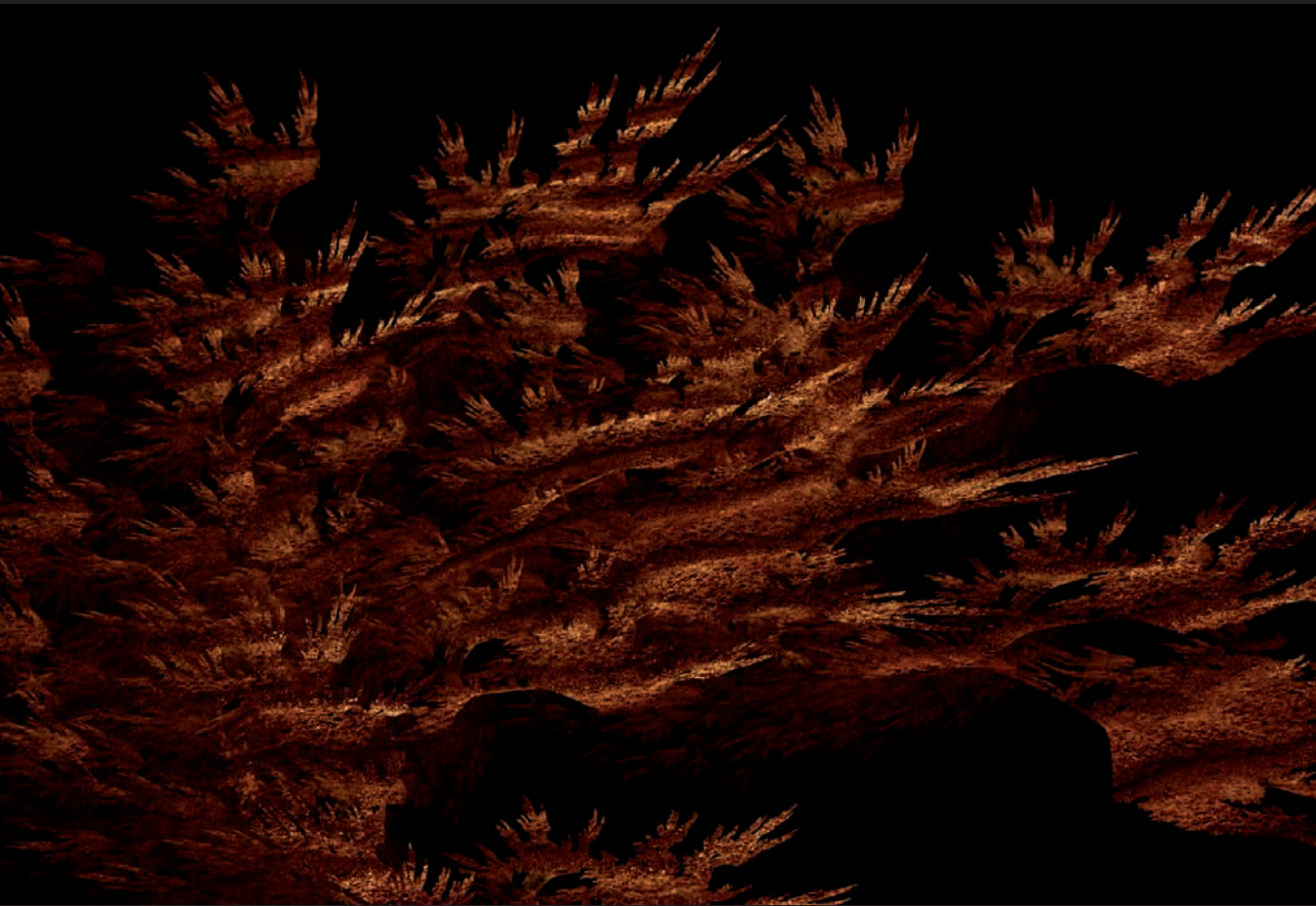


REASON TO WRITE



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In relationship to academic writing, these directions are like having assembly instructions that are almost helpful, yet somehow fit neither the parts provided, nor the nature of the final product. Each rule forces the writer to think a certain way, and therefore to write a certain way. It is helpful to examine the way in which these rules constrain the possibility of the way that writers think through a given issue, and to examine how to revise the rule so that writers can work through a question in the process of academic inquiry.

