ACADEMIC WRITING

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REMEMBER THE WRITING CENTRE

Writing Centre:
one-on-one writing help
TODAY

- A bit on academic writing
- The thesis
- Organization, paragraphs
- Clarity/wordiness
- Technicalities
- Questions???
ACADEMIC WRITING
BASIC CONVENTIONS*

- Use third person instead of first person perspective (and avoid 2nd person)
- Tense – control it!
  - Past tense to report research results (ie. Davis and Grifaldo interviewed a group of 180 police officers...). Lit reviews generally in past tense.
  - Present tense for implications of research (ie. As Davis and Grifaldo (2013) show...)
- Avoid contractions (ie. They weren’t satisfied with the results.)
- Write clearly**

* Append each of these with “usually.”
** Except this one
“GRADUATE LEVEL” WRITING?

• Demonstrates knowledge of the field and its conventions – is well-researched

• Is critical and reflective, analytical and interpretive

• Proves/contributes/offers something – shows originality of thought

• Expresses itself clearly (conceptually, grammatically, and syntactically)
  • Is “mechanically skillful” (Heady, 2007)

• Is well-organized and moves readers along on your train of thought
“Learning to write well is largely a matter of learning how to frame questions.”

- Rossenwasser & Stephen, *Writing Analytically*
THE THESIS
THESIS/THESIS STATEMENT

- WHAT? A thesis is the argument put forth by your paper; the controlling idea.
- WHERE? Usually near the end of the first paragraph
- WHY? Proves you are capable of analysis; makes a promise to your reader; tells your reader what to expect

A thesis is an arguable claim
SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT THE THESIS

- Not every assignment requires a thesis
- A thesis statement can (and often should) be longer than one sentence
- The thesis statement does not always have to refer to the essay (i.e. “This essay will show...”)
- But this tactic helps clarify the thesis for your reader
TOPIC VS. THESIS

- Topic = the subject matter of your essay (ie. I wrote this great essay about the supernatural in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*)

- Thesis = an interpretation you made about your topic based on your research and analysis (ie. “I wrote this great essay about *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* where I argued that Coleridge uses the supernatural to avoid writing about politics.”)
WEAK THESIS STATEMENTS

What happened to these sad old thesis statements?
This essay will discuss self publishing.

A thesis without a claim leaves the writer with nothing to argue. To fix this problem, give yourself something to argue!

Better: Self-publishing companies present and market the editorial process to their customers with varying levels of enthusiasm. When assessing a book’s quality and relevance, collection development specialists could benefit from examining a vanity press’s ideology and its emphasis on the editorial process.
2. THE THESIS IS A FACT – NOT ARGUABLE

The first book ever purchased on Amazon was *Fluid Concepts and Creative Analogies: Computer Models of the Fundamental Mechanisms of Thought*. OR

Internet censorship is an issue we face.

Better: Although the Internet may allow minors access to dangerous or inappropriate material, Canada should not adopt strict censorship laws. Given the global and decentralized nature of the internet, such laws would not only be ineffective, but would weaken Canada’s position on the world financial and cultural stage.*

*Adapted from http://www.csulb.edu/~eguzik/thesis.html
3. THE THESIS IS EMOTIONAL AND BASES ITS CLAIM ON PERSONAL CONVICTION

There are too many violent video games in circulation today, and they are harmful to our children!

Better: Arguably, the encounters in *Bully* teach younger players about friendship, choice, and consequences; however, the game’s didactic impact goes beyond this. As a text, *Bully* represents a particular narrative of adolescence, one that questions the morality of adult institutions and problematizes the very idea of “growing up.” As this essay will show, *Bully* gives players a complex learning environment in which to re-examine their beliefs about youth violence. *

* Adapted from Rauch, 2008
NO THESIS IS FIXED

You can change it, you know.
GETTING A THESIS: AN EXERCISE IN CLOSE READING

- In the following exercise, you will participate in a close “reading” of some data
- Grab a piece of paper
- Watch this shoe commercial and jot down things you notice

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teY3kmsLjKE
WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

• We noticed details without knee-jerk judgement
• We organized the details into a lens
• Interpretation: what do the details suggest?
• Analysis: why does this interpretation matter?
STRUCTURE
The Five Paragraph Shackles?

