays
When drafting your body paragraphs, it is useful to consider them as miniature essays. Your transition works as a small introduction, your topic sentence acts as your thesis, your evidence acts as support or further elaboration, and your final analytic statement or claim of significance functions as a conclusion. Therefore, all of the tips and strategies in each of these sections can be applied on a smaller scale to individual paragraphs as well.

What follows in this section is a more general discussion about the role evidence plays in the structure of your essay, and not a discussion of how to conduct research or evaluate evidence, which can be found instead in the section of the guide titled **"The Research Process."** To begin, here are some key caveats to keep in mind when first considering how to use evidence in the supporting sentences of your paragraphs:

Give Your Evidence a Voice

As stated above, evidence is always a key part of an argument; however, it alone is not the argument. Any piece of evidence you use, regardless of how compelling or groundbreaking it is, has to have its relevance and purpose explained in the sentences surrounding it. Evidence can and does speak volumes, but it does not speak for itself. Rather, you must animate it through your own contextualization and elaboration.

Standards of Evidence Change Within and Across Disciplines

Relevance to the paper topic or prompt is always something to consider when building support for any argument. Each discipline has specific criteria for what it considers a valid piece of evidence to be, and even interdisciplinary courses or assignments still retain standards for what counts as admissible support and what does not. It is a great practice to get in the habit of visiting your professor's office hours, as well as Burling's research librarians and tutors, in order to talk through how to go about properly supporting an argument with research.

Quality Over Quantity

Regardless of essay length, you also need to be conscious about what your evidence does for the development, clarification, or support of your thesis and its corresponding topic sentence. A few well connected, contextualized, and specific pieces of evidence will accomplish so much more in terms of supporting a topic sentence than either a wall of partially explained fragments or one monolithic example that is over-relied on. Though a common cliché in most cases, the phrase "quality over quantity" is apt when it comes to evaluating evidence.

Quotations:

Expected by professors in virtually all social sciences and humanities essays, quotations are direct replications of another author's words. The use of quotations is a necessary aspect of incorporating or challenging the work of others, as they provide precise textual evidence that you can then build your own arguments on. Just like other forms of evidence, all of the above caveats will apply equally to the use of quotes:

- **Quotations must be explained**
- **Quotations must come from legitimate sources within your chosen discipline(s)**
- **Quotations must be strategically selected, properly referenced, and used purposefully**

When and Why We Use Quotations

Because the majority of your paper will be filled with your own original arguments and analysis of sources, you should deploy quotes for specific purposes, **namely to support your thesis and relevant topic sentences and to persuade your audience by demonstrating that you have a command over the relevant literature or knowledge**. Adapted from the University of North Carolina's guidelines for quotations, this checklist will ensure that you use them effectively and develop their context and significance completely:

1. Context

As stated previously, any piece of evidence that you use requires contextualization. Even the most powerful or straightforward quotes mean little to an argument if they are left to fend for themselves. Whether through a historical, philosophical, or even anecdotal frame, encasing your quote in a frame of reference will make your evidence internally accessible to your audience and demonstrate that you are not simply cherry-picking from every source that agrees with your argument.

2. Attribution

Your audience should always be able to tell where your analysis ends and the work of others begins. In order to make sure that happens, attribute your quotes by either introducing the author or otherwise making it clear at the *sentence level* which words are yours and which words are someone else's.

3. Significance

Just as all quotations need to be contextualized, they also need to be made relevant to your own analysis if you want to use them as evidence. Only after giving your quotation a proper context and attribution can you begin your own analysis in which you demonstrate not only why your evidence supports your claim, but also how that support speaks to your argument in a significant way.

4. Citation

Without question, all forms of evidence, especially quotations and paraphrases, require a citation as dictated by a formal citation style. Consult your professor beforehand about which citation style they prefer, as styles vary across disciplines. Thankfully, Grinnell's Writing Lab and Burling Library have easily accessible information on all of the major citation styles. Additionally, there is a wealth of information online that is fine to trust as long as it comes from a university library or writing center, or from the publishing body or association of the specific style.

Quick Tip
The Difference Between Style and (Citation) Style
All writers should strive to develop a style of writing, research, and speaking that is personally fulfilling and effective. In fact, the concluding sections of this guide deal with how to go about developing college-level style. However, the one area where personal style preferences cannot overtake formal constraints is citation style. Every formal writing assignment you draft in college must adhere to one of the pre-existing style conventions, plain and simple.

Other Ways to Incorporate Evidence

Part of developing an effective style of academic writing is understanding how each of the forms of evidence work together in order to provide your argument with the right kind of support. Just as you need to seek out a wealth of sources in order to make sound claims or diversify your sentence length and structure in order to make essays compelling to read, you will also need to employ a variety of ways of presenting evidence in order to adequately make a college-level argument. Here are some other common forms of presenting evidence that you should use in your academic writing:

1. Paraphrase

Paraphrasing is the act of recasting a select portion of a source into your own language. In order to not copy the text, which would be plagiarism, you need to locate the main point, key distinctions, or whatever else about the text makes it vital to your analysis and reinterpret it without borrowing the language of the author or simply replacing words or phrases with synonyms. In general, paraphrasing another scholar's thoughts is a skill professors want you to acquire. It shows that you have grasped a specific idea well enough to restate it in your own words.

2. Summary

Whereas paraphrases should be used when zeroing in on an author's particular argument or foundational claim, summaries should be used when trying to describe a topic or review a common literature or discourse. Summaries either describe events or arguments, provide background information, or bring together a wide breadth of sources. A summary would be especially useful for introducing a topic or contextualizing a claim, while a paraphrase would serve as evidence. **In short, summarize to describe or contextualize, and paraphrase to argue.**

3. Hard Data and Visual Representations

Both data, whether in the form of graphs, charts, tables, or visualizations, and other visual representations, such as photographs or illustrations, act as evocative forms of evidence integral to modern scholarship. Whatever the form of data, whether crime statistics, a Picasso painting, or a supply curve, it still requires all of the same guidelines for use as any other form of evidence. Many students forget to contextualize or provide a discussion of significance for visual forms of evidence, but even visualizations cannot speak for themselves and are always open to interpretation. In order to get the full utility from visual data, you must animate your representations in the same way as textual evidence: **contextualization, attribution, significance, and citation.**

Analysis

In addition to transitioning into the next body paragraph, most body paragraphs should conclude with an analysis of the significance of your body paragraph as it relates to your thesis. If you think about an argument from your audience's perspective, then you will realize that after all of the contextualization, evidence, and rhetoric that goes into persuading them of your point, they may need a reminder of the overall direction of your argument.

Especially if you are working through multiple pieces of research or evidence within one paragraph, it can become very easy for either yourself or your reader to lose sight of the larger picture. For those reasons, it is often recommended to shore up the ending of your paragraph with both a transition into the following one and a re-statement of why your analysis is significant that concurrently demonstrates how that significance ties into the overall flow of your main argument.

Conclusions

Containing the Flow: Leading the Water to the Reservoir

Conclusions can often pose similar concerns or worries to those found when drafting introductions. Thankfully, those anxieties can be alleviated by understanding what roles conclusions can serve and which criteria and strategies can strengthen conclusions.

You can visualize your conclusion by thinking of it as a reservoir for the flow of your argument, as it will give a final resting point to your ideas. Continuing the dam metaphor, you can quiet the waters and allow everything to settle in a clear and accessible form, now that you have done the work of beginning the flow and directing it through your body paragraphs. More often than not, you will find a clearer and more concise thesis awaiting you in the reservoir of your conclusion. This new thesis will inspire further revision, in turn making your paper that much stronger.

Quick Tip
A simple mantra to have in mind when writing arguments is the well-worn **preacher's maxim:** "First you tell 'em [your audience] what you're gonna tell 'em, then you tell 'em, and then you tell 'em what you told 'em." An effective conclusion will essentially "tell 'em what you told 'em," while going the necessary step further of telling them why what you told them is important, new, or interesting.

The following sections will explain what a conclusion is and the purpose it serves in your argument, as well as strategies for drafting an effective conclusion that could leave you with the gift of a better thesis and your reader with a feeling of closure and a positive final impression of your thinking.

What and Why?

Working parallel to your introduction, a conclusion is the final paragraph in your academic essay. It functions as a bookend to your introduction, as it restates the key argumentative claims of your essay—without simply copying the thesis—while giving your reader a sense of completion in regards to the scope of your argument.

