WRITING IN THE ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

This publication was prepared by the staff and Peer Helpers of The Learning Commons.
About our cover:

When the University of Guelph was incorporated in 1964, the institution adopted the name and some of the history of the City of Guelph. Guelph’s name comes from “Welfen,” the family name of the royal House of Hanover. That ancestry is recognized by the white Hanovarian stallion which appears on the University of Guelph’s official crest and in this 1981 painting by Heather Cooper. The original painting still hangs in the University Library, depicting the Hanovarian stallion with the winged horse, Pegasus, the symbol of poetic inspiration.
Revision and Editing ........................................................... 53

In the End is the Beginning .................................................. 57
  Learning from Someone Else’s Mistakes ...................... 58
  Where to Look for Help ............................................... 59

Appendix 1: Common Grammar and Punctuation Errors... 61
  Commas ........................................................................ 61
  Agreements .................................................................. 62
  Grammatical Sentencing ............................................. 63
  Apostrophes ................................................................ 66

A Select Bibliography of Books on Essay Preparation
and Style ......................................................................... 67

References ........................................................................... 70
Introduction

Most of us think that we know how to write an essay. After all, it seems as if we have been writing them for years. And, to be honest, many of the things that you have been told in high school about making outlines, setting a time-line for the various stages of the writing process, and always having an introduction with a thesis argument, are the simple basics upon which all your academic writing should be founded.

However, sometimes when you get to university, with all of the competing claims upon your time that university life — both social and academic — brings, your well-tried essay-writing strategies don’t seem to work. With good reason: in high school you might have had a month or even two to write a single essay, and your teachers kept you on track with deadlines for outlines and first drafts. Suddenly you are balancing a full course load, several essays at a time and midterms on all sides. And now you are more-or-less on your own, with no teachers to keep you on track.

So you procrastinate. There are other reasons why you put off working on your essays too. One of them is fear. First of all, even though you have had plenty of exposure to essay-writing, you really aren’t sure what you are supposed to be writing about now. You are in a new environment, where what you are used to producing may no longer be acceptable, or at least up to university standards. And second, while most of your writing assignments are probably essays, you will quickly discover that
not only do different disciplines expect different types of essays, but that many of your assignments might not be “essays” at all. You might be asked to produce different kinds of papers that are so new to you that you don’t even know where to begin.

But as a student in the arts or social sciences, you have chosen a discipline where you are likely to have to produce significant amounts of writing. That’s where this resource comes in. We hope that we can offer you some information about writing, some of which will seem old, some new, which will help you in your academic career at university. Much of it will be focused on “essay writing,” which is still the most common form of writing assignment in the arts and social sciences, but we will also introduce you to literature reviews, book reviews, research reports, and case studies.

This book focuses on the “mechanics” of writing these different types of assignments. For a more general guide on “where to begin” with university writing, including more in-depth discussion of how university writing differs from high school, see *Writing Your First University Papers* in this series.

**Benefits of Writing Assignments**

You may not look forward to writing assignments at university. It is certainly true that they will involve you in strenuous mental activity, and they almost always take more time than you intend. But writing is just like working out at a gym, or playing a sport. All involve an effort which is worthwhile and can create an intense feeling of exhilaration. The mental “high” you get when all of your ideas come together to form a coherent and interesting whole is an exciting experience.
There are other good reasons why university students are given writing assignments. First, it is recognized that by writing about a subject in depth you become engaged with the ideas and the field you are studying in a much deeper way (Light, 1992). You can focus on one subject and develop an opinion about it. In effect, when you write an essay, you are transforming passive into active learning. Since you can often tailor your research topic to an aspect of the course that especially interests you, you will likely find that you enjoy your course more and feel you are learning more.

Writing papers also gives you an opportunity to use the tools of your discipline helps you to understand them better.

**Writing in the Disciplines**

One of the first things you will learn about writing in a university environment is that different disciplines require different types of writing, so there is no “one-size-fits-all” template. The different types of writing roughly correspond to the different methods scholars in varying fields use to generate information and understanding, and the key to your success in your chosen field will be how you learn to adopt these methods.

Although later on we will discuss the different kinds of writing expected in different disciplines, at this point it is useful to review the process all writers undergo when they are writing almost any type of paper. When you are studying in any discipline, when you are reading and writing within that discipline, you are, as it were, stepping into something which is very much like a conversation among the people working in the discipline. These are people who “speak the same language,” whether it be the language of Sociology, or English Literature, or Political Theory. In your case, as a university student, this is a
conversation already in progress when you begin your studies. By writing a paper, you are joining that conversation, and truly becoming engaged in the methodology, the ways of thinking that are part and parcel of that discipline.

Most often in the arts and social sciences, you will be writing argumentative papers: the kind of papers that let you explore your own ideas about the issue and also try to persuade others that your position is a worthwhile one. And because you have to assume that others may have other points of view, or take other positions, you have to provide reasonable arguments and evidence to support your case. But whether that evidence consists of statistics, direct quotes, paraphrases of previous research, or your own research and observations is determined by the conventions of the discipline for which you are writing. Vocabulary, format, and citation and referencing styles might all vary depending on the discipline.

---

**Thinking When You Write**

Since most of your papers will be argumentative, it is important to understand how you will arrive at that argument.

Researchers into cognitive psychology have found that the most successful essay writing involves more than simply taking a stand and sticking by it. A study of students’ writing patterns (Walvoord and McCarthy, 1990) found that the most highly successful students often engaged in a debate-like dialogue when planning their papers. The study concludes that the successful essay writer is not just a text processor, but someone whose thinking is dialectical. This writer does not simply adopt a position and stick to it, but considers other arguments throughout the pre-writing stage. After going through this process at the planning stage and testing her/his position against
all the counter-arguments, the writer is able to marshal the information she/he has retrieved into a disciplined whole and to arrive at and support a tenable argument and conclusion.

Get used to using debate-thinking as an aid to your pre-draft writing. By adopting this particular frame of mind every time you write a paper, you will at least save yourself from falling into the trap of producing a purely descriptive paper.
This chapter includes two sample essays, one bad and one good, from students in a 200-level Political Science course in Canadian Government at the University of Guelph. Their subject matter (opinion polls) is accessible, yet academic in nature. In this way you can examine papers that are at an equivalent level of complexity to those you will write at university, and use them as a kind of measure or guide when you are writing your first essays.

