

What Do Professors Want From Student Writing?

This is a version of a handout produced by Professor Don Ross (English) as a result of his CISW research into faculty attitudes and expectations toward undergraduate writing. The handout version of this text is available from the Center. Both faculty and students have found it to be useful in their classes.

This ranked list of guidelines is based on a workshop involving a dozen professors from five colleges at the University of Minnesota. The guidelines are amplified with quoted comments by faculty on undergraduate papers and address what many faculty say they look for in formally-prepared term papers, laboratory studies, and technical reports. Some of the guidelines, especially those concerning explicit organizing principles, are more relevant to the sciences and social sciences than to the humanities.

Development

The ideas in paragraphs and the whole paper should be developed. Assertions should be backed with sufficient evidence; opinions should be amplified so that the reasoning that goes into them is clear.

Typical comments include: The paper lacks focus; none of your important points are developed sufficiently; Give examples; Develop the main topic around the main questions you were asked to address; Do a more systematic comparison; More substance, more explanation; Required additional explanation; Insufficient coverage of the articles you reviewed; Pick a few salient points and illustrate them with examples; Be sure the issues are clearly and thoroughly discussed.

Suggestions to help students improve this aspect of their writing: Before you write, decide on three to five issues, examples, or points which you will treat in detail. After your first draft, talk to someone about what your paper is "all about"; have that person take notes and see if the paper has retained the focus and depth you started out with.

Technical Content

The "technical content" of the paper must be accurate; theories and evidence should be stated in conventional terms; facts should be verifiable.

Typical comments: I would not give an A unless the organization, clarity, and style were good; sometimes I've given two grades and assigned one on the basis of technical content and another on the basis of organization and presentation.

Suggestions: Check your facts, calculations, and references. Be sure graphs have legends and tables have headings. Reread the introductory and concluding paragraphs or sections for consistency.

Purpose

The purpose of a paper should be clear. This advice covers the rhetorical aims (to prove, persuade, inform), as well as the intellectual points. The paper should have a well-defined motivation other than just fulfilling the assignment. Often, but not always, announce your purpose clearly, early in the paper.

Typical comments: Your view should be stated from the beginning; The first thing I'm going to be looking for is a statement of purpose; What should your argument be?; You need to tie together the argument with your analysis; I am unsure that you really understand the concepts

you discuss; Explain why you have taken the position you adopt; then you will have a solid and logical structure.

Organizing Principle

The whole paper should have an organizing principle which is easy for the reader to identify and which can be followed. Most scientific reports have explicit conventional sequences which professors expect to be followed; the typical report on an experiment has an "Introduction," followed by sections on "Experimental Procedure," "Results," and "Conclusions."

Typical comments: Your main argument should be clearly stated in the introductory paragraph which provides a road map of how the argument will be developed; The introductory paragraph is critical because it informs the reader what you intend to do and how you intend to do it--without it, the reader has no confidence in your ability to provide intelligible information or an intelligible argument; Develop an effective framework.

Suggestions: Try an outline or informal list of the main topics, either before you write or after the first draft is complete. For each paragraph, take notes for yourself on how it adds to the content of the paper, and what the rhetorical function is in your proof or explanation.

Problem Definition

Most assigned topics involve questions, problems, or dilemmas. The context for ideas should be carefully defined, and can often provide the path by which the reader is lead through the paper.

Typical comments: Please state your argument in an introductory paragraph; show how you will systematically develop it; and conclude with a strong summary statement to show that you have accomplished what you set out to do; Most facts are true, but they don't support the conclusion.

Suggestions: Before you start writing, read the assignment sheet for the paper carefully; if you don't understand what kind of problem you should write about ask the professor or the TA. Use your sense of your teacher's style to figure out what is expected.

Precision

Sentences should be precise; the words and phrases should be accurate, especially if they involved technical concepts. In commentary, the nouns and verbs should precisely express the basic ideas in the sentences and modifiers (e.g., adjectives) should add to that precision.

Suggestions: Write a completely new introduction after you have read your draft carefully. Many papers are more precise in the middle sections than in the introduction, especially if you write the introduction first (before you see how it turns out).

Careful Editing

It is a courtesy, a standard, and often an absolute requirement that your work be in standard, edited English. It is better to correct mistakes in ink at the last moment than to leave mistakes on the paper you turn in.

Suggestions: Write with a word processor and use its spelling checker. If you know that you have problems with grammar and mechanics, read your paper out loud slowly to someone, and note every place where it sounds odd. Your ear for accurate spoken language is often quite good. If you aren't sure what a word means, look it up in both the dictionary and the thesaurus.

Recognition of "mechanical" errors of usage, punctuation, and spelling varies quite a bit among the faculty. Some have a very low tolerance, while most only seem to notice problems

which are frequent and widespread. Students often think that writing without mistakes is all that the teacher is "really" looking for, a conclusion which is reinforced because errors are relatively easy to mark on the page. However, a survey of papers from several colleges indicates that papers with high grades can easily have more careless mistakes than those which only earn a low B or a C.

The previous issues are relatively easy to describe, even if they seem hard to realize. For example, discussing an outline or a prospectus with the professor or someone else in the class can help you improve the way you present your ideas. However, the best papers, the ones which earn A grades, are often characterized by having the right "tone." The following comments are about papers—they rarely are conveyed through what your professor says directly.

Tone

The best papers read like the work of an educated adult. It is hard to say exactly what this means, but it falls somewhere between high-school writing and published prose.

Professors' Remarks: This needs a convincing conclusion and introduction; Conclusion needs to be stronger; when the language is not clear, it's because of lack of self-confidence.

Suggestions: Look for equivocating words and phrases, such as "seems to," "might be," "perhaps." Only express your doubts when they are genuine, and when what you have said in the paper leads to well-defined uncertainty.

Two adjectives which describe the desired tone are confidence and enthusiasm. Students who really understand their topic, who know more than they have the space to tell about, who have read the sources critically, or who see the relation between theory and the data are likely to be confident in how they write. If the topic is personally or socially interesting, and if your writing process led to important trains of thoughts or results, let the reader feel your enthusiasm. Professors' Remarks: If students are enthusiastic about the topic, they can probably write a paragraph about all the things they would have liked to have found that would further have elucidated the subject.

Originality and Surprise

Originality is judged in the context of other undergraduates, not Nobel or Pulitzer Prize recipients. Faculty look for approaches or conclusions which are not shared by the rest of the class, or by other students who have written on the topic before. However, originality needs to be within the limits of the field. Surprise involves how the topic is presented, whether in the use of detail, figurative language, interesting analogies and examples, or organization.

Professors' Remarks: The most exciting papers are those which are creative in the way they are organized; The best writing involves new ideas in a problematic way; it shows that the student is questioning the ideas in the field; I look for things like creativity and original thinking.

Typical comments: Use your own language to explain these ideas; Take the ideas and put them in your own ideas, and reflect on them in terms of your own beliefs and attitudes.

Suggestions: If the classroom atmosphere is appropriate, try to talk with your professor about the approach you plan to take. Be candid: say where you think your ideas are original, and ask if you are getting too far from what your research allows.