

From Research to Writing: The Art of Crafting Successful Prose

“I can’t write without a reader. It’s precisely like a kiss—you can’t do it alone.” John Cheever

The mistake many students make is that they engage in stream of consciousness writing without ever revising their work. This will earn a very low grade, guaranteed. If you write your paper at 2:30 a.m., I will know. There are many things to consider when writing either an essay or a research paper. I provide the following information for those of you who wish to improve your writing skills.

As a writer, you must first choose your voice. Who are you as a writer? What is the context in which you are communicating? This will manifest itself in how you refer to other authorities, how you refer to your audience, and the kinds of language and argument structure you employ. These factors are part of the author’s voice.

The successful writer knows who his audience is. What do they know already? What background do they have? What will they find interesting, relevant, or useful? What do you want them to do with the information and ideas you are presenting? For this paper, you are writing for an audience of one—me.

You should start drafting your paper when you have a voice, audience, a main claim/point/research question, and some idea of how you will develop or substantiate it. Drafting a paper requires numerous phases.

Pre-writing (the creation of a rough draft) serves multiple purposes. It allows you to get a handle on what you have read, to develop ideas, to find your own voice, and to overcome writer’s block.

Pre-writing may take numerous forms. This is the place for stream of consciousness writing or journal style writing. Lists are extremely helpful at this stage. Schematic drawings provide the opportunity to visualize the relationships between content. Finally, power writing—a short burst of concentrated activity—may prove extremely useful.

Upon completion of a rough draft, you should set it aside for a while. Read through and highlight ideas you want to develop. Look for a sentence that expresses something new and central.

Outline your work. Each paragraph should have one main point. Can you find it? Is it at the beginning or end of the paragraph? Each point should bring the reader one step closer to the main point and accepting your conclusion. There is no single “correct” way to organize. Do your point sentences form a manageable, coherent, and logical map?

Your work will contain two types of strings. Topic strings are comprised of information familiar to your reader. It is what the sentence is about, i.e. it is the subject of the sentence. Topic strings help focus your reader’s attention.

Thematic strings provide new information. They include what you want to convey about your topic. Thematic strings are the predicate of the sentence.

Transitions establish connections between units (e.g. but, and, then, because, or too/in addition, therefore). Transitions can review key concepts, make a generalization you will qualify, or state a claim that you will reject.

Sample Revision Checklist

Structure and content:

1. Highlight point sentences in the introduction (the theme), point sentence in the conclusion, and all point sentences in the paragraphs in between. Do the point sentences in the introduction and conclusion agree with each other?
2. Do the points in between build on one another?
3. Are there holes in the argument or jumps in the logic?
4. Does the series of points bring the reader to the right conclusion?
5. If there are paragraphs without a clearly discernible point sentence, what should that point sentence be (or, how should the content of the paragraph be allocated elsewhere)?
6. Highlight terminology that consistently crops up throughout the paper. Do these terms get at core ideas? If so, are they clearly defined? Are they in the point sentences?

Paragraphs:

1. Is the point sentence at or near the beginning of the paragraph?
2. Do the other sentences in the paragraph develop the point?
3. Write out topic and theme words. If this not possible, consider what they should be and revise the paragraph to be more coherent.
4. Is there sufficient and appropriate transition or logical connection between this paragraph and the previous?
5. Are quotations integrated properly?

Sentences:

1. Convert nominalizations into verbs (e.g. "The *weakness* of the question is the *assumption* that the *success* of the prophets in combating child sacrifices was as total as their *opposition* to the practice." Would be better written as - "The question is *weak* because those who pose it *assume* that the prophets were not only *opposed* to child sacrifice, but also *succeeded* in combating the practice.").
2. Make sure topic words come before theme words.
3. Check for unduly long or run-on sentences and shorten them.

Proofread:

1. Check spelling.
2. Check punctuation and capitalization.
3. Check subject-verb agreement.
4. Check bibliographic format (bibliography and foot- or end-notes).

For additional help:

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

This book walks you through the process of writing a research paper from understanding your role with regard to your readers and finding and honing a topic to constructing an argument, drafting, and revising. It is in-depth, detailed, and deals with subjects not commonly treated in writing manuals, such as the role

of claims, evidence, and warrants in constructing an argument and organizing your paper.

Williams, Joseph M., with Gregory G. Colomb. *Style: Toward clarity and Grace*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

This volume focuses on how to construct coherent and effective sentences and paragraphs. The authors state the principles and provide myriad examples of good and bad writing. They also discuss usage and how to employ elements of balance, rhythm, and metaphor to create not just effective, but also elegant prose.

Hale, Constance. *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wickedly Effective Prose*. New York: Broadway Books, 2001.

Believe it or not, this is a hilarious book of grammar. Hale teaches you all the necessary grammar and usage rules about everything from parts of speech to how to write sentences and create a voice for yourself as a writer. She includes useful sections on what not to do, and how to use (and break) the rules to create stunning prose. *Writers of sermons will find much in here that is useful.*

Alexander, Patrick H., John F. Kutsko, James D. Ernest, Shirley A. Decker-Lucke, and David L. Petersen eds. *The SBL Handbook of Style for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*. Peabody, Mass. Hendrickson, 1999.

This volume is indispensable. You might use it most frequently to find the proper way to cite a secondary source, whether something as basic as a book by your favorite scholar, or as complex as a book with seventeen editors or an in obscure internet publication. For those working in archaeology, it also includes the rules for author-date citations. It is also a good place to look up standard abbreviations for journals you might come across in footnotes. But it also has a lot of gems, including how to abbreviate the name of any book of the Bible, any rabbinic source, Greek and Latin works, and Dead Sea Scrolls as well as which common biblical terms should or should not be capitalized.