THE PURPOSE OF ACADEMIC WRITING IS TO WIN AN ARGUMENT

The idea that, in a paper, one is to argue that one is “right,” at all costs, is based upon a model of adversarial debate. While academic writers often respond to other writers, an academic article is not an editorial or a speech, and rarely adopts an adversarial tone. As such, there are several ways in which this rule gets in the way of quality academic prose:

- Writers become more concerned with defense of a statement than curiosity about what is so
- Writers tend to ignore any information that does not support winning the argument, which impedes honesty
- Writers will tend to polarize a complex issue in order to take a “side”

When you write in academics, you have an obligation to your reader to be honest, and to fully explore an idea. There is a difference between winning or losing an argument, and persuading an audience through honest inquiry.

Most readers can sense very quickly if a writer is more invested in being “right” than in telling the truth. Readers are persuaded by writers:

- Who are invested, but reasonable
- Who are careful and honest
- Who are fair, and look at all sides to an issue
- Who take other points of view into account
- Who endeavor to be of service to their readers

In other words, readers are best served by writers who can be trusted not to sacrifice intellectual and personal integrity for the sake of “winning” a one-sided argument on paper, just to prove that he or she can do so.

One of the most important features of academic writing is an attitude of genuine curiosity that demands that you take your own writing seriously. This means taking responsibility for the ethical dimension of writing: the responsibility, to yourself, and to your reader, to tell the truth, and to get to the heart of the matter at hand, without bias or agenda.

Unfortunately, the word “argument” often gives the wrong impression. The word “argument” is not a poor description for what one does in academic writing, if one defines it. However, in modern day language, an “argument” sounds like a “fight.” It sounds like competition. One fights, and one fights to win.

However, the word “argument,” in this case, refers to a logical progression of ideas that invests in the truth of a matter as opposed to “winning.” One does not persuade by battering the opposition. One persuades by demonstrating that one is a reasonable person. Persuasion is usually not the result of “winning,” but the result of the reader, in encountering the writer’s prose, coming to trust in this attitude of honesty on the part of the writer.

Old Rule: **The purpose of academic writing is to win an argument**

New Rule: **The purpose of academic writing is to be honest, and to determine the truth the best that you can.**

ACADEMIC WRITING IS THE PLACE TO EXPRESS YOUR OPINION

Encouraging students to write about their opinions is, quite frankly, careless, and probably stems from the underestimation of young people’s ability to think effectively, or to have something of value to say. Critical thinking, or critical writing, is never the place for opinion.

Yet it is also entirely understandable to ask how one can tell the difference between when something is an “opinion” and when it’s a valid point. After all, most of us think that our opinions are pretty reasonable.

To answer, one can employ a *Dictionary Definition*, which should be familiar. A dictionary definition is useful for pointing out the general meaning of a term, when that meaning is often misunderstood or confused. The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definition for opinion:

opinion: 1) a belief or assessment based on grounds failing to reach or amount to reasonable proof.

In other words, an opinion is distinguished from other kinds of statements precisely because:

- The statement can be argued, but is never held to any standard that would establish its truth or accuracy
- The statement may be commonly believed, but it is not a statement that is based upon fact, reasoning, logic, or established knowledge

If a statement fits the above, it is an opinion. One can argue it, but in doing so, one must remember that one is arguing something that, to qualify as an opinion:

- has no proof or sound reasoning to back it up
- contradicts existing proof or sound reasoning
- is based upon personal preference, or taste

Again, this is where a misunderstanding of the term “argument” makes things confusing. Just because it is possible to argue for one’s opinion, this does not make it appropriate material for academic writing. Opinion and belief have no place in academic writing.

It’s not that every opinion is wrong; it is that, to qualify as an opinion, the statement cannot allow us to reliably determine whether it is true or valid by using formal or informal logic.

We argue our opinions all the time. People can hold long debates over whether a hard or a soft mattress is more comfortable. People have conspiracy theories. People hold views on politics, religion, morality, and whether one sports team is better than another sports team.

The attempt to write academically based on an opinion almost always gets an academic writer into trouble—not only because what he or she writes is not logically defensible, but because it can very quickly cross genres and become an editorial.

Reasoning from opinion usually results in faulty reasoning. In rhetoric, faulty reasoning is called a ***fallacy***.

For example:

1. One could hold the *opinion* that wearing a lucky bracelet will cause one to do well on a test.

DEFINITION

A **fallacy** is an unsound or unfair way to present one’s thinking, and usually represents either an error in reasoning (a cognitive bias), or a deliberate attempt to obscure one’s meaning in order to persuade through unfair means.