These are not exactly the essays the students handed in; some things have been altered for purposes of demonstration. For example, it is much easier for you to read very short papers. It is easier, too, for us to demonstrate the structure of a paper when it is contained on only a few pages.

For this reason, we have eliminated many paragraphs illustrating the arguments made in the papers, although we have not changed the arguments themselves. You will have to imagine that the students have included these very necessary supportive facts or references. This imaginative leap is particularly necessary in the case of the “good” paper, which was much longer than the “unsatisfactory” one, where very little had to be eliminated from the original text in order to make it fit on three or four pages of small print.

The professor had suggested that these essays be roughly eight pages in length. The “unsatisfactory” essay was four-and-a-
half double-spaced pages; the “good” one was fourteen. (Note that some instructors may be very rigid about the number of pages they will accept in an essay; in those cases, do not exceed the stated number of pages. On the other hand, it is almost always a bad idea to hand in a paper that is far shorter than required. If you have done so, you have probably written a more superficial paper than the course demands. The solution, then, is not in padding your essay to build up the number of words, but in re-examining your thesis and your arguments.)

Sample A is an example of a failing paper. It was probably written in great haste, as it shows many of the signs of a paper written the night before the deadline. There are proofreading, spelling, and grammar errors, as well as an almost incoherent conclusion. It also exhibits some of the most telling indications of lack of preparation and deep thought. It responds to the question asked in a very impressionistic way; it focuses on the less important aspect of the topic at the expense of the most important one; and although there are glimpses of intelligent and important arguments, they are not sufficiently developed. In short, it appears to be a very rough first draft, one which needs extensive rethinking, restructuring, and revision.

Look at the thesis argument in sample A. It reads:

In order to prove the importance of public opinion polls in Canadian politics, the process of polling, and the use and misuse of polls will be examined.

This tells us how the essay is going to be structured (it will examine the use and misuse of opinion polls), an important thing to indicate in an introductory paragraph, but nowhere in the introduction can we find anything that qualifies as a thesis argument. Certainly, this sentence does not tell us what the author is going to be arguing in the paper.
Compare that thesis argument with the one in sample B, which is from a paper that received an “A” grade. It reads:

When we do that [examine polling theory, methodological problems, the role of polling in modern Canadian elections] we can see that one result of polling’s increasing influence is a subtle undermining of responsible government and the ideals of democracy, as well as the development of an increasingly ‘value-less’ science of politics.

There is an immense difference between these two. The second paper has gone one step beyond the first one, and is expressing a point of view. This student is making his/her paper into an intellectual and philosophical argument, going deep into what he or she considers to be the underlying truth of the matter.

It is also interesting that, both in declaring such a forceful thesis argument, and indeed throughout the rest of the paper, this student’s individual and characteristic voice is very evident. (When we speak of a voice in writing, what we mean is that the writing is really reflective of the interior nature and feelings of the writer, just as your spoken voice belongs to you alone, and when you speak on the telephone to friends, they know who you are without identification.) This voice we see exhibited here is really a consequence of the confidence the author has in his or her argument, a confidence gained from doing enough research to really have an “opinion” or point of view based upon those findings.

It is rare to find an undergraduate, or indeed anyone, who has merged her or his research and thought so thoroughly with the way our student expresses it in this academic paper. Yet this is what good writers should always aim for, and if we do sometimes achieve it, we produce much more powerful work.
One warning: this question of voice should not be confused with any discussion of subjective versus objective point of view. When you write from a subjective point of view you present information as you see it from your own experience. You include impressions as well as facts. You may find this concept especially confusing when your instructors say they want “your opinion” or ask you to write “an opinion paper.” When they use the word “opinion” in this context, they do not define it in the same way you do when you are talking casually. They want you to take a stand, argue something, and support your arguments logically. Almost all of the essays you will be expected to write at university must be presented from an objective point of view. The emphasis is on your subject matter, and you convince your readers by presenting objective facts which can be verified outside your paper.

Another important difference between the two papers is in their level of precision. As we have noted, sample A tends to be impressionistic, and often mentions things in general terms, without specific data or detail, and sometimes makes blatantly false statements (for example, the claim that polls have been used for more than 150 years in Canada: Canada only came into existence in 1867, and polling is an even more recent invention). Sample B is extremely precise, gives data, specific examples, cites important quotes, authorities in the field, and gives references.

It is this level of precision which often makes the difference between an excellent paper and one which is merely good. It is an indication of a good command of the topic, and of a more complex understanding that goes beyond the ordinary student’s grasp.

Finally, we should touch on the way that thoughts are expressed. The good paper rarely has style, spelling, or grammar errors. The poor paper, on the other hand, exhibits proofreading
errors ("roll" instead of "role," for instance). Too often we believe that just because we use computers with spell-check we can avoid all spelling errors. It is still necessary to proofread any paper before you hand it in. There are also grammar errors, and partly because of them, it is at times difficult to understand exactly what is being said. We’ve highlighted some — but not all — of them to show you what we mean.

This last problem is an important one. When we are reading a sentence, and we have to stop and re-read it several times in order to figure out its meaning, we not only lose track of the argument the student has been in the process of making, but our general overall impression of the paper declines. Even markers who are not grammar-oriented will lower grades because of this. So, although some students will argue that the “content” of an essay is the only important criterion for the grade received, it is without a doubt true that grades will be adversely affected by poor grammar and style. The only way that content can be transmitted is through words organized in such a way so as to be clearly and simply understood.
SAMPLE A.

TOPIC: Over the past twenty years polls have come to play an increasingly important part in Canadian political life. How have public opinion polls changed the way Canadian political parties run election campaigns?

Everyone would agree that public opinion polls have come to play an important roll in Canadian politics. After all, in a democratic system such as ours, the citizens should be allowed to express their support (or lack of support) for the government which represents them. And public opinion polls allow Canadians to express their political attitudes. However, opinion polls are more than just an ideal system for the citizens to fulfill their freedom of speech. For over one hundred and fifty years politicians in the democratic elections of Canada have relied on the information generated by public opinion polls in order to base their political campaigns. In order to prove the importance of public opinion polls in Canadian politics, the process of polling, and the use and misuse of polls will be examined.