While you do not want to provide a wealth of new or otherwise unaccounted for information in your conclusion, you should try to extend, further legitimate, or draw significance from the previous information so as to avoid simply concluding with a summary. Instead, let your conclusion serve as a justification for your previous claims and provide space for you to have the final word on your topic.

Strategies for Robust Conclusions:

Depending on the nature of your argument, the content of your conclusion will vary from assignment to assignment, but your conclusion will always act as the final reminder as to why one should care about or give credence to your argument. The following strategies offer some perspectives from which to consider the form and content of your conclusion, all of which can be combined so as to conclude your piece effectively.

1. The Proposal

Paint your conclusion as a proposal for a new plan of action, a reconsideration of previous thought, or a solution to the problem posed in your introduction.

2. The Qualifications

While the conclusion is not the first place in your essay that you should consider opposing viewpoints, it is an ideal location in which to both synthesize the opposition and restate why your argument deals with or is stronger than other arguments.

3. The Synthesis

As stated earlier, the conclusion should function as a section of significance and justification and not simply of summary. Thus, a solid synthesis of your key claims, support, and reasoning will show the audience why your analysis is significant.

4. The Redirection

Just as your introduction provides an inroad into your analysis, your conclusion offers a path from the page into the greater world, whether of your topic or more generally. You can use your conclusion as a hook between the specific and the global and redirect your discrete argument to comment (briefly) on larger trends, concepts, or events.

5. The Creation

You can also think of your conclusion as space to reframe your past claims so as to present a greater claim or set of considerations. In moving around, restructuring, or newly combining previously supported reasoning, you can offer your readers a new path into your analysis without confusing them with new or disjointed information.

6. The Interrogation

The conclusion can also interrogate authors, claims, or assumptions through hypothetical or leading questions. Posing questions to the common literature of your discipline and your own evidence and analysis shows your audience that you have deeply considered the available material, while simultaneously allowing you, the author, to ensure that you have fully considered the topic at hand.

7. The Past-Future Tripper

Conclusions that aim to inform either the past, through a new insight or analytic frame, or the future, through predictions or applications, can work especially well in terms of showing the significance of your argument and in broadening the scope and effect of your work.

What to Do If You Find A Thesis in Your Conclusion

At the end of their first drafts, many writers discover that they have actually crafted a stronger thesis statement in their conclusion. Of course, finding a more polished idea about your argument after working through it in a draft makes complete sense and is one of the great gifts that writing multiple drafts and going through the revision process can give you. However, it can also pose a certain level difficulty for writers in terms of what exactly to do it with it based on whether the "concluding" thesis can simply replace their existing thesis, or if this better thesis requires deeper structural changes in the body of the paper or changes in the quality of evidence for support.

Quick Tip
The "So What?" Game
Whenever you get stuck on your conclusion, ask someone you trust to read your current draft and ask you the dreaded but crucial questions, "so what?" and "why should I care?" Answering these blunt questions will produce the necessary statement of significance and the synthesis of evidence that will make any conclusion clear and strong. Such straightforward questions can offer you unparalleled clarity in moments of writer's block.

Any writers who find themselves in this situation should consult an outside reader in order to talk through potential changes, benefits, and costs to incorporating this new thesis. **One of the first things you should do is print out a copy of your old thesis and your new thesis and bring them to your reader.** Talk over some of the benefits and drawbacks to replacing your thesis. First, ask them whether the new thesis helps your paper topic or not. If it does help, talk over

what other changes would have to occur to your argument in order to incorporate the new thesis. If the changes have more to do with your argument or the structure of your essay, you should make an appointment with the Writing Lab, your professor, a writing mentor if your class has one, or even another student. Conversely, if the revisions require changing your evidence, either through addition, deletion, or more substantive changes to the type of research necessary to support this new thesis, then you should consult your professor and the research librarians or research tutors at Burling. As with most aspects of the revision process, the more time you leave in your drafting timeline in order to deal with these kinds of changes or edits, the better you can take advantage of all the resources that Grinnell offers to improve your writing and research, and the stronger your essay will become because of it.

The Research Process

A Note on the Relation of Writing to Research

Students often perceive research and writing as two entirely separate processes. Constrained by the brevity of the semester, undergraduates often approach writing research papers in a methodical way: developing a thesis, compiling evidence to support that thesis, and incorporating that evidence into a written argument. In this model, research is a contained process and functions merely to give credence to the author's preconceived ideas. As any professor will tell you, however, this is not the way academics actually approach research. Rather, research and writing are integral components of each other's process, and they must work together to produce good academic writing. Research should be an ongoing part of your writing process and inform the choices you make during every stage of composition.

Once you begin to treat writing as a process of inquiry, the ways that writing and research inform each other become apparent. Think about the readings you do for class—either assigned texts or sources for your own project. Any time you annotate a text, adding your own insights and questions in the margins, you are beginning to compose. Similarly, freewriting can be a productive way of drafting prose and developing new research questions simultaneously.

Quick Tip
Extremely obscure topics often lack the sources necessary to perform a fresh and compelling analysis. However, almost no topic is "too narrow," provided you can find enough evidence to contribute something new to the conversation around the subject.

As you draft your paper, try to be conscious of the ways that argument and inquiry interact during your process. The strategies and techniques offered in this chapter can help you develop habits for recognizing these relationships and using them to improve your analysis.

Narrowing Your Topic

By now you should have settled on a general topic for your research paper. (If you have not yet decided on a topic, visit our section on brainstorming for suggestions on how to get started.) Whether you've been given a prompt by your professor or generated an idea of your own, chances are your topic will need at least some tweaking in order to meet your assignment's requirements. For example, while a topic such as "the U.S. Civil War" would be too broad to tackle in a ten-page paper, it would also be difficult to fill ten pages on an extremely specific topic, such as the use of anaphora in the Gettysburg Address. Writing a good research paper means refining the scope of your topic so that it is appropriate for the parameters of your assignment.

Longer assignments with narrow scopes often intimidate newer students. If you're wondering how you could possibly fill a certain number of pages with such a narrow topic, remember that professors will never assign an impossible task. In fact, as you become more accustomed to research and writing, you will likely find yourself wishing for *more* space to write. Thus, refining your topic will usually require you to narrow rather than broaden it. In *The Curious Researcher*, Bruce Ballenger suggests thinking of your research paper as a photograph: in high school, research reports often resembled landscape photography, fitting as many pieces of information into the shot as possible and losing some of the finer details in the process. The college research paper, in contrast, is like a close-up picture: it narrows the focus to one single element of the landscape and allows for a more detailed analysis. However, finding a fresh angle from which to approach a topic can present a challenge to even the most experienced writers. Consider the following exercises if you're having trouble narrowing your topic.

Quick Tip
Combine two or three of the ideas you brainstorm during the exercise below to arrive at a unique topic, but be careful about incorporating more than that—you can quickly arrive at a topic so specific that it becomes impossible to find sources.

The Five W's

Asking yourself the five "W"s—who, what, when, where, and why—is an easy technique for brainstorming multiple ways of narrowing your topic at once. Write your topic at the top of a page and list each of the five "W" words along the side. Behind each "W," list any categories that could be the focal point of your new narrowed topic. Consider various meanings for each of the "W"s to maximize your results.

Quick Tip
The "why" of the five "W"s asks you to consider exigence: the issue or problem that has caused you to address a certain topic. Consider whether/why your topic has a sense of urgency, meets a topical demand, or in some way informs your audience's understanding of larger issues.

Who? A specific person, a population, an organization or group, etc.
What? A type, a brand, a theory, etc.
When? A time frame, a time of day, a period of life, a specific set of circumstances, etc.
Where? A geographic location, a type of establishment, etc.
Why (does this topic matter)? Cultural significance, cause and effect, etc.

Here is an example:

TOPIC: Teenage Pregnancy
WHO: high school students, adolescent fathers, teens in poverty
WHAT: miscarriages, academic performance, multiple pregnancies
WHEN: 1980-1990, present day, postpartum
WHERE: in New York City, at Grinnell High School
WHY: understanding the psychological effects of pregnancy on adolescents, examining the correlation between teen pregnancy and poverty rates
Some New Possible Topics Academic performance of adolescent fathers during the 1980s, the effect of multiple pregnancies on poverty rates in New York City, the psychological effects of postpartum depression/anxiety on high school girls

Write Your Way to a Topic

If you find it difficult to make your ideas fit into the categories of the five "W"s, try writing your way to narrower topic instead. Create a record of your thoughts by putting them into words—you might surprise yourself with how quickly your interests reveal themselves. Here's how it's done:

1. **Explain your interest in the topic.** Explore what you hope to achieve in your project by starting with one of the following sentences:

    - I want to describe…because...
    - I want to know…because...
    - I am confused by... because…

    Example: I want to know more about the function of classical mythology in children's literature because of its recent popularization through series such as *Harry Potter* and *Percy Jackson and the Olympians.*

2. **Summarize your interests in fewer than seven words.** Force yourself to be as concise as possible when summarizing your interests. Do this exercise more than once to see what different directions emerge.