I am not an essay...
I am a burger!
PARAGRAPHS

- Paragraphs divide your thinking into manageable chunks
- Each paragraph should address only one idea
- *However*, you may need more than one paragraph to fully explore an idea
- In other words... *there is no five-paragraph essay. There never was a five-paragraph essay...*
Topic sentence!
...staaay on topic....

Topic sentence!
...now stay on THIS topic....

Topic sentence!
...you get the point....
TOPIC SENTENCES AND TRANSITIONS

- Topic sentences tell the reader what the paragraph will be about
  - You might even think of topic sentences as mini-thesis statements

- Transitions from one paragraph to the next can be helpful for your reader, if you can offer some kind of connection between two paragraphs
EXAMPLE
Essay about the impact of comic books on the literacy skills of elementary school children

Paragraph topic: Tone & voice

Topic sentence: The different font styles used to represent the speech of each character can provide cues for young readers when interpreting voice and tone. Loren ipsum blah blah blah. Loren ipsum blah blah blah. Loren ipsum blah blah blah. Loren ipsum blah blah blah. Loren ipsum blah blah ho hum ho hum doodle.

Paragraph topic: Sequential art

Topic sentence: While fonts can help children with interpretation, the sequential aspect of comic books also aligns closely with how many children process information. Loren ipsum blah blah blah. Loren ipsum blah blah blah sing song toodle oo. Loren ipsum blah blah blah. Loren ipsum blah blah blah. Loren ipsum blah blah blah ho hum ho hum doodle.
QUICK EXERCISE

- Open Problematic Paragraph
- Have a one-minute chit-chat with the person next to you about what’s wrong with it and how you might fix it.
A FINAL PLEA FOR PARAGRAPHS

・Stick to one topic per paragraph (try the “Reverse Outline” trick)
・Open your paragraphs with strong topic sentences (again, the “Reverse Outline”)
・Each paragraph should help prove your thesis
・Each paragraph should contain enough information to be a paragraph
・Each paragraph should stand up to the “so what” question
CONCLUSION

- Your final say!
- Brings your ideas together, and creates a sense of closure
- Leave the reader with a sense of your thesis’s broader significance and limitations… without re-stating it word-for-word
- Should never raise new points but might suggest implications for future research
As a general rule, what you are trying to say should never be obscured by how you say it

Avoid the temptation to overcomplicate your sentences and word choice

Avoid wordiness

... by which I mean the non-art of cramming too many ineffectual words into a sentence.
The consideration of social inclusion and diversity for the purpose of creating equality within the library as an institution is an ongoing concern that is being continually investigated and dealt with by a variety of members of the library and information science field as they endeavour to build and sustain socially inclusive and diverse environments going forward.
CLICHÉS: AVOID

- The day and age
- Every day life
- In today’s society
- At the end of the day
- Selling like hot cakes
- Long arm of the law
- Never a dull moment
- Lock, stock, and barrel
- Leaps and bounds
- Chomping at the bit
- From time immemorial
- Leave no stone unturned
- In the same boat

Some of the above dull-as-dishwater examples originated with M. Spear:
http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/cliche.html
STOCK PHRASES: LOSE THEM

- On account of the fact that... → Since, because
- Due to the fact that... → Since, because
- Because of the fact that → Since, because
- At the present time... → Now
- In the event that... → If
- Regardless of the fact that... → Although
- Under circumstances in which... → When
MODIFY ADJECTIVES UNNECESSARILY: DON’T BOTHER

- “Highly innovative”
- “Extremely interesting”
- “Very compelling”
- “Hugely unfortunate”
- “Fantastically overwrought”

Pffft.
Get over it.
REDUNDANT: DON’T BE IT

INSTEAD OF SAYING THIS...

added bonus
arrived at the conclusion
surrounded on all sides
costs a total of...
honest truth
large in size
personally responsible
postpone until later
warn in advance
new breakthrough

SAY THIS...

bonus
concluded
surrounded
costs
truth
large
responsible
postpone
warn
breakthrough
PASSIVE VOICE: neither wrong nor (usually) good

- Active voice = the subject (actor) in the sentence performs the action
  
  **Active:** The patron misplaced the library book.

- Passive voice = the subject (actor) in the sentence has the action performed on them.
  