Canada is a large country which makes conducting polls very expensive and time consuming. In order to make the monotonous task easier politicians hire organizations such as, The Canadian Gallup Affiliate and The Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, to conduct the polls. Also, parties have private polls conducted by a hired group of people dedicated to helping the parties campaign.
The two most common methods of surveying used are the “quota system” and the “probability system.” Under the quota system sample groups are determined by the use of census data, such as, age, gender, and region. Next a quota for each group is set, i.e., 100 men between the ages of 30 and 40 living in Ontario cities with populations above 100,000. The other type is called Probability Sampling. The population is divided into “Strata” which are determined by the number of people in the area. Then usually a sample group of 1,500 are chosen at random within each strata and are interviewed.

Problems that may occur during the sampling and interviewing procedures could lead to a margin of error in the poll results. A margin of error of + –3 per 1000 people surveyed is acceptable. These errors occur for many different reasons.

The types of questions designed on the surveys is one of the most important considerations for interviewers. Due to Canada’s massive size it would take a great deal of time to interview fifteen hundred people in every strata, in person. Thus, much of the interviewing for polls is done over the telephone. This in itself complicates the types of questions people will answer on the phone. For example people are less likely to answer long thought-provoking questions to a stranger over the phone. The survey question must not require long detailed answers because the answers will vary greatly. However, when questions are worded so that the answers are simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or limited to a multiple choice explanations will be emitted from the question.
Without the explanation false assumptions could be made over the survey results. Due to data analysis being so subjective many problems in tabulating the results of public opinion surveys can exist. This occurs when assumptions and unsubstantiated explanations of the data are tabulated in the way the statistical deems best. Also biases and misinterpretations can lead to the misunderstanding of data or representing the biases of the interviewer. Both these problems add to the margin of error in polls which means the information contained in them can be misleading.

The Progressive Conservative Party used the polls to help guide their campaign during 1984. An election poll said that they were gaining popularity in all regions except Quebec. So for the last three weeks of the campaign they concentrated on reaching out to the French Canadians. This tactic obviously worked because they won the election.\(^4\) Polls can be very beneficial to the politician who is dedicated to dealing with the issues. There is a fine line however, that politicians cross when polls are no longer used for the sake of the issues that concern the people and instead become a scorecard to measure the popularity vote the politician needs to get into office. It is detrimental to all when the numbers in the polls start leading politicians away from the issues instead of towards them. The group that loses the most when this happens is the Canadian public because they are being denied a government that is truly representative of their concerns.

The theory of allowing polls to be used in elections as a voice of the people to dictate the issues of concern to the
politicians is a great ideal for the democratic system. Polls, when conducted properly i.e. the right types of questions are asked and the results are tabulated as correctly and factually as possible, can be a useful and essential component of developing political campaigns. When politicians use the information in the polls to develop their campaigns to be centred around the issues that concern the people everybody wins. The position with the most suited type of answers for Canada’s problems, the people of Canada benefit from a great leader, and Canada as a nation grows to be the strongest in the world. It is however when the numbers of the poll results over ride the importance of the issues in the campaign that everybody suffers. Thus, polls play a very important role in Canadian politics. They are the backbone of the campaigns from which future Canadian leaders emerge. For a country that is constantly looking for the leader that will read only the issues in the polls and not the numbers, some say Canada has found that leader, others say Canada still sits and waits....
TOPIC: The use of polls in Modern Canadian Election Campaigns

The Canadian election campaign is an undertaking that some might see as becoming more and more unsavoury. The successful campaign must increasingly focus on a “sellable” message, intoning the themes which will be well received by the general public, regardless of viability or rationality. The catalyst for this type of campaign has been the opinion poll. To fully understand this development, polling theory, possible errors, and its role in the modern election campaign must be examined. When we do that, we can see that one result of polling’s increasing influence is a subtle undermining of responsible government and the ideals of democracy, as well as the development of an increasingly “value-less” science of politics.

A complete understanding of the theory behind polling must begin with an understanding of the evolution of the term “democracy.” Aristotle, in his Politics envisioned a republic wherein rule was by the consent of the governed, but which produced an aristocracy which ruled.\(^1\) Of course, ideas about the nature of democracy have changed from era to era, and one theorist, James Bryce, now seen\(^2\) as the catalyst for the modern reign of the pollster, believed that a reliable method of polling would improve the institutions of democracy, leading to “a fourth stage” of democracy which would be reached if the will of the majority of citizens were to become ascertainable at all times, and without the need of its passing through a body of representatives... . In such a
state of things the sway of public opinion would have become more complete ... the authority would seem to remain all the while in the mass of the citizens... .³

Radical egalitarianism is not, however, the only theoretical foundation for opinion polling. The most essential base is the modern worship of technology. As Martin Goldfarb states: “in the information age, the pollster has taken on a new role ... to make him or her a force in the machinery of idea generation in modern society.”⁴ This machine however, is the most dangerous of all, for it must be by definition purposeless, scientific.

The primary tool in this quest is the theory of probability, which suggests that you can take a sample of the population and extrapolate it to the population as a whole. In Canada, our sampling technique has generally been a “mixture of area-probability and random-quota methods.”⁵ Area-probability sampling accounts for regional differences by selecting respondents from particular areas, and quota sampling groups people according to “occupation, age, sex, and religion.”⁶ These methods are said to produce a margin of error of 95.4%.⁷

The scientific sheen placed on the theoretical base of opinion polling does not mean that it is without problems. First, Canadian pollsters have no minimum methodological standards: for example, each polling organization handles the problem of the undecided voter differently, resulting in a wide variety of results on the same issue.⁸ There are also problems with hidden voting (some respondents would not publicly state that they were voting Reform for fear of being

---

³ Goldfarb states: “in the information age, the pollster has taken on a new role ... to make him or her a force in the machinery of idea generation in modern society.”
⁴ These methods are said to produce a margin of error of 95.4%.
seen as bigoted), and interview errors (badly formulated questions, approval seeking responses, interviewer cheating, piggybacking, respondent fatigue, intentional misjudgement in post-survey corrections). There are also numerous sampling errors. It is easy to have an unrepresentative sample (biassed towards certain groups), or undersized samples, (the infamous Gallup poll of November 7, 1988 incorrectly showed a huge Liberal lead in the election campaign because only 1041 respondents were interviewed).