One could even argue: “I wore my lucky bracelet, and then I did well on the test.”

This is a fallacy called *False Cause*. False Cause makes it look like there is a relationship between a cause and an effect, even when there is not a logical relationship. In other words, just because there is an effect (doing well on the test) does not mean that you have established the cause (wearing the bracelet). Maybe you got lucky. Maybe you studied. Maybe the test was easy.

Another famous example of “false cause” would be: “The rooster crows at sunrise. Therefore, the rooster causes the sun to rise.”

2. One could hold the *opinion* that aliens have taken over the government.

One could even argue: “Anybody who thinks aliens haven’t taken over the government is naïve.”

This fallacy is called an *ad hominim attack*. In an *ad hominim attack*, one ignores the issue at hand, and, instead, launches a personal attack against any person holding an alternative view.

Another example of *ad hominim attack* would be: “You may have a point, but woah—is that tie ugly!”

3. One can hold the *opinion* that *Titanic* (1997) was a great film.

One could even argue: “Women love the film *Titanic*”

This fallacy is called *Hasty Generalization*. In *Hasty Generalization*, almost any opinion can appear to be supported if a person makes a general statement meant to speak for everyone, (or a group of people). Thus, we could say that, even though *Titanic* is the type of film that, in American culture, is supposed to appeal to women, the plain fact is that not every woman loved (or, indeed, even viewed) the film, and one could probably find a female who saw the film, and couldn’t wait for the ship to go down.

Another example of *Hasty Generalization* would be: “Men want their sons to grow up to be baseball players.” This is false. Some men don’t care for sports. Some men would rather their sons grew up to be doctors or lawyers. Some men are not very concerned with their son’s eventual employment. Some men are not fathers. Some men would rather their

sons grew up to be football players. Some men live in countries where the sport is not even played.

Trying to offer legitimate support for an opinion is inevitably frustrating, because opinions, by definition, don't require proof—that's why they're opinions.

Opinions are almost never reasoned responses. Some have to do with personal taste ("I like blue"). Some have to do with our personal beliefs or values. Some are the product of conventional wisdom—hidden cultural assumptions that one acquires by sharing a common culture or language with others, even if one is not aware of those hidden assumptions. At times, one can make a conscious assumption, such as a proposition (e.g.: let $x=2$), but it is the unconscious ones that are at issue, here.

Assumptions can hide in a lot of places. In fact, they're impossible to avoid. Behind *all* of our statements, and questions, are a series of assumptions. Often these assumptions are totally true, quite simple, and very obvious:

Request: "Tomorrow, when you go to the store, would you pick up some milk?"

Assumptions: There will be a tomorrow; you will be alive; the store will be open; the store will have milk; you know that when I say "pick up some milk" I do not mean that you should look for some on the ground, or that you should steal it, but that you should purchase it with money; the store will be willing to sell you the milk for money; you will have money to buy the milk; you will bring the milk back, and not drink it along the way; etc.

These assumptions are simple common sense; we can't go around questioning basic reality every time we ask a question or make a statement. We've simply got to have some kind of mutual agreements, that are unspoken, and that we all "get."

The problem is that sometimes we "get" unspoken assumptions that have less to do with reality-as-we-know-it (tomorrow will come), and more to do with ideology. Sometimes we don't question the information that we absorb through social, cultural, familial, educational, and popular culture sources.

There is a riddle that illustrates hidden cultural assumptions quite effectively. If you've already heard it, then you'll get the reference. If you don't know the answer, notice how much time it takes for you to come up with the answer, before looking:

A man witnesses his son in a terrible bicycle accident. He scoops up his boy, puts him in the back of his car, and races to the emergency room.

As the boy is rolled into surgery, the surgeon cries out in shock: “I can’t operate on this boy! He’s my son!” How is this possible?¹

Argument from opinion can be tempting, because it absolves one from the responsibility of examining one’s assumptions. That’s why it’s very important for one to get into the habit of avoiding statements that begin with: “I believe...” or “In my view...” or “In my opinion. ...” If the statement is sound, one can just state it.

Listen to the difference between the following statements:

Statement 1

“In my opinion, a free press is essential to a functioning democracy.”

Statement 2

“A free press is essential to a functioning democracy.”

The difference between the two statements is that Statement 1 does not require any reasoning to back it up—we all have the “right to our opinion,” don’t we?

On the other hand, Statement 2 requires reasonable justification, such as:

“A functioning democracy relies upon citizens being able to access reliable information upon which to make informed decisions in order to actively participate in the political process.”