    Examples: Greek mythology references in children's literature, structural parallels between children's literature and mythology, allusions to the character Hades in children's literature

3. **Ask questions.** Every research topic will eventually develop into a research question. You don't need to develop that exact question just yet (see our next section, "Developing a Research Question," for more information on that), but asking some preliminary questions will help you narrow your topic and put you on track towards drafting a more nuanced research question later. Take this time to write down anything you want to know in order to keep track of the possible angles you might consider as you refine your research question later.

Quick Tip
Consider the context of your assignment when deciding whether and how much to engage with existing scholarship. Keep in mind that 100 and 200 level classes might ask you to focus on developing your own ideas from a primary text, while seminar assignments often ask you to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussion.

Examples: How do structural parallels between children's literature and classical mythology reinforce the pedagogical purposes of their respective stories? What rhetorical tools do children's authors most often use when referencing classical mythology? Why do allusions to Greek mythology in children's literature tend to depict the god Hades as wholly antagonistic?

Are you still struggling to narrow down your topic? It may be time to rethink your initial idea or look to existing scholarship for inspiration. Revisit our section on brainstorming for more ways of thinking about your topic here, or click here for more information on finding and evaluating source material.

Developing a Research Question

Now that you've narrowed down your topic of interest, it is time to turn it into a research question. This question should transform your more neutral topic into a specific issue on which you can take a position. For example, if "social media use among Grinnell students" is your topic, your research question might be "Does social media use impact the academic success of Grinnell men and women differently?" or "How does the use of Tinder over time impact Grinnell students' self-esteem?" Such questions allow you to develop tentative answers (e.g., "men's academic performance suffers more than women's with increased mobile social media use," "using Tinder does not have a significant effect on self-esteem"), which you will then argue in favor of during your analysis, assuming you find evidence to support your claim.

Quick Tip
Much like your topic, your research question will need to match the scope of your assignment: avoid questions that are extremely broad (What causes political revolutions?") or narrow ("How did pedigreed dogs comfort the incarcerated royal family during the French Revolution?").

Types of Research Questions

Below are some of the most common types of research questions. While not a definitive list, these suggestions provide useful blueprints for creating complex, analytical research questions. As you formulate your main research question, remember to keep in mind the other questions you will need to address as you begin new arguments. (For a more detailed discussion of this idea, see our section on Stasis Theory here.)

Cause and Effect

How does x *influence* y*? What role did* y *play in the failure/success of* x*? What does this tell us about* x/y/z*?*

The cause and effect research question examines the relationship between two or more events, people, or general phenomena. Research ideas that involve multiple related topics with unclear or contested relationships are ideal for cause and effect research questions. You might ask what impact working in the dining hall has on first year students' stress levels, or what caused Sweden to be the first European country to switch to paper currency. Experiment with your variables to see if you can arrive at a cause/effect relationship that is both logical and compelling.

Comparison

What is the difference between x *and* y*? How are* x *and* y *alike despite their differences? What does this tell us about* x/y/z*?*

Like the cause and effect research question, the comparison research question also requires putting two or more phenomena in conversation with one another. However, unlike cause and effect questions, which imply a causal and sometimes chronological relationship between factors, comparisons ask you to identify the similarities and differences between any two ideas, regardless of their relationship. Asking about the differences between Georgist and Marxian economics would, for example, constitute a comparative research question.

Description

What is the change in x *over time? How can we explain the phenomenon of* y*? What does this tell us about* x/y/z*?*

The final major genre of research question, description, asks researchers to explain a particular event or phenomenon. Descriptive research questions offer writers the opportunity to report new observations about a single research variable, rather than examining the relationship among multiple variables. Asking what students think of a new student government leader would constitute a descriptive research question. Keep in mind that descriptive research questions are often less common than cause/effect and comparative questions because it can be more difficult for writers to arrive at the analytical significance of a descriptive question (see below).

Choosing a Question with Analytical Significance

Remember that a research question transforms your topic into an issue on which *you can take a position.* That means that, while perhaps valuable for your own understanding of an issue, questions such as "What year did the Cuban Revolution begin?" or "Which states seceded from

the Union during the American Civil War?" do not make good research questions because their answers are uncontested.

In contrast, open-ended research questions ensure that whatever answer you offer in your argument carries analytical significance. Use your research to offer new insights into an ongoing debate, shed light on a new perspective, or in some other way answer the question of why your research should matter to your readers. Notice that each of the examples in the previous section concludes with the question, "What does this tell us about *x*/*y*/*z*?" Try using this as a model when you need to zero in on the significance of a question. Or, instead of asking "who/what/when/where," ask questions about "why" and "how." These questions propel you into the territory of academic debate and uncertainty and transform a simple report into an analytical paper, so always be sure to return to your initial research question and ask, "So what?"

Searching for Sources

Once you've narrowed down a topic and established your research question, it is time to begin looking for sources. It can sometimes be difficult, however, to know where or how to begin sifting through the countless sources available to you. While the number of resources at your disposal might seem overwhelming, learning how and when to use them will ultimately make your research experience easier. This section offers some basic research strategies and introduces you to some of Grinnell's research resources.

Quick Tip
General search engines such as Google and websites such as Wikipedia can be useful for brainstorming ideas, establishing background information, and seeing what kinds of topics exist. However, they are not your best resources for finding peer-reviewed scholarship and other reliable data. For more on evaluating sources from the web, see the next section.

How to Search

The following ideas do not constitute a definitive list of rules for doing research. You may not need to do everything listed below (or you may need to do an additional task that is *not* listed here) in order to complete your research assignment. Instead, the following list offers strategies for general research to keep in mind as you look for sources.

1. **Begin broad.** If you often overlook sources labeled "encyclopedia," "dictionary," or "bibliography," thinking that their concise treatment of your topic won't be of much use, think again. In order to create a convincing and nuanced argument, your understanding of your topic will need to extend beyond the most specific details of your research question. Try reading about some facet(s) of your topic in the reference section of Burling Library,

or use an online encyclopedia such as Oxford Reference. Even if you think you know a lot about your topic already, these sources might give you new ideas about what information is available and what discussions are taking place around your topic. Reference sources also often contain bibliographies with major scholarship on your topic, so they can point you toward helpful resources.

2. **Don't have an answer before you begin.** Often when forming a research question (especially if doing so involved preliminary research), you may quickly develop a sense of what the answer is going to be. Remember, however, that the purpose of research is to *find* your answer—not to cherry pick evidence for a conclusion at which you've already arrived. Keep an open mind and don't ignore sources that refute a conclusion you may have initially predicted. Considering all possible answers to your question during the research stage will help guarantee that you make the most convincing argument possible during the writing stage.

3. **Look to existing scholarship.** Reading a few journal articles or a monograph related to your research will familiarize you with the debates already taking place around your topic. Consult the most recent scholarship in the field and scan their footnotes and bibliographies; you're likely to find a few other sources that you can use in your work. Some databases and online tools, such as PsycInfo and GoogleScholar, respectively, also contain a "Cited In" feature, allowing you to see the most contemporary scholarship referencing the resource you've found.

4. **Ask an expert.** Your professor will know the foundational texts and authors in the field, so ask them for texts that they might recommend. They may also offer more precise or contemporary language for researching your topic (see #5 for more information on search vocabulary). If you're still stuck, schedule a Library Lab to consult one-on-one with a librarian about your topic.

5. **Keep your options open.** Unless you're already an expert in your topic, you likely won't know the language scholars are using to discuss it. Using the techniques above, develop a vocabulary for finding sources and continue to expand your arsenal of search terms as new ones emerge. If you're researching strikes in the petroleum industry, for example, you might try swapping "strikes" for "lockouts" or "petroleum" for "oil." Examine the keywords and subject headings connected to a few of your favorite sources or check the Library of Congress subject headings for inspiration.