The single greatest problem with polling, however, is its deleterious effect on the institutions of democracy. This is clearly seen in what has come to be called the “horse-race effect” where the consistent stream of polls leads the media to cover the race rather than the issues. So, in the post-Mulroney race for the leadership of the Conservative party, most Canadians discussed the “tortoise-hare” relationship between Charest and Campbell, but few could state coherently the position of either candidate. This type of discourse debases the political process.

That opinion polling misunderstands and undermines our democratic institutions can be seen in the modern campaign, where taking a stand for a political principle seems to have given way to blatant opportunism. In the 1974 election, Trudeau, using polling information, crusaded righteously against Stanfield’s proposed wage-and-price controls and won the election handily. Once in power, however, Trudeau consulted his pollster, Martin Goldfarb, and reversed his position completely. Trudeau was not
guided by what was right, he was guided by what was popular at any given moment, and the technology of polling provided him with that information. And as Joseph Wearing shows us, the packaging of Canadian political leaders often begins two years before the anticipated election. Polling helps them to rank the issues of public concern, and tests policies for public reaction. Party policies, a politician’s principles, and the timing of elections are now determined by the pollster.\textsuperscript{12}

To conclude, public opinion polls are unreliable owing to many methodological problems. But since, in modern Canadian politics, polling is cloaked with the mask of “science,” a mode which takes precedence over other modes of experience, the pollster has become more important than the political philosopher, who merely has “values.” The central issues then degenerate into what will “sell” right now, rather than what is the best course for the nation. The modern Canadian political campaign has become the epitome of this process, with a meticulously planned message, careful packaging, and a gross opportunism which highlights the emptiness of a process without a principle.
The Writing Process

Even though you might encounter various kinds of writing assignments in the arts and social sciences, the process you will undertake to write most of those papers is essentially the same: you will have to choose a topic and a thesis argument; plan, research, and develop it; and, of course, write. These are what may be called the “generic” features of the writing process, and every writer goes through somewhat the same process no matter what the project or discipline.

Step 1: Generating a Topic

In this section we will discuss how to discover and choose a topic, as well as how to formulate a thesis argument.

Discovering and Choosing an Essay Topic

One way to make sure that you understand is to highlight the key directing words in the question. For example, in our sample essays, the essay question, as stated in sample A, is:

Over the past twenty years polls have come to play an increasingly important part in Canadian political life. How have opinion polls changed the way Canadian political parties run election campaigns?
When we read this essay question, we can see that the emphasis of the essay is supposed to be on “how have opinion polls changed Canadian election campaigns?”. The word “how” is a key directing word. Sample A, however, is clearly based on a misunderstanding or misreading of the question. It devotes the major part of the paper to a discussion of polling methodology, and only in the second-last paragraph does it discuss how polls have been used in Canadian elections. This incorrect emphasis has caused the paper to be much more descriptive and less analytical than it should have been, and meant that the author has only glanced at the really important questions the issue of polling raises. The author has not developed his/her thinking in anything less than a superficial way, nor has she/he produced a good paper.

If the essay topics appear as statements, turn them into questions to find out what you really should be writing about. If the topic statement is, for instance, a very general one such as:

**Water pollution in the Great Lakes**

you might restate it as a question that expresses the relationships implied in that phrase. So you might ask:

- What are the major causes of pollution in the Great Lakes? *or*
- How polluted are the Great Lakes today? *or*
- What can we do to keep the Great Lakes clean?

This will help you to choose the focus of your essay. And the answer to your question, of course, will be your thesis argument. Of course, it is always a good idea to quickly check with your TA or professor to see if you are on the right track.
Formulating a Thesis Argument (otherwise known as a Thesis Statement, or sometimes an Hypothesis)

The thesis argument is probably the most important aspect of your essay. Without one, your essay has no point-of-view. Without one, your essay has no reason for existing. Successful students are able to frame a focussed thesis argument that addresses an important “issue” raised by the general essay topic.

Look at our sample essays. Sample B has a sentence at the end of the introduction (first paragraph) which states:

When we do that, we can see that one result of polling’s increasing influence is a subtle undermining of responsible government and the ideals of democracy, as well as the development of an increasingly ‘value-less’ science of politics.

Sample A has a sentence in the same position which reads:

In order to prove the importance of public opinion polls in Canadian politics, the process of polling, and the use and misuse of polls will be examined.

The thesis argument from sample B tells us that the writer is going to argue that polling has not only made the ways politicians act increasingly ‘value-less’ but it has undermined the democratic nature of politics. So we know that this writer is going to argue that polls have changed election politicking, and not for the better. But what of sample A? We know what things the essay will discuss (“the process of polling,” “the use and misuse of polls”), which is an important thing for an introduction to tell us, but we have no idea what position the paper will take. As readers, we feel satisfied and secure that we know what we are reading in sample B, as well as that the author really has a good
grasp of his/her subject. We are not certain what sample A will say, so we are constantly searching for clues as we read through the paper. In fact, what we find in the course of the paper is that we are still confused. The only argument that we can dig up from the paper as a whole is that the author is arguing that “polls play a very important role” and in the last paragraph, almost as an afterthought, a vague comment that they can be useful or they can have some negative effects. Now this last comment could have formed a perfectly good thesis argument; there is no reason why an excellent paper, with well-reasoned and well-documented arguments and examples, could not have been written defending this point-of-view. This author’s problem is that this position has not been clearly stated at the outset, and has not been argued throughout the paper in a consistent and clear way. It is probable that the author never really sat down to think about what position he or she would adopt in the paper, never settled on a thesis argument which would drive and determine the whole structure and argument of the essay.

Of course, sometimes you don’t know exactly what your argument is going to be until you’ve worked through it, and indeed, many writers find that their thesis statement is the last thing they write. But you can’t get started without some kind of idea or position, and that’s where the “working thesis” comes in.

If you were writing a paper on our polling question, you could consider several aspects of the issue to help you arrive at a position. You could list the following possibilities:

- polling has not changed the way elections are run in Canada,
- it has changed things immensely, or slightly,
- it has improved things (and why),
- it has made things worse (and why),
it has changed things but both for better (why) and for worse (why).

Decide whether or not each generalization could be explored and defended in a position paper of the assigned length. What would you have to know about polling to do that? After this process, decide which proposition you think you want to commit yourself to. This is your working thesis argument, and you should write it down (in one sentence if possible) and keep it with you when you are doing the research for your essay.