The moment one reads a piece of writing that contains the phrase, “In my opinion...” or “I believe...” one can assume that the writer is either feeling uncertain about whether or not the statement is true or valid, and is trying to hide that fact, or the writer would like to assert a biased point of view, without being obligated to logically justify it.

Old Rule: **Academic writing is the place to express your opinion.**

New Rule: **Academic writing is the place for reasoned exploration of an idea.**

ACADEMIC WRITING INVOLVES AGREEING OR DISAGREEING ON AN ISSUE

There are a series of important topics that represent controversial issues within public discourse in the United States. They include: abortion; gun control; health care; prayer in schools; the legalization of marijuana; assisted suicide; etc. They are

¹ Answer to the riddle: The doctor is the boy’s mother.

often issues about which people feel very strongly, and unless you have been living under a rock, you know the list.

Writing can get very personal, especially when a writer feels compelled to write about something that the writer has experienced personally, or in regard to which the writer feels a certain call to action.

This is often the case with binary issues. There is no reason not to feel strongly in regard to such issues. It is rather that academic writing demands a specific response in regard to those issues that is different from opinion writing.

Within public discourse, these kind of issues have been reduced to what is called a “binary,” or an “either/or” argument. One is for-or-against, or one is pro-or-con. Thus, one is pro-life or pro-choice. One is for, or against, gun control.

No matter how strongly you feel about a given side of an issue, the act of simply repeating, on paper, the same arguments that are usually offered, for that side, does not in any way constitute critical thinking, or writing. Your reader has already heard those arguments. Your reader either doesn't agree, or you are “preaching to the converted.”

While it is true that it is difficult to write on polarized issues, this does not mean that they are not vital issues. Rather, it means that writing upon them requires a formidable degree of critical sophistication. There is a reason for this. Academic writing is logical; if an issue hasn't yet been reasonably resolved within public discourse, several things may be going on.

- We are missing important information or have not yet asked the right questions
- A value system or moral judgment may be the test of truth, as opposed to logic
- The issue is complicated, and cannot be resolved by only one of two answers

The impulse to agree or disagree is sometimes a very difficult habit for student writers to shake, because they have been routinely prompted to take a side on an issue. The reason students are often encouraged to do so is in order to rehearse rhetorical strategies—which, while it may provide instruction in certain stylistic approaches to persuasion, denies the student the ability to recognize the complexity and real-life context of important issues that impact upon real people.

EVER WONDERED?

When referring to “a general person,” a writer can use the phrase “he or she” or “him or her.” Because it is one or the other, such a pronoun is always treated as singular, as in: “When a person blushes, he or she is embarrassed.” The writer can also use the pronoun “one,” which is formal, but always refers to “every-single-person.” It is always treated as singular: “When one blushes, one is embarrassed.”

It is possible to write critically on a pro/con issue. However, to do so, one would have to let go of one's own investment in the issue, and disrupt the opposition itself. This is the most difficult form of critical thinking. To break a binary, one would have to do the following steps, in order, within a critical paper:

1. Re-represent the “pro” side of the argument in a way in which someone who strongly held that view would find both reasonable and fair.
2. Re-represent the “con” side of the argument in a way in which someone who strongly held that view would find reasonable and fair.
3. Ask a pertinent critical question of the issue in a way that breaks the binary—in other words, that asks a question in a way that neither side has before, or discover the single point of contention that prevents this issue from being logically resolved, and then resolve it.

In most cases, real-life questions are simply not adequately addressed through only two options.

For example, the answer to the question: “Does popular culture create public opinion, or reflect public opinion?” is, of course: “Yes.”

Old Rule: **Academic writing involves agreeing or disagreeing on a Topic.**

New Rule: **Academic writing involves recognizing the complexity of an issue.**

ACADEMIC WRITING INVOLVES THE WRITER CHOOSING A TOPIC OF INTEREST

Writing about what interests you seems so reasonable. Yet it is often a real trap. There's a difference between being curious about something, and having an interest in something. Imagine having an “interest” in a business—it means you've got something at stake.

If you feel strongly about women's issues, and you end up writing an emotional rant about the unfairness of it all, you're caught in this trap. If you lean strongly toward the left or the right side of the political spectrum, and you end up sputtering indignantly through an essay, you've fallen into this trap.

Grace Paley once said: “You write from what you know, but you write in what you don't know.” If you're “interested” in something, it's probably not only because you know something about it, but also because you hold an strong position on the matter, often with a whole lot of emotional baggage attached.