6. **Use Boolean operators.** Boolean operators are powerful but easy-to-learn search terms that use logic to refine your search results. The three operators, "AND," "OR," and "NOT," can help you focus a complex search that requires multiple terms. Use "AND" to narrow your findings by requiring all search terms it connects to be present in your results. Use "OR" to broaden your results by connecting two (or more) similar concepts or synonyms. Use "NOT" to exclude certain words from your search, ignoring concepts not directly related to your research.

TOPIC: Feminism in Fairy Tales

Some possible searches:

"feminism AND fairy tales"

"Feminism OR gender OR women"

"Fairy tales NOT fables"

"fairy tales AND feminism NOT Cinderella"

7. **Be selective.** Don't just grab every source that comes up in your search results and file it away for later. Instead, keep your question in mind as you evaluate potential sources. Before selecting a source, skim each article (or read its abstract if there is one) or read a couple reviews of a book. Does it seem like it could offer evidence (or a compelling counterargument) to your analysis, or is it only distantly related to your topic? Be sure to note the date of publication as well, as sources that were published years or decades previously may no longer contain the most relevant information—especially in science papers. Keep only those sources that might offer something useful for answering your research question.

Quick Tip

While typically you'll want to rely on the most recent scholarship, older sources can sometimes be useful. Check the bibliographies and footnotes of recent scholarship—if an older source is still relevant in discussions around a topic, it will be cited there.

Where to Search

Finding credible sources for your research can be easy if you use the tools that are designed for that purpose. As you navigate the various research aides offered at Grinnell, keep in mind the specifications of the tool you're using: is the database filled with primary or secondary sources? Do you have access to the entire article or just the abstract? Whenever you use an unfamiliar research tool, scan through the information on its "About" page or ask a librarian or research tutor for help. Knowing *what* you're looking at is the first step to productive research. The following offers a brief introduction to some of the most useful library resources at your disposal as a Grinnell student.

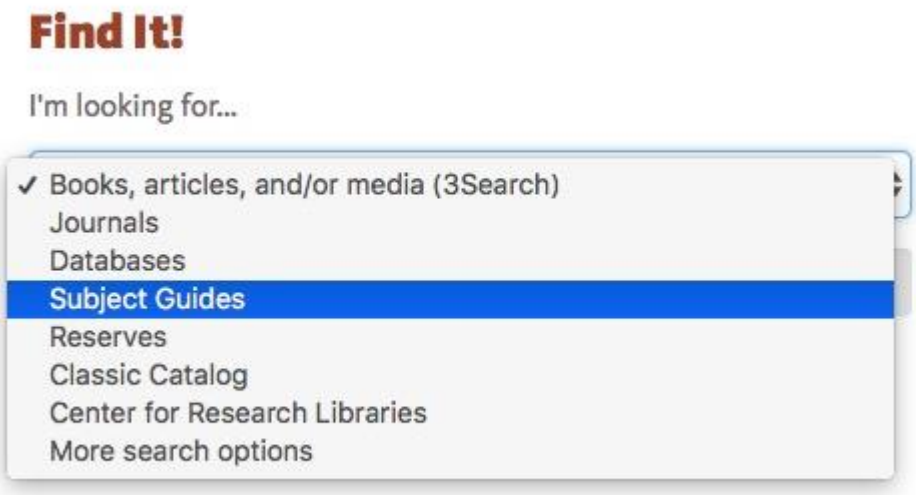
Quick Tip
Being selective in your research does not necessarily mean discarding sources that you might find interesting. Remember that you shouldn't have settled on an answer to your research question at this stage in the process. Keep track of a few sources that inspire you, even if you don't immediately see their connection to your paper—you may find them useful later.

3Search

3Search is the default search option on the library home page. Entering your search term(s) in the grey box will pull results from Grinnell College's collections (primarily electronic or hard copies of books and audiovisual material), all EBSCOHost databases, and WorldCat (more on this below). This is a great tool for getting a general sense of what information is out there and what search terms yield the best results.

Subject Guides

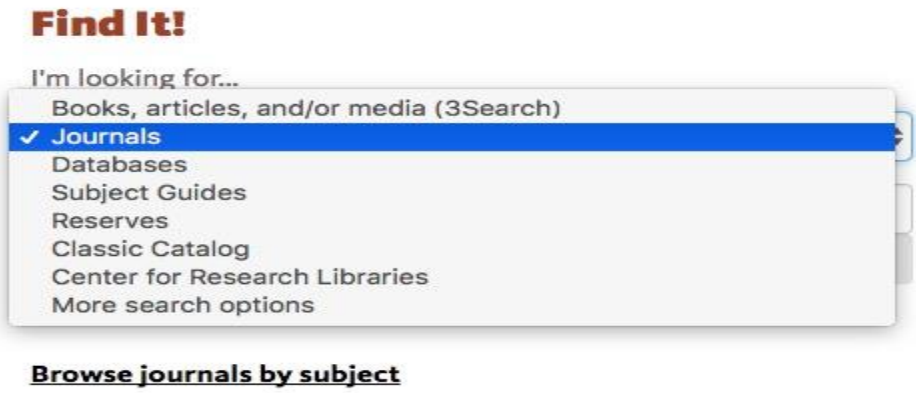
Also accessible through the drop-down menu on the library home page, subject guides are curated by librarians and contain resources associated with a particular field of study. These resources may include specific journals or databases, reference materials, citation guides, or any number of other tools the librarian has deemed useful for research in that field. Many courses also have specific subject guides tailored to class content, so check to see if yours does. Using the subject guides can be a quick way to find the sources most closely related to your topic.



Journal Finder

Maybe your professor mentioned a specific journal related to your topic, or you've seen one that sounds promising pop up in various citations. You can easily search the journals Grinnell has access to by using the "Journals" option in the library's dropdown box or click the black link that appears below the dropdown box to browse journals by subject or title. These options will help you avoid searching databases that are unlikely to have the information you need, especially if you know the journal(s) you're looking for.

WorldCat and Interlibrary Loan (ILL)



When Grinnell does not have a physical copy or access to an electronic copy of a resource, you can request it from another library through the interlibrary loan service. To request such a loan, go to the left sidebar on the library home page and click the link there. If you find a source during your research through WorldCat (a catalogue of the contents of more than 70,000 libraries worldwide) or under the WorldCat header in 3Search, clicking "Get full text" will take you to a link for an Interlibrary Loan (ILL) request form that has already been filled in with most of the appropriate information. Simply log in with your Grinnell username and password, double check the information provided, and submit the request.

Evaluating Sources

As you begin to assemble a collection of sources for use in your paper, remember to think critically about what purpose they can serve for your project and where they come from. If your argument hinges on an article of dubious authorship, for example, your entire analysis risks losing its credibility. Evaluating sources as you compile them ensures that the evidence you rely on during your writing is trustworthy. The following section offers advice on how to recognize various kinds of sources and evaluate their reliability. Familiarize yourself with these guidelines and practice integrating them into your research process.

Types of Sources

Researchers categorize sources in a variety of different ways. Some methods of categorization, such as differentiating between primary and secondary sources, may already be familiar to you. Though they operate under many different names, each form of categorization merely offers another way of understanding information and its function in your writing. A few of the most common ways of categorizing sources are listed below.

Primary and Secondary Sources

The labels "primary" and "secondary" categorize sources by their relation to the origin of an event or other phenomenon. Primary sources are those that have been created *at* the origin, offering direct evidence or a firsthand account. Secondary sources are those whose authors or creators were one or more steps *removed* from the point of origin and may engage with the primary sources from a position of hindsight. If, for example, you were writing a paper on the Russian-American novelist Vladimir Nabokov, his novels, stories, interviews, and personal

correspondence would all constitute primary sources while scholarly monographs or journal articles on Nabokov's life and work would act as secondary sources. The table below categorizes some common research materials that are often (but not always!) considered either primary or secondary sources.

Primary Sources	Secondary Sources
Diaries, personal letters, etc.	Biographical works
Autobiographies	Reference books
Photographs, drawings, and other artwork	Popular or scholarly books
Interviews and oral histories	Articles from newspapers, magazines, and journals *after* the event
Audio and video recordings	Bibliographies
Government documents	Reviews
Research data	

Scholarly and Popular Sources

Most of your courses at Grinnell will require you to rely primarily on scholarly sources. Unlike popular sources, which are written for a general audience, scholarly sources are written by experts in a field and tend to offer more in-depth treatments of a subject. Specifically, when we say "scholarly sources" in this guide, we mean sources written by scholars and published by an academic journal or press. Publication through these channels typically involves a process of peer review, during which manuscripts undergo debate, discussion, and suggestions for revision from a panel of other scholars in the field. Articles or books published through this process tend to provide more authoritative and specialized knowledge.