Step 2: Researching

Some papers will not require library research. Instead, they will require that you do some sort of textual analysis, focusing closely on a primary source (the original source: a poem, a play, a philosophical tract). Of course this is a kind of research in itself, and this way of proceeding will be touched on in another section of this book, but right now we will focus on the kind of research you will be expected to do in the university library, where you will often, but not always, be looking at secondary sources, that is, other peoples’ research as they discuss a subject (the books or articles written about the poem or philosopher, about the Magna Carta, about a series of archaeological findings).

Before You Begin

Having a working thesis argument helps to streamline your research. It is also a good idea to make up a list of questions that you think you want answered about your topic, or to identify two-to-five main ideas or subtopics that you think should be included in your essay. All this should be sketched out before you begin to do your research. This way, when you read journal
articles or books you will not be a passive reader; you will have
answers for which you are searching, and you will be actively
engaged in thinking about how what you read will fit in with your
particular essay. And if you want, you can establish temporary
essay folders on each subtopic, adding subtopics as you become
aware of them. By placing your research material in the
appropriate folder, you are already beginning to organize the
structure of your essay and when you make your plan, you will
find that much of your work is already done.

In the Library

First of all, it is a good idea to take one of the library
tours offered at the beginning of each semester. Then you will
not only become familiar with the computer system here, locate
the floors where you will be searching for titles, but also find out
how to use the CD Rom catalogues when you want to locate
articles on specific topics.

Here are some tips for researching:

- Begin by working up a bibliography of all of the recent
  books and articles which would discuss your topic. The
  quickest way to do this is to use a computerized
  bibliographical source. If you have never done this
  before, go to the librarian at the Research Help Desk and
  ask for assistance. It is most important at this stage to
  note down all of the bibliographical details of each book,
  article, etc., as it is an infallible rule that if you don’t, the
  odds are that you will decide at the last moment to
  include a reference to that material and when you return
  to the library, that particular volume of the periodical will
  be missing from the shelves.

- After you have made up a list of books and articles (as
  up-to-date and as focussed as your essay demands),
arrange them in order of most-to-least useful. This is the order in which you should read. That way if you do run out of time, you will have spent the time you had in the most appropriate and efficient manner.

- Many of the books and articles you will read will summarize some of the same material. Learn to skim over these portions, as well as to search through material for key words which are important to your paper.

- Another way to read is to make up a “dialectical journal” by dividing a paper in half, and writing the quote or a paraphrase from the text on one side of the line, and your responses, and your ideas as to how this information would fit into your paper on the other.

- If you are making notes on paper or index cards, make them on only one side of the paper. This way, if you decide to cut and paste or to re-arrange your material thematically, you can do so without losing material written on the back.

- If possible, paraphrase. This forces you to see the material in a more thoughtful, creative way, and you escape the possibility of becoming a zombie-copier. Of course, don’t do this if it is an important, seminal phrase by an acknowledged expert in the field; when it could not be said better, or more concisely; or when it fits in perfectly with one of the points you wish to argue.

- Make sure that you note the author, title, and page number for every research note, quote or paraphrase.

**On the Internet**

Students at the University of Guelph can access the Internet at computer terminals on campus, in residence, or through their modems at home. They can go to the Library
Website and perform catalogue searches of, and reserve books from, the libraries at Guelph, Wilfrid Laurier, and Waterloo, all of which are accessible to them. They can look up journal indexes, download articles from full-text electronic journals, locate government information, and ask a reference librarian for researching advice through the Virtual Reference service.

As of 2004, University of Guelph students can use RefWorks, a Web-based system where they can create their own personal databases by importing references from online databases. This program will also format a bibliography or reference list in many styles. (A series of information pages and tutorials about how to use this useful online tool is available through the library homepage at http://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/.)

Internet research opens up a new world of possibilities, but like all adventures into new territories, it can be fraught with dangers too. On the one hand, if you are preparing a research paper on the Government of Ontario’s educational reforms for a Public Policy course, you will be able to find information that is detailed and up-to-date. You can access the provincial government’s home page to find out about recent Bills passed and the status of legislation. So, especially when you need to find recent information, government data or statistics, or a copy of some other primary sources such as The Magna Carta, for instance, the Web is a godsend. But beware: it also has its own problems.

≈ Search Limits

Since there is so much information on the Web, and since it is sometimes difficult to find out exactly where the information you need is situated, this kind of research can take up enormous amounts of your time. Doing research on the Internet demands good time
management skills and you should set a time limit on this phase of your work. It also follows that it is very important to learn how to refine your search techniques. The Library Website

www.lib.uoguelph.ca

will give you some help with this, as will the library reference staff.

Reliability

When you do locate relevant material on the Web, you need to use all of your critical and analytical skills to determine whether the material is scholarly, current, factual, and reliable.

When you do your research in the university library you can be fairly certain that the books and journal articles you find will be academic in nature. But the nature of the Web is so democratic, some say anarchic, that anyone can write almost anything there, and present arguments or even “facts” that may have no validity when tested against reality. One way you can test the author’s mainstream academic reputation at least is by going to another source such as Who’s Who or to Academic Abstracts or simply by checking out the bibliographic information given at the end of the paper. Also, check to see if the information presented is comparable with the information you have seen in other related sources, both printed and electronic. And if the author simply refers to “authorities” in the text, but does not tell who they are, or has no references, you should become more cautious as a reader. So if the article is not written in an academic format with citations and references, if it comes from an
address which is not academic, or is linked to a special-interest group (for example, a chemical company or a political party), or if it is written for a general audience, does not use formal language, and appeals to the emotions rather than the intellect, you should probably look at any claims it makes with a critical eye.

~~

Plagiarism

Copying and pasting passages you find on the Internet for research papers can be either beneficial or disastrous. This is true, of course, of any writing you do using the shortcuts available on a computer. But using the Web, where it is so easy to choose to download information into a file on your own computer, may also be seen by some as an excuse to plagiarize (i.e., to represent the works of others as your own work). Students may commit this crime, perhaps because they forget to copy down the pertinent bibliographical information, perhaps because they mistakenly believe that what appears on a computer screen in a more informal format does not belong to an author in the same way as the contents of a book or periodical, or perhaps, dare we say it, because they think that they will not be caught.