  **Passive:** The library book was misplaced by the patron.
Judith’s romantic relationships were hindered by her vicious cat.
Judith’s vicious cat hindered her romantic relationships.
The world has been threatened by Cthulhu since time immemorial.

What is the subject of this sentence?

Cthulhu has threatened the world since time immemorial.
“It is important to use proper citation.”
“Proper citation is important.”
“There are many ways to interpret disco music.”
“Disco music can be interpreted in many ways.” OR “A listener can interpret disco in many ways.”
“There are never any winners in those damned Shopper’s Drug Mart sweepstakes.”
EXERCISE

- Open “Wordy Sentences”
- Work with a partner to clean up the 5 sentences
Wrong, wrong, wrong! 😊
8) Comma errors
9) Spelling/word choice errors
Mina Shaughnessy: Hierarchy of grammatical errors

8) Comma errors
9) Spelling/word choice errors
On the way home, Jan found a green man’s watch.

Living on campus, coffee is easy to find.

6) Misplaced modifiers and dangling modifiers
7) Errors in possessive apostrophes (e.g. its vs. it’s)
8) Comma errors
9) Spelling/word choice errors
John had just set down the overstuffed sandwich when he spotted a cockroach on the table. He smashed it with his open palm before he could eat.*

5) Errors in pronoun reference
6) Misplaced modifiers and dangling modifiers
7) Errors in possessive apostrophes
8) Comma errors
9) Spelling/word choice errors

* http://www.chompchomp.com/terms/pronounreference.htm
A bag full of Macintosh apples, peaches, dates, almonds, clipper ships, tarantulas, travel guides, and bowties were in the trunk of his car.

3) Errors in subject-verb agreement
4) Shifts in sentence structure
5) Errors in pronoun reference
6) Misplaced modifiers and dangling participles
7) Errors in possessive apostrophes
8) Comma errors
9) Spelling/word choice errors
Mina Shaughnessy: Hierarchy of grammatical errors

1) Sentence fragments
2) Run-ons
3) Errors in subject-verb agreement
4) Shifts in sentence structure
5) Errors in pronoun reference
6) Misplaced modifiers and dangling participles
7) Errors in possessive apostrophes
8) Comma errors
9) Spelling/word choice errors
RUN-ONS

- They are NOT long-winded sentences
- Two types: comma splice & fused sentence
- They happen when you string together two independent clauses without strong enough punctuation.
Clauses can be independent or dependent

Independent: Eddie drank five coffees.

Dependent: Although Eddie drank five coffees.

Subordinate clause
• Clauses can be independent or dependent

Independent: Eddie drank five coffees.
Dependent: Although Eddie drank five coffees.
Fix: Although Eddie drank five coffees, he still slept through the musical performance of Tommy.
RUN-ONS ARE GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

- Comma splice & fused sentence
  1. Comma splice: two independent clauses are linked by a comma
     
     Susan drank five coffees, she was up all night.

  2. Fused sentence: two independent clauses are linked by NOTHING
     
     Susan drank five coffees she was up all night.
HOW TO FIX RUN-ONS

You’ve got a comma splice, I can fix it.

1. Make the clauses into separate sentences
   - You’ve got a comma splice. I can fix it.

2. Connect the clauses with a coordinating conjunction
   - You’ve got a comma splice, and I can fix it.

3. Make one of the clauses dependent
   - If you’ve got a comma splice, I can fix it.

4. Connect the clauses with a semicolon
   - You’ve got a comma splice; I can fix it.
NEED HELP?

▪ Book an appointment or attend a workshop at the Dalhousie Writing Centre
  http://www.dal.ca/campus_life/student_services/academic-support/writing-and-study-skills.html

▪ Practice and focus
QUESTIONS?