From the Experts
"What have I always told you? Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain!"
—J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*
"Trust, but verify."
—Ronald Reagan

Beware of falling into the trap of "grey literature": works online that might seem like scholarly sources (maybe they're even attached to a .edu web address) but were not published through the channels described above. Students often stumble across other students' theses or dissertations and mistake them for peer-reviewed scholarship, for example. If you're having difficulty determining whether a source is scholarly or otherwise, ask yourself the following questions:

- **What is it called?** Popular sources often have short, catchy, and sensational titles to catch readers' attention, while titles of scholarly sources tend to be more technical and include more details about what the article contains.
- **Who wrote it?** Scholarly sources are written by authors with academic credentials while journalists or other staff writers tend to author popular media. If you're uncertain, a quick Google search will usually give you the information necessary to determine whether the author of a piece is an academic.
- **Who published it?** Publication information should be clear and easy to locate; if it isn't, the piece is likely to be self-published and should probably be avoided. Scholarly sources will be usually published by academic journals or presses (e.g., *Journal of American History*, Duke University Press), as opposed to general interest publications such as *Newsweek* or *Time*.

The BEAM Method

A framework developed by Joseph Bizup, BEAM classifies sources into four categories based on the functions they serve during the writing process. For projects where thinking in terms of primary/secondary sources proves difficult, you might instead consider how your sources fit into the categories of BEAM:

Background Sources:

- Provide a general overview of a topic
- Offer information that is well-established in the field or considered common knowledge
- May not need to be cited if contributing information that is already widely acknowledged

Quick Tip
Wikipedia is a popular example of a background source. While you likely won't cite the Wikipedia page itself as a source in your paper, you can use it to acquire a basic understanding of your topic and brainstorm new avenues of research.

Exhibit Sources:

- Are sources that you analyze or engage with directly
- Can vary by topic and discipline, but may include a novel, an interview, an image, a dataset, etc.
- Form the backbone of the your unique contribution to the issue

Argument Sources:

- Include claims or theories from other scholars with whom you agree or disagree
- Place your work in the ongoing scholarly conversation through citation

Method Sources:

- Model how scholars conduct their own research
- Offer theories or discipline-specific jargon

Reliability of Online Sources

You will almost certainly use the internet at some point during your research, and you should now be equipped with the skillset to navigate the library catalog and locate academic databases. (If you are not confident in your ability to do this, see the previous section of this chapter, "Searching for Sources.") Many useful online resources can be found through general search engines as well, but these search engines and their millions of results can be dangerous for the inexperienced researcher. To avoid being tricked by unreliable sources, consider these tips when Googling:

Quick Tip
If you are more familiar with the primary/secondary model of considering sources, it might be helpful to understand "exhibit sources" as another way of identifying primary sources and "argument sources" as another way of identifying secondary sources.

1. **Evaluate the author.** Just as you should check an author's credentials to determine whether a not a text is scholarly, you should evaluate the author of any information published online for credibility. Do some digging to find out who the individual or group behind the information is. What is their background? Do they provide an "About Us" section with credentials or contact information? Be especially wary of sources you find whose authorship is ambiguous or absent altogether.
2. **Evaluate the web address.** Pay attention to the suffix of the web address hosting the information. Both the ".edu" suffix (meaning that a site is associated with a college or a university) and the ".gov" suffix (indicating affiliation with a United States government agency) are usually considered credible sources of information. Be more wary of addresses ending in ".org" or ".com," as these suffixes are associated with nonprofit and commercial organizations, respectively, and are more likely to contain biased information.
3. **Check for bias.** What is the purpose of the website you are on? Does it appear to be selling a particular product or promoting certain viewpoints? Remember that

information is never completely objective, so it is important to consider the point of view the author of the website is taking. Bias does not necessarily make a source unusable, but you should always be aware of potential bias in online sources.

4. **Evaluate the information itself.** Use your common sense when evaluating any online source. Does the information given seem too outlandish to be believable? It might be. Try fact-checking the information provided against sources you trust and examine the sources cited by the author(s). *Always* be skeptical of information online if it does not cite any sources or tell you where the information came from.

Oral Presentations

Many professors require an oral presentation in addition to—or in lieu of—a traditional research paper. Oral presentations provide an opportunity for you to communicate the best parts of your research to your professors and peers. While the oral presentation is a new challenge for many students, it is also an opportunity to improve public speaking skills and develop greater fluency in a chosen research topic. This chapter offers tips for tackling oral presentations that are meant to help everyone from the anxious orator to the confident presenter.

Before the Presentation

1. **Dress appropriately.** Consider your audience and the formality of the event when deciding what to wear. Most professors don't enforce a dress code, but a good rule is to dress "one step up" from how you expect your audience to look. Avoid graphic tees and other distracting clothing or accessories such as large earrings that clink and hair-do's that require constant rearranging.
2. **Work out any technical details.** In advance of your presentation, make sure that any technical equipment or visual aids you plan on using work well. If you can get early access to the room where you'll be presenting, ensure that you know how to operate the equipment you'll be using by doing a technical run. Whether or not you can access the room ahead of time, prepare multiple backups of any digital presentation aides you plan on using. Store one copy on a USB drive and another in the cloud so that you have a fallback option if your preferred method fails to load.
3. **Make an outline.** Unless told otherwise by your professor, do not plan to read a prepared speech during your presentation. Instead, create a general outline of your presentation. Doing so will help you remember to highlight important details while maintaining interaction with your audience. Write your outline in a large, readable font and leave plenty of space between points to write down any last minute ideas before your

presentation. Include only as much information as you need to stay on track so that your speech sounds as natural as possible.

4. **Practice, practice, practice.** Whether your presentation is short or long, formal or casual, practicing beforehand is a necessity. Find an empty room or a willing friend and rehearse what you plan to say. Ensure that your presentation does not go over or under the time you've been allotted by practicing slowing down your rate of speech to a pace that is easy for the listener to understand. Rehearsing your presentation can also help you notice points that you may want to omit or elaborate on.

During the Presentation

1. **Be professional, but relaxed.** Remember to maintain good posture and eye contact with the audience, but do so in a way that is comfortable. Hold your head high, avoid shifting your weight or shuffling your feet, and make eye contact with the audience whenever possible. Practice different stances ahead of time to determine which are most comfortable for you.
2. **Try not to fidget.** The center of attention should be your research—not the coins you're jingling in your pocket or the earring you're absentmindedly playing with. If you notice yourself fidgeting or doing anything that might otherwise distract your audience, try to stop.

Quick Tip
Signpost for your audience. Just as it is important to clearly signal the conclusion of your presentation, alerting your audience to major points and transitions *during* your talk will help them follow your argument. Unlike in a paper, your audience cannot got back and reread parts that they don't understand during a live presentation. Improve the clarity of your speech by recapitulating main points and clarifying when your audience looks puzzled.

3. **Speak loudly and slowly.** Your audience won't take away much from your presentation if they can't hear you or understand what you're saying. If you tend to speak quietly or quickly, have a friend sit across the room when you practice your presentation. They will be able to tell you if they can hear and understand what you're saying.

4. **Keep your place.** Use a finger or a notecard to keep track of where you are in your presentation. This technique will allow you to look up from your notes and make eye contact with your audience without losing track of what you were saying. You can even include place markers in your visual aid(s) so that the audience can follow along with your main points.

5. **Have a clear conclusion.** Prepare some final remarks to wrap up your presentation so that you don't let your presentation fizzle out without a clear conclusion. You might try posing questions to your audience or indicating potential directions for further research. Finally, signal to your audience that your presentation has finished by thanking them and inviting them to ask questions of their own.

After the Presentation

1. **Be prepared for questions.** Often, your professor or classmates will ask a few questions about your presentation. Answer questions as concisely and clearly as you can, and don't be afraid to say that you don't know the answer if you don't.

2. **Ask for constructive feedback.** Ask your professor or a few classmates for some specific things that you did well and others that need improvement. Make note of these remarks and integrate them into your next presentation.

3. **Congratulate yourself!** You just presented your research in front of a live audience. Whether it was a terrifying hurdle or an exciting adventure for you, be proud of yourself for improving your public speaking skills.

Quick Tip
Pay attention to your peers' presentations. You may be tempted to just run through your own presentation in your head when the big day arrives, but try to take notes on what others are doing as well. Ask yourself what you liked and didn't like about what your classmate(s) did, and consider how you might implement those observations into your own presentation.