However, the same scholarly rules which govern all your writing here at university still hold true. You must give references for any ideas or words you find on the Web. Your professors will be aware of the problem, and many of them are particularly concerned both about the quality and referencing of any information derived from Web-based research. Most of them are also aware of the methods used to detect plagiarism from the Internet. If you think about it, if you could find it, so can they —
except it is easier for them, because you have given them the words to search for.

Step 3: Outlining

After your research is completed, go back and re-assess your choice of thesis argument and main arguments. At this point, it might also help to use free-writing. You can set a kitchen timer for a limited amount of time (say five minutes), and sit down and write whatever comes into your head about:

1. your thesis argument,
2. how you can defend your argument, and
3. how you could oppose, or qualify your argument.

The value of free-writing is that it is completely spontaneous and creative. No one looks at what you have written, and you really don’t care how you express yourself. The result is that you unblock all of the restrictions you normally feel when you are writing, and you allow yourself to generate new ideas as you move from sentence to sentence.

Sometimes it also helps to re-read your first free-writing effort, and then to write about any ideas that reading generates. Or, you can try to find a central idea in your writing, scribbling words on a page that seem to link to that idea. Another strategy is to list all of the ideas the two previous exercises generated. Listing arranges ideas in some kind of linear or hierarchical organization.

At the beginning, we suggested that researchers have found that the most successful students use a kind of debate technique when they are planning and writing essays. This is also
the technique that lawyers preparing a court case use. They prepare not only the case for the defence of their clients, but also attempt to figure out what arguments the prosecuting lawyer will be using too. That way, they will not be surprised, and will be prepared to defend any attacks which may be made against their arguments. So at this time, in preparation for your outline, it is a good idea to make another list. On one side of a paper put your proposition (thesis argument), and below it the arguments (with cue-words for the proofs supporting them) you intend to make to defend your argument. On the other, put the counter-arguments, and the cue-words for arguments supporting them. Now, you have an advantage at this stage over the lawyer, whose client has already hired him or her, or the debater who is forced to stay with the team and the side of the argument it has drawn. If you find that your former thesis argument will not hold water when met with opposition, you can switch teams, and argue a different proposition in your essay. Or, given this new information, you might decide to take the middle road and qualify your argument somewhat. In any case, you now have the raw material from which to frame a detailed and highly organized outline.

It is commonly held that people are divided into right and left-brain thinkers. And it is true that some people say that they are completely incapable of writing a plan or an outline before composing. These people believe that all of their creative juices are frozen when they begin to organize, and simply put off doing anything at all when forced into this mould. Ergo: they suffer from writer’s block. If you belong in this category, there is an answer which will not only allow you to immediately begin to write in free-flowing prose, but will also provide you with the kind of structure and logical coherence which you may have been lacking and criticized for in the past.
So, if you are this kind of writer, now is the time for you to sit down and write, write, write. And at this stage you need not worry about grammar or style; just get that first draft down on paper. After you have finished this first draft, you should go through your paper and make a reverse outline: that is an outline which details every paragraph of your draft. This outline should be made on a very large piece of paper — the easiest thing to do is to go to an art supply store and purchase some sheets of inexpensive newsprint paper. Leave lots of room on your outline for additions, and for each paragraph have two entries, one for “says” and one for “does.” After “says,” note in point form what that paragraph states; after “does,” note how the argument relates to the essay’s thesis argument and overall organization. For example, in an essay arguing the proposition that “cars should be discouraged as a major means of transportation,” one paragraph “says” “our oil supply is dwindling and this is exacerbated by the way our car motors waste gas.” What it “does” is to support the idea of the proposition by citing comparative statistics. After this has been done, look at the outline to determine if

1. all of the sections and subsections support and prove the main proposition or thesis argument of the whole paper;
2. there are any paragraphs which do not do this, and are thus off-topic and need to be eliminated;
3. there are paragraphs which are repetitious or belong in another section of the paper; and
4. there either needs to be more support to the existing arguments or a shifting of the order of the arguments, or a new structure of argumentation superimposed upon the whole essay. Make the changes on the paper, and begin to write again, not by simply shifting your already-written


paragraphs around, but completely afresh and keeping your eye on your giant plan.

Other writers, those who can write from outlines, and indeed who feel most secure when they write from a plan, should also begin by making an extremely detailed outline on a huge sheet of paper. Include all of the outlining stages noted in the paragraph above, but you might want to make two separate outlines: one which is rather like a first-draft outline, then another after that outline has been thoroughly analysed and re-structured in the manner described above. By the time that you have struggled through this extremely detailed and highly analytic outline procedure most of your work will have been done, and when you come to write your essay in prose it will seem to be both easy and natural.

*Checklist for Outlines*

- Check on your **FOCUS**. Do the working title and the working thesis statement still reflect precisely what you now (having finished your research) want to prove?

- Is your **THESIS** at the **top** of your outline? Does every main division and every subdivision prove your statement?

- Do you have an appropriate **STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATION**? Do your main divisions suggest the direction of your thesis? Are they arranged in the most effective order? Are your details, examples, and more specific statements subordinated to the general statements in the outline?
Check once again. Have you gathered ENOUGH EVIDENCE to support your case? Could your worst enemy find a loophole in your argument? Have you missed anything? Does the outline emphasize important ideas and details by giving them adequate space? On the other hand, can you detect any arguments that you can now see are unrelated to your thesis? Delete them from your essay!

**Step 4: Writing**

Once you have prepared a precise, analytical, unified, and highly detailed outline, you have the structural bones of your essay, and the writing process should be relatively smooth sailing. You already know what you want to say; you know the order in which you intend to say it; so now you should be able to concentrate on writing the kind of simple and clear prose, with the logical transitions between ideas expected of academic writing. There are, however, some aspects of this stage of the process which bear discussion. Students often ask, for instance, how to write introductions and conclusions, how to reference and incorporate sources, and how to avoid plagiarism. And markers are often concerned that students don’t write in a sufficiently formal and academic style, and that there appear to be a certain number of constantly recurring grammar and punctuation errors in student papers.

**Writing an Introduction**

Even though it is usually the first paragraph in an essay, it is not really the first thing you write, especially if you are one of those people who writes first and makes an outline later. It is
something that can really only be written (or outlined) after you have settled on your thesis argument and explored in detail how you are going to explain and defend that argument. The main purpose of an introduction is to show the readers what they can expect in your paper, to set the scene for the argument you will be making, and to indicate exactly what that argument is. In order to do that, you have to know what you are going to be saying in the body of your paper.