If you're personally invested, it's more difficult to step back. The bottom line is: If you've got some sort of agenda before you begin to write, your ability to examine the issue in a fair way is already compromised. It is a perfectly understandable for us to be reluctant to question what we think we already know, or to take an objective stance on an issue about which we feel strongly.

Old Rule: **Academic writing involves the writer choosing a topic of interest.**

New Rule: **Academic writing involves becoming curious about a question.**

THE PURPOSE OF ACADEMIC WRITING IS TO TELL THE READER WHAT WE "SHOULD" DO

When we write academically, it is true that we intend to persuade our reader. However, successful persuasion is actually the result of telling the truth about what we have found, from a point of curiosity.

Telling a reader that something is so, or telling the reader what to do or think, without telling the reader why, is just not very persuasive. As a reader, you probably recognize the fact that you would resent such a maneuver, and that you would be much more likely to become engaged if, upon reading what someone has written, you said to yourself: "That seems reasonable" and "I never thought about it that way, before."

At that point, the job of the academic writer is done. As for compelling someone to action—telling the reader what he or she (or all of us) should think or do, or should not think or do—that is not our job. In writing, we trust readers to think or act according to their own judgment.

Old Rule: **The purpose of academic writing is to tell the reader what we "should" do.**

New Rule: **The purpose of academic writing is to tell the reader what we have come to understand.**

2 REVIEW

CHAPTER REVIEW

The important information to take from this chapter is:

The purpose of academic writing is not to win an argument, but to persuade by being honest, and determining the truth the best that you can.

Academic writing is not the place to express opinion, but a place for reasoned exploration of an idea.

Academic writing does not involve agreeing or disagreeing on a topic, but rather involves recognizing the complexity of an issue.

Academic writing does not involve choosing to write about what “interests” you, but about becoming curious about a question.

The purpose of academic writing is not to tell the reader what we (everyone) should do, but, rather, what the writer has come to understand.

GRAMMAR REVIEW

Pronoun Usage: Replacing Specific Nouns

A pronoun replaces a noun, such as a person or a thing. If, instead of saying: “Clara hits the ball,” one says: “She hits it,” then “Clara” and “ball” have been replaced by the pronouns “She” and “it.”

Singular pronouns replace one unique thing in the world, in a specific context, as in “Clara” (she) or “that particular ball” (it).

Plural pronouns often replace unique groups of things in the world in a specific context, as in “The Johnson family has three cars” as “They have them.”

Pronoun Usage: Replacing Non-Specific Noun

The tricky thing is if a pronoun refers to a kind of non-specific “every-single-person” (singular) or “all-people” (plural).

Singular “Every-Single-Person”

The writer can use the phrase “he or she” or “him or her.” Whether one or the other, the pronoun is always treated as singular, as in:

“When a person blushes, he or she is embarrassed.”

The writer can also use the pronoun “one,” which is formal, but always refers to “every-single-person.” It is always treated as singular:

“When one blushes, one is embarrassed.”

Plural “All-People”

Provided one is not referring to a specific group of people, but just “people, in general,” a writer can use the *plural*. In doing so, the writer should remember

that he or she is, in that moment, speaking for all persons, and make sure that the statement justifies that level of generality, as in:

“It’s true of all people. When we are embarrassed, we often blush.”

THREE COMMON ERRORS

1. Singular to Plural:

If what you are replacing is singular or plural, keep it singular or plural:

“When one goes to the store, one shops.”

NOT: “When one goes to the store, they shop.”

2. Pronoun Switching:

If you use a pronoun, keep using that same pronoun for what it replaces, as in:

“If one goes online, one can buy almost anything, especially if one has the money to do so in one’s bank account because one was born wealthy.

NOT: “If one goes online, he or she can buy almost anything.”

3. “He” for “every-single-person.”

“He” can never substitute, by itself, for “every-single-person.”

One can alternate between the genders as long as it is not confusing to the reader, as in:

“A student studies a great deal. He may stay up all night to read. She may get up early to write a paper.”

One can use the phrase “he or she” (or “she or he”), as in:

“A student studies a great deal. He or she may stay up all night and read. She or he may get up early to write a paper.

NOT: A student studies a great deal. He may stay up all night and read. He may get up early to write a paper.

If you are wondering why this last rule applies, ponder the following statement:

“A human is a mammal. *He* breastfeeds *his* young.”