Grammar and Style

Grammar

In other parts of this guide, we have focused on strategies for thinking about writing at the structural level. As you begin to transition to revisions at the sentence level, however, you will need to seriously consider grammar. While perfect grammar cannot take the place of a thoughtful, well-structured analysis, ensuring that your writing contains few or no grammatical errors will strengthen your work and bolster your authorial clout.

While the main focus of this guide is not to compile every rule about English grammar and punctuation, we have put together a few of the most common grammatical errors made by

college students and our thoughts on two commonly debated grammatical issues. If you still have questions after reading this chapter or just believe you are "bad at grammar," the end of this section also contains links to other useful resources.

Five Common Mistakes Students Make

1. **Misplaced or Missing Commas**

Whether it's a missing comma after an introductory clause or a comma splice connecting two independent clauses, misplaced, misused, or missing commas constitute one of the most common errors in undergraduate writing. But placing commas should not be a guessing game. You should have a clear rule-based reason for using each and every comma. There are plenty of guides to using commas available online, including on the Writing Lab's Grinnell Share site.

2. **Semicolons, Colons, and Dashes**

Many students assume that the use of advanced punctuation is the mark of a sophisticated writer. While semicolons, colons, and dashes can certainly help you construct more complex and varied sentences, even experienced writers used these marks incorrectly. These are powerful tools when wielded sparingly and purposefully, so you should know when and how to use them. Once you feel comfortable with your comma competency and are ready to experiment with new forms of punctuation, give this guide from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill a read.

3. **Dangling Modifiers**

A modifier is any word, phrase or clause that describes or *modifies* another word, phrase or clause. A dangling modifier occurs when the subject that is being modified is not clearly stated in the sentence. For example,

> Having finished her computer science homework, a thirty-minute Netflix break was in order.

This sentence is ungrammatical because the modifier (highlighted in blue) does not modify the subject of the main clause (highlighted in red). In other words, the "thirty-minute Netflix

break" was not the one who"finished her computer science homework." You could correct the sentence like this:

> Having finished her computer science homework, Elizabeth decided that a thirty-minute Netflix break was in order.

4. Shifting Verb Tense

Prose that switches from past tense to present tense halfway through a paragraph or sentence can confuse readers. Unless there is a logical reason to do otherwise, maintain the same verb tense throughout your writing. For example:

> In a survey last spring, students reported favoring the food served in Lyle's Pub to the food served in Bob's Underground Cafe. Everyone in the survey says the mozzarella sticks are the highlight of the menu.

In this example, the discordant verb tenses cause confusion. Are the students who favored the food at Lyle's Pub last spring the same people talking about mozzarella sticks now? Avoid ambiguity by ensuring your verb tenses are consistent.

5. Vague Pronouns

A pronoun should refer clearly to its antecedent (the noun it replaces). If it is unclear to which word a pronoun is referring, edit the sentence so that the relationship between pronoun and antecedent is obvious. For example:

> Ted was juggling seventeen credit hours, a job in the mailroom, and a lead role in the upcoming production of *Hamlet*. It was a bigger time commitment than he had anticipated.

In the sentence above, the pronoun "it" in the second sentence could refer to any number of things; it is unclear to the reader whether Ted's heavy course load, job, role in the play, or something else altogether was a "bigger time commitment" than anticipated. Specifying which noun a pronoun refers to (e.g., "The job was a bigger time commitment…") can add clarity to your writing. Or, if all these activities combined took more time than Bob anticipated, use a noun rather than a pronoun to name the new subject. For example: "The combination of all these activities resulted in a bigger time commitment than he had anticipated."

Quick Tip
A restrictive word, phrase or clause is a part of the sentence that cannot be removed without changing the meaning of a sentence. A nonrestrictive word, phrase or clause, on the other hand, can be omitted without altering the sentence's core meaning.

Write with the Right Words

Students often misuse common words by using them interchangeably. Remember the quick tips below if you're unsure which word to use in these tricky pairs.

Which* or *That

Use "that" before a restrictive clause and "which" before a nonrestrictive clause. Consider the following examples:

Sentence 1: The bookstore that sells lanyards is hiring student workers this fall.

Sentence 2: The bookstore, which sells lanyards, is hiring student workers this fall.

In Sentence 1, the word "that" is used to indicate that, while there may be more than one bookstore, the one that is hiring student workers in the fall is a specific bookstore: the one that sells lanyards. Sentence 2, on the other hand, suggests that one bookstore exists, and it happens to be hiring student workers in the fall. The fact that this bookstore sells lanyards is additional information that does not change the meaning of the sentence.

If* or *Whether

Use "if" when you have a conditional sentence and "whether" when you want to show that there are two possible outcomes. For example:

Sentence 1: The professor didn't know whether she should teach *Pride and Prejudice* or *Northanger Abbey*.

Sentence 2: If it rains a lot in the next week, the crops may recuperate.

In Sentence 1, the word "whether" suggests that the professor was debating between teaching the two novels but was committed to teaching one of them. Sentence 2, in contrast, uses "if" to indicate that the rain in the upcoming week is a hypothetical situation upon which the recuperation of the crops relies. When in doubt, use "whether" to describe a choice and "if" to describe a condition.

Two Great Grammar Debates

Endorsing the Oxford Comma

The necessity of the Oxford comma (or "serial" comma) has long been debated; the Modern Language Association (MLA), Chicago Style Manual, and the US Government Printing office have all endorsed the Oxford comma, while the Associated Press—publishers of the stylebook commonly used by American journalists—has not.

Quick Tip
Whether you decide to use the Oxford comma or not, it is important to be consistent in your writing. If you use the Oxford comma once, commit to using it for the rest of the paper to avoid creating confusion. Conversely, if you begin a piece of writing *without* using the Oxford comma, avoid introducing it halfway through your paper.

Proponents of the Oxford comma argue its implementation can reduce confusion. Take the following example:

Sentence 1: Everyone at the party met Jesse, the president of the college and a rodeo clown.

Sentence 2: Everyone at the party met Jesse, the president of the college, and a rodeo clown.

In Sentence 1 (which does *not* use the Oxford comma), it is unclear whether everyone at the party met three separate people—first, Jesse; second, the president of the college; and third, a rodeo clown—or one person named Jesse, who happened to be both president of the college

and a rodeo clown. By using the Oxford comma to separate the final two people in the series, Sentence 2 erases this ambiguity.

Sometimes, however, the Oxford comma can create ambiguity. For example, if I dedicate my book to "my mother, Oprah Winfrey, and the Girl Scouts of Greater Grinnell," it is unclear whether my mother *is* Oprah Winfrey, or whether my mother and Oprah Winfrey are two different women. When deciding when to use the Oxford comma, ask yourself whether the comma adds to the clarity of your writing.

Because even major language authorities cannot reach consensus on the Oxford comma, most people consider it a matter of stylistic preference. However, even though its use is technically optional and will not make your writing ungrammatical, most academics still use the Oxford comma. We recommend using the Oxford comma to improve the clarity of your writing.

Ending a Sentence with a Preposition

Much like the Oxford comma, the issue of ending a sentence with a preposition is one that many grammarians feel passionate about. The argument against ending a sentence with a preposition derives from a Latin grammar rule that a preposition must always precede its object. In the 17th and 18th centuries, many writers began attempting to make the rules of English grammar conform to those of Latin, resulting in the disagreements over preposition placement that continue today.

Yet in many cases, ending a sentence with a preposition is the most natural phrasing, and it typically goes unnoticed. For example, read the first sentence of the previous paragraph again. Did you notice we've ended it with a preposition? Unless you're a real stickler for this rule, you probably didn't. Omitting the modifier, we could have instead said, "Many grammarians feel passionate about the issue of ending a sentence with a preposition," or "The issue of ending a sentence with a preposition is one about which many grammarians feel passionate," but these sentences are not necessarily *better* simply because they do not end with prepositions.

You might be familiar with the notable saying, "[This is] nonsense up with which I will not put," which has often been (incorrectly) attributed to Winston Churchill. The phrasing deftly avoids ending the sentence with a preposition, but to many English speakers it also sounds absurd, even pretentious. For this reason, most modern grammarians agree that it is perfectly acceptable to end a sentence with a preposition, particularly in cases where it sounds more natural to do so, such as in passive and infinitive structures. Use your best judgment when

deciding whether to end a sentence with a preposition and remember that you can always experiment with rephrasing when something just doesn't sound right.

Further Reading and Recommended Resources

The Grinnell College Writing Lab has compiled a number of handouts on both grammar and style. They can be accessed online at this link after logging in with your Grinnell username and password. Professor Emerita Elizabeth Dobbs has created a very useful grammar handbook here.

For specific instruction on writing in the sciences, consult Grinnell's guidebook, *Investigations*, here.

For resources regarding professional writing, including cover letters and resumes, consult the Grinnell Center for Careers, Life, and Services page here.

Style

Up to this point, most of this guide has focused on giving you the information necessary to draft a college-level essay. However, there is more to academic writing than structure alone. At a certain point, many writers can produce a paper with polished form and proper attention to grammar, yet still miss something integral: style. On one level, style simply refers to the way *you* put together *your* sentences and paragraphs. Even though style is by its nature subjective, style can become the central issue of a piece of writing, even if the more objective standards, such as form, research, and citation, have been dutifully taken care of.

Quick Tip
It is always useful to keep in mind how paper length dictates the structure of the essay. If a professor asks for a 2-3 page paper, you will most likely write a paper that has 4-6 paragraphs. A well-developed paragraph will usually take up half a page in a paper with standard margins and 12 point font. Knowing how space dictates structure and argument is key to drafting, especially for shorter papers.

For most writers making the transition into academic writing, style can be one of the most consistent but intangible hurdles they face. Unlike more obvious or surface-level issues such as basic grammar, paragraph and sentence structure, or understanding the prompt, style concerns

can be harder to discern or correct. Sentences can be grammatically correct but still come out "awkward" or "wordy." A thesis can appear sharp and concise without really delivering your point.

The following section will help you understand both common stylistic issues in the academy, as well as strategies and questions to consider when concerns over your own style arise.

High School Hand-Me-Downs: Bad Habits and Misconceptions

Regardless of our high school curriculum, most of us leave that phase of our education with some bad writing habits and misconceptions about how to write scholarly papers. Here are some of the common barriers to developing a more refined style:

1. **The Five Paragraph Essay**

The five paragraph essay is an almost universal writing template for high school curricula. In its most basic form, the five paragraph essay resembles the following:

Introduction

- 1-2 sentence thesis
  - States topic, focus
  - Contains three (1a, 1b, 1c) arguments or main points of support

Body Paragraph 1:

- Topic Sentence develops the argument for 1a
  - Evidence
- Ends with a transition

Body Paragraph 2:

- Topic Sentence develops the argument for 1b
  - Evidence
- Ends with a transition

Body Paragraph 3:

- Topic Sentence develops the argument for 1c
  - Evidence
- Ends with a transition

Conclusion:

- Reviews three main points and how they connect to the thesis

Many new writers will face the fact that most essays written in college, at least past the introductory level, will require a different form of analysis than this style of essay writing can handle. Even though the five paragraph essay can be instructive in terms of learning structure, paragraph unity, and concision, here are just a few problems associated with it:

- **Vague, surface-level thesis statements**
    - Example:
        - "States should have more than two political parties for a variety of reasons…"
        - "Our current prison system poses several problems in the debate between public and private funding…"
- **Stilted or uninspired organization**
    - Often, topics will require a different kind of organization or flow of argument than can be contained in three main points. Attempting to cram a literature review, historical overview, or presentation of opposing opinions into a rigid five paragraph essay will leave your analysis either lacking content or development of ideas. Especially for longer research assignments, you will need more space to develop your argument than what this essay format allows for.
- **Repetition of argument**
    - Because your thesis can become vague in this format, you will often find yourself repeating claims or arguments in order to connect your main points back to your thesis. The formulaic nature of the argument can then pigeonhole your analysis and leave you constantly tethered back to your thesis in a way that appears repetitive and vague.

Quick Tip
Say What You Mean!
One of the most common obstacles to academic style is getting caught up in jargon and presentation. Remember, a successful paper delivers your intelligent point with concision and precision. Your goal is to deliver a sound argument and not to simply sound intelligent—though you will do so with a great argument!
(Borrowed from UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center)

A Quick Distinction:

Within the critique of the five paragraph essay, there is a more general distinction to be made between writing *a* five paragraph and writing *the* five paragraph essay. You will almost assuredly write an essay containing five paragraphs during your time at Grinnell. The problem with the five paragraph essay has nothing to do with the number of paragraphs and everything to do with the way it makes you structure them. You can and will write rigorous and extensive analysis within the confines of five paragraphs; however, the five paragraph essay format makes that almost impossible because it forces you to have a tripartite thesis that prizes breadth over depth. Instead of going deeper, your argument runs to the margins, so that none of your points receives the proper level of development. On the other hand, a college-level essay will give you the space and direction to craft compelling, fully-developed arguments with the

support of ample evidence so that you can actually communicate with others, voice your own views, and persuade an audience.

2. Fear of "I"

A common absolute that gets hammered into the minds of new writers is never to use the first person pronoun "I" in argumentative or scholarly essays. Often a strawman for subjectivity, "I" is maligned for making essays too personal, injecting singular experience into what should be "objective" work, or otherwise drawing attention away from the analysis. In fact, many scholars effectively use "I" in their own writing, for it can be effective, concise, and clarifying if used correctly.

Quick Tip
Function dictates form!
Instead of relying on templates or models, let the prompt or assignment dictate how you structure your work. Some assignments may require more formulaic analysis, others may require extended summary, review, or research. College is a time to develop your own voice as a thinker, and a part of that development comes with growing into your own style.

- **Assertiveness or Positioning of Voice**
    - Do not be afraid to insert yourself into your argument, either to stress the uniqueness of your perspective, position yourself on one side or another, or state how your work fits into the discourse of your discipline.
- **Clarity:**
    - Using "I" or "We" in a sentence, especially one that states a research agenda or reason for an argument, can make your statement much more clear and direct, as well as save you from falling into passive voice.
        - Example: In the development of civil society organizations in Burkina Faso, the issue of the overlap between the military and the government was analyzed.
            - With "I": In analyzing the development of civil society organizations in Burkina Faso, I confronted how the overlap between the military and government affected union safety.
- **Signposting:**
    - Another effective use of first person pronouns is to signal to your reader what the major issues, arguments, or claims you will be talking about in your paper. In order to be explicit, you will need to think about what a reader may need to know about your essay in order to move forward through it. Signposting

language then anticipates key aspects of your argument and signals to them in order to ground your reader.

- Examples:
    - "Having established X's argument, I argue that Y"
    - "I will first present X research…"
    - "Before outlining the previous literature, I wish to…"
      However, use such signposting judiciously.

3. Fear of Simple Language

Either out of want to impress professors or due to continuous vocabulary study for standardized tests, most of us meet our first writing assignment eager to use our arsenal of multi-syllabic words and synonyms to their fullest firepower. Because of this expectation, many students are often surprised to get comments such as "wordy," "fluffy," or "opaque," back on their erudite treatises about the differences between states and nations or a reflection paper on Descartes. Their surprise can be linked to missing a crucial part of the assignment: clarity of argument. It is always important to remember that most writing assignments at the 100- and 200-level are really testing how well you can make different types of arguments and conduct basic research. In terms of style, you will need to understand how to use language strategically, or, in other words, how to use language to advance your argument.

Just as function dictates form in terms of the structure of an argument, argument dictates diction. Most critiques of academic style have less to do with making your writing more exciting or interesting and more to do with how to present your arguments clearly and concisely.

Quick Tip
Who Did What to Whom [WDWW]
When writers forget to consider conciseness, they end up producing sentences that obscure their point, as opposed to helping make it. "WDWW" is an easy mantra to keep in mind when writing almost anything. It will also ensure that you use action verbs and active sentence constructions when writing as the active voice pushes arguments forward and presents a certain level of clarity that passive constructions do not.

Graduation: From High School to College-Level Style

Now that we have discussed common problems of new academic writers, we can consider some other considerations and strategies for sharpening academic style.

Conciseness

One of the most common critiques that many writers receive, regardless of class level, is that they can be more concise and clear. Even if we think our writing can be as condensed, sharp, and effective as we can make it, there are often more edits and refinements that we can apply. Below are some common tendencies that inhibit the clarity of their writing.

1. Redundancy

In Pairs:

Often, writers will pair together two words in a description that both have the same meaning or function the same in the description. Here are a few usual suspects: **each and every, first and foremost, any and all, always and forever**. If this occurs, simply pick one and omit the other.