**Writing a Conclusion**

Some people have been misled to think that a conclusion is some sort of backwards introduction, essentially no more than a summary of the argument you have made. Another mistake is to see the conclusion as a part of the defence of your argument, although it is true that it may extend the paper’s exploration of the implications of the thesis argument. Perhaps the best way to think of a conclusion is to think of it extending outward; it can include a summary of what you have discussed in the body of the paper, but it should do more than that. It can also refine your thesis argument, evaluate the argument in terms of its timeliness, suggest other possible approaches or solutions, look at it from a more philosophical point of view and put it in the context of your course subject, or the discipline as a whole. In general, though, we can say that a conclusion should indicate the significance of your paper’s argument.

**Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism**

One of the most important parts of research writing is the documenting of sources. You must give credit for the ideas and words you take from other sources. Sometimes students see this as a negative thing, but in fact it is not. Your work and your arguments become more credible when you show that others,
sometimes well-known authorities in their fields, have come to the same conclusions that you have. So referencing is part of the arsenal of your defence. On the other hand, if you do not give credit for these ideas you have garnered elsewhere, you might be accused of plagiarism, which is a kind of academic stealing. Sometimes it is hard for students to know how much they need to change the original when they are paraphrasing material from another source. For a detailed discussion of this question log on to our Learning Commons site at

www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca

and look at our Academic Integrity tutorial or our Fastfacts handout “Plagiarism and Academic Integrity.”

The other problem that some students face is with the incorporation of sources. The general rule is that when you are incorporating a quotation into your own work you should meld it with your own words so that it appears to be a seamless web. An example of this would be:

In Philip Larkin’s poem “Church Going” the speaker is convincing because he seems to be like us as he takes off his “cycle clips in awkward reverence” (9).

Here, even though the words from the poem are indicated within quotation marks, they are an integral and logical part of the writer’s sentence.

Yet another problem with quotations is that they must always be introduced in some way, and related to what you are saying. You never simply throw a quotation into the text to stand by itself without an explanation — a problem that often occurs with papers in English literature.

The specifics of incorporating sources and referencing them varies between disciplines, sometimes even between
instructors. Always make sure you find out from your instructor what citation and referencing style you are required to use, and follow the format carefully.

For further information about incorporating quotes and referencing, see our Learning Commons Fastfacts titles “Using Quotations in Your Essay,” “APA Style,” “CBE Style,” “MLA Style,” and “Chicago Style,” available in printed form from the Learning Commons reference desk or online at

www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca

How you reference internet resources is somewhat in a state of flux at the moment, and will probably remain so for a few years to come. Still, your current MLA and APA guidebooks, and their Websites will tell you how to reference most things. Some electronic sites you might visit for aid in referencing electronic sources include:

- our own Learning Commons Website at www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca
- a Modern Language Association style site at www.mlanet.org.publications/style
- the American Psychological Association site at www.apastyle.org/elecref.html

**Maintaining Academic Style**

A university essay is almost always written in a formal academic style. This need not be a pretentious or unwieldy style; indeed, it is the mark of good writing to be clear and logical. But writing in this formal style means that we cannot use the language of the coffee shop, or colloquial language. Thus, you would never see “O.K.” in an academic paper, and you would rarely see the word “maybe.” There is always another, more formal word you
can choose. For “maybe” we can substitute “perhaps,” for instance; for “O.K.,” “acceptable” might fit.

Another pitfall to avoid is the use of jargon. Jargon is the technical language of a particular discipline; it is usually a short-form which stands for some concept. Its use is indeed a problem, and many of us fall into using jargon because it is so easy. Some people say that if a term is not to be found in a first-year textbook, then we should seriously consider whether it might be jargon. If we think of our writing as communication, then we will avoid using jargon which leaves those who are not party to that peculiar usage in a state of confusion.

There are other problems associated with academic writing: overuse of the passive voice, lack of precision, wordiness and the use of empty expressions. For a longer discussion of these problems, see the Learning Commons Fastfacts handout “Improving Your Style.”

**Common Grammar and Punctuation Problems**

In university papers, grammar always counts; many a strong argument has been sunk by weak grammar. Appendix 1 contains a list of the most common grammar and punctuation problems writers make. Conquer these problems, and you will go a long way towards convincing your reader that you have a firm grasp on your writing — and your subject.

For further discussion of these and other grammar and punctuation problems, see the Learning Commons Fastfacts handouts “Improving Your Grammar,” “Improving Your Sentence Structure,” and “Improving Your Punctuation.”
Writing Different Types of Papers

Although all essay writing involves a common need to evaluate, synthesize information, and to take a position, it is true that there is a difference between the kind of essays you will be required to write in English Literature and Sociology, for instance. If you think of essays as participating in the on-going conversation within a discipline, and see that at university you are being trained to think within that discipline, it makes sense that a student of English or Drama will be practising thinking in a different way from the Business student, and those different ways will be reflected in the kind of essays they write. So when you write an essay, you should think about what methods scholars in that particular field use to generate information and understanding. You can learn about this first by viewing your professor’s lectures as models, and when you are reading articles in learned journals in the field, by noticing how they go about advancing their arguments.

A Note About the Five-Paragraph Essay

High school teachers teach the five-paragraph essay for a simple reason: novice writers need a structural blueprint to help them frame an argument in a disciplined way, with an introductory paragraph containing a thesis argument, a three-paragraph body usually containing three separate examples to support the argument, and a one-paragraph conclusion.
In university there will be some times when a five-paragraph paper is appropriate — notably in first-year English Literature courses where you may be assigned several 500-700-word papers, but possibly in other disciplinary writing as well. Most of the time, however, you will be writing more than five paragraphs, with one paragraph for each fully developed idea. But the organizational pattern remains the same, even when the introduction is 20 paragraphs long, the body many times that size, and the conclusion is the size of a whole chapter.

**The Textual Analysis Essay**

In literature courses, be they in English or another language, and in some drama and art history courses, the kind of essay you will be asked to write will often take the form of a textual analysis. Let us take an English literature course as an example.

You are given a text or texts, perhaps a short story, a poem, or a novel. The kind of essay you are supposed to write is intended to make you practise literary criticism, to analyse an imaginative work. In order to do this you must look first at how your subject was written or created. By beginning your analysis of a short story, for instance, by looking at the image patterns or the symbols, and how they change or weave their way through the piece, or by looking at the role of the narrator, or the use of irony or foreshadowing, you can come to a far deeper appreciation of the kind of world inhabited by that work of art and how it communicates that world to the reader.

The most important point about this kind of essay is that you cannot simply retell the story. You must become a kind of detective, or watchmaker, and discover what makes things tick, what makes you feel the emotions you do as you experience the
work. At the heart of your paper is your thesis, which specifically states the position you are taking and how you propose to defend it. (For more information on crafting a thesis, see “Formulating a Thesis Argument” on page 21.)

The same technique works for an analysis of a painting, sculpture, or other artistic production, except that instead of looking at words arranged in a pattern you are looking at brushstrokes, shapes, colour, composition etc. For example, the kind of marks made by a renaissance painter are very different from those of an expressionist working in the 20th century, and they not only look different, but they represent two different visions of life and art.

**Smart Reading for Textual Analysis**

There are particular reading skills and techniques that you need to learn for writing papers based on close textual analysis. However, it is a good idea to train yourself to read literary texts using these skills all the time, whether you are going to write papers on them or not. Learning how to be a “smart” reader will not just make you become a more analytical person when you write essays, it will help you to improve your exam writing skills as well.

This method of reading and thinking about literature does not really depend upon any specific literary theory. Of course, you will find that many of your professors are working from a particular theoretical basis when they lecture and analyze texts — some will be feminists, some Marxists, some post-colonialists, some will use a cultural studies perspective, and most of them will expect or encourage you to consider a work of literature in an appropriate historical or political context. The particular kinds of textual evidence they will be looking for depends on their theoretical stance. But even if your professor does work within
theoretical boundaries, there are still some common ways of reading literary texts that will serve you well as a reader and writer.

Experienced readers will be on the lookout for the following features when they read through any text: its structural framework, the differences between the surface content and the deeper content, figurative language (metaphors, symbolism, imagery), the literary type or genre, diction, and patterns. It is also natural for these readers to situate themselves in the period of the work, so as to understand the meanings of the words used in the context of the time and the historical significance of references.

- **Look for the structural framework of the text.** For example, a Shakespearian sonnet is composed of fourteen lines divided into three groups of four lines (quatrains) and a concluding couplet; a Petrarchan sonnet is divided into an eight-line group (octave) and a six-line group (sestet). There are certain expected meanings or patterns associated with these different parts, and you need to understand what they are so you can evaluate how a sonnet conforms to, or deviates from, these expectations. Another example of a structural framework is the form taken by a novel such as James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. *Portrait* is a *bildungsroman* — a book structured to show the growth of a character from childhood to maturity, in this case, to chronicle the main character’s destiny as an artist.

- **Look for the difference between surface and deep content.** Art is rarely overt; it often expresses itself in more indirect ways than other forms of communication do. For example, although a novel like Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* is on the surface a hunt for a great white whale,
underneath it is really a search for the meaning of the universe.

- **Look for figurative language.** Just as an entire work can have surface and deep meaning, words can also mean more than meets the eye. Look for wider significance, even when it appears that a poem, short story, or novel is describing something that really only exists in the plot. For example, in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* there are frequent references to the colour green — green lawns, green lights at intersections, the green of American money, etc. — and although these items do play a physical role in the novel, the symbolism of the colour green (and you can think yourself of all the resonance that colour has for the West and America in particular) is of central importance in the world Fitzgerald has created.

- **Look for the literary genre or classification of the work.** This will help you to analyze the created world more easily or to see if there are meaningful and significant differences between your text and others in its group. We can see more deeply into Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, for instance, when we understand it as a satire and not just as a children’s story. Placing it into the context of the genre of satire allows us to understand the book as a satire of the whole human race.

- **Look for the diction.** Examine the type of language used in your text (words, phrases, sentence structures) in the poem, short story, or novel. Just as you can tell something about a person’s education, geographical origin, and, in some countries, social class by the way they speak, you can understand a lot about the world your work of art exists in by the language — or lack of language — in the text. In Roddy Doyle’s *The Van*, the characters’ lack of
ability to communicate with each other and their depressed circumstances are depicted in the kind of street language the characters use.

- **Look for any kind of patterns.** Pattern-finding is one of the great skills in any kind of intellectual endeavour, and it is tremendously useful for studying literature or art. Patterns may be observed in repeated words with the same tone, or in imagery and symbolism (when, for instance, you notice a seasonal pattern in a novel beginning in the fall but ending in the spring, suggesting hope, rebirth, and regeneration). Other kinds of patterns may be seen in character types or structural elements.

- **Situ ate yourself in the correct historical period and place.** This is of practical significance, since it means that you will be able to understand (or at least look up) the meanings of archaic words and interpret actions in historical perspective. For example, the phrase “in all our gay apparel” would read as one thing in the 19th century and quite another in the late 20th or early 21st.

(This list inspired by Peter Barry’s “ten interpretive processes” as found in English in Practice: In Pursuit of English Studies, 10-14.)

Two good books that will give you more information on the process of reading for and writing a textual analysis are Sylvan Barnet’s *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature* and *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*. 
The Evaluative Research Paper

Teachers in courses such as History or Political Science often want to train their students to be able to evaluate events, theories, historical figures, structures, or policies in a systematically analytical and precise way and to display an intellectual rigour in doing so. Successful students in these courses often use primary or original sources, test their positions against counter-arguments, and always support every point they make with evidence that is detailed and factual. Once again, a good thesis is the key element in being able to structure and define your argument, and communicate to your reader how you are planning to proceed. (For more information on crafting a thesis, “Formulating a Thesis Argument” on page 21.)

So, in a History paper arguing that Louis XIV was a good king for France, the student might argue that he was a good king because he controlled the nobles and improved the military. To prove this, he/she could first discuss a subthesis which defined what the characteristics of a “good King” in that period were, and then proceed to support his/her arguments with historical evidence (Walvoord, 1990).

In these papers, it is important to do more than simply pile up facts by summarizing readings you have made. You must be able to synthesize from the evidence of primary sources, to recognize the biases in the sources you find, to assess their value as clues enabling