In Categories:

Redundant categories occur when words are paired that often imply one another: **period in time, unusual in nature, deceitful in character.** In order to eliminate the redundancy, you can simply drop the more general category--"in time," "in nature," "in character"--and leave the more descriptive word in place.

2. Qualifiers

Either due to colloquial speech or fear of sounding overly authoritative, many of us have picked up the habit of introducing qualifiers into our speech and writing. Here are some of the more common qualifiers: **very, often, hopefully, practically, basically, really, mostly.** Most qualifiers weaken the clarity or movement of your argument. In fact, you may be surprised at how many you use in your own writing, as well as how many words you gain once you delete or replace them.

3. Prepositional Phrases

The use of prepositional phrases can do wonders as far as making a sentence more descriptive, precise, or interesting; however, they can also bog it down or make a statement practically unreadable. It is good practice to identify each of the prepositional phrases in a sentence and see what can be omitted, edited, or replaced.

- Example:
    - The reason that Jack Taylor of the Grinnell College basketball team was able to score 138 points against the basketball team of Faith Baptist Bible College was due to the fact that on that particular day, he attempted to make more shots than any other player on his team.
        - **The above sentence was set up to fail due to the "the reason...was" construction. Instead of prizing conciseness and clarity, this sentence style forces the writer into a clunky and roundabout description of a simple event.**
            - **Revised Example:** Grinnell College's Jack Taylor scored 138 points against Faith Baptist Bible College because he had the most shot attempts of any player on the team.
                - **The revised example demonstrates the power of replacing a "to be" verb with an active verb. Once that edit is complete, then you can start to remove or combine the other lengthy prepositional phrases in the sentence in order to make it more concise.**

Verb Tenses in Academic Writing:

Verbs are the bedrock of any sentence. The choices that writers make in terms of diction, voice, and tense of a verb impact not only the reader's basic understanding of the sentence, but also the precision of the statement in relation to your overall argument.

While on one level we think of style as wholly subjective, and thus about individual choices and preferences, style is often more about the choices and decisions we make *within conventions*. Here are some quick, common conventions for verb usage in academic writing and their effects on style considerations as drawn from the work of Grinnell's longtime Writing Lab instructor Kevin Crim:

Quick Tip
The thesaurus is not always your friend, partner, companion, comrade, playfellow, or benefactress!
Often, you will have to write papers on particular themes, motifs, or patterns. You may start to feel repetitive if you constantly use the same terms or jargon, but repetition can show consistency and clarity. Replacing key terms of argument or definitions with synonyms can actually muddy your argument or confuse terms. In some cases, there will not even be an acceptable substitute at all.

1. **General Principles on Tense**

- Use the past tense to describe past events
    - President Kington hoped to win over the student body by jumping off the high dive.
- Use either the present or the present progressive tense to write about things that are happening currently
    - Climate change intensifies with every single carbon emission.
    - The drama is worsening by the minute.
- Use the present tense to state general truths or habitual thoughts or actions
    - Two physical objects cannot exist in the same space at the same time.
    - We long for answers concerning the man's death.

2. **Literature and the "Literary Present"**

- When writing about literature, you should treat discussions of theme, plot, and authorial intent as having occurred in the present and should describe them in the present tense.
    - In *Of Mice and Men*, John Steinbeck depicts the lasting effects of migrant labor on both the body and psyche of the laborer.
    - In *White Teeth* Zadie Smith reorients our perceptions of London and British life by focusing her novel on immigrants who, living under the recent consequences of colonialism and the Second World War, must navigate a city in which they are both deeply enmeshed and simultaneously othered.

3. **Writing in History:**

- A guiding rule when writing history is to couch your narrative in some form of the past tense. Unlike literature, you need to treat past events, actions, and even thoughts or opinions as occurring in the past.
    - "Though we know him today as one of the principal authoritarian leaders of the 20th century, Joseph Stalin grew up with the intention of becoming a priest."
    - **"**In collaboration with local security forces and carried out by a Belgian hit squad, the United States and Belgian governments assassinated Patrice Lumumba only seven months after he became the first democratically elected leader of the Democratic Republic of Congo."

- Use of the present tense in history papers should be reserved to your own analysis or to the thoughts of current scholars in the field.
    - Historian Ludo De Witte considers Lumumba's assassination to be the most important assassination of the 20th century.

Verb Categories

- **Intransitive**
    - *I run.*
        - Intransitive verbs require neither an object nor a complement in their main clause structure. Rather, the clause is complete simply with a subject and verb, and it reads with clarity and direction.

- **Transitive Active**
    - *I throw the ball.*
        - The transitive active verb takes on a direct object (*ball*) to receive the action (*throw*) as performed by a subject (*I*). In choosing a transitive active verb, you can draft a sentence that flows uninterrupted for the reader.

- **Transitive Passive**
    - *The ball was thrown by me to Tom.*
        - When you place the recipient of an action as the subject of your sentence, you will have to increase the length of your sentence in order to clarify the relationship between subject, object, and action.
        - Additionally, the transitive passive verb forces your reader to move both forward and backward through the sentence. As the sentence is read left to right, the action of the sentence is going right to left. These types of verb relationships should be used sparingly, unless the identity of the actor is unknown.
            - Change to the transitive active:
                - *I threw the ball to Tom.*

- **Linking**
    - *Professor Armstrong is a mentor to his advisees.*
        - The linking verb (*is*) establishes logical equivalence between the subject (*Professor Armstrong*) and the subjective complement (*mentor*). While linking verbs seem direct, in terms of style they often leave your sentences lacking any real action or direction. Often, linking verbs carry little weight or meaning within them and can require multiple modifiers or complements in order to make an otherwise direct or simple point.

        - **Active Examples**
            - *Professor Armstrong mentors his advisees.*
                - This example turns the noun "mentor" into a verb in order to express what Professor Armstrong does for his advisees.
            - *Professor Armstrong acts a mentor to his advisees.*
                - This revision is still active while placing emphasis on the role that Professor Armstrong serves in for his advisees.

Active Versus Passive Voice

One of the most common comments that students receive from professors is "overuse of the passive voice." Often, students do not realize that they are even using the passive voice as it is easy to slip into when trying to think through an idea while drafting. The easiest way to understand the passive voice is by contrasting it to the active voice:

- **Active Voice:**
    - *The student published her thesis.*
        - **In the active voice, the subject (*student*) performs the action expressed by the verb (*published*).**
- **Passive Voice:**
    - *The thesis was published by the student.*
        - **In the passive voice, the subject (*thesis*) receives the action expressed by the verb (*was published*).**

Quick Tip
The Business of "Is-ness"
No grammatical convention is completely untouchable when it comes to academic writing. There is always a time and place for the passive voice and linking verbs; however these verb choices are often overused. In order to check your own writing for overuse, scan your first draft for linking verbs, either using the search function of your word processor or with a printed copy, and see which ones can be eliminated or revised.

You can often identify the passive voice by the presence of a "to be" verb, though it is important to note that not all sentences that contain "to be" verbs are in the passive voice. Another common indicator is the prepositional phrase "by the," as it signals towards the agent performing the action. As you can see in the above example, which contains the "to be" verb "was" and the prepositional phrase "by the," using the passive voice often necessitates longer sentences and prepositional phrases in order to adequately identify the recipient of the action. Still, the passive voice may be appropriate in some settings, such as when the actor is unknown, the actor is less important or irrelevant to the action, or when there is uncertainty about who or what committed the action. Even so, the majority of your sentences should be phrased in the active voice, as you want your statements to act as direct expressions that move your paper forward, present themselves with clarity and conciseness, and retain a level of certainty and authority when it comes to tone.

Academic Honesty

We wish to conclude this guide by focusing on the cornerstone of all scholarship: academic honesty. In its simplest form, academic honesty means having integrity, both as an individual scholar and as someone engaged in a communal conversation that includes not only the individuals here at Grinnell, but also a much larger intellectual community that spans decades

and continents. This integrity takes shape through students properly citing or attributing the ideas or work of others, refusing to cheat on exams or papers, ensuring that no research findings are fabricated or falsified, understanding the intellectual property of the sources you use, and avoiding any other forms of plagiarism. At Grinnell, we prize academic honesty because without it scholarship and research cannot take place to begin with. Thankfully, you have access to Grinnell's handbook on academic honesty so that you can ensure that you are acting with integrity as a scholar and as a free-thinker. If you ever have questions about any aspect of academic honesty, ask--your professor, a writing mentor, a Writing Lab staff member, a librarian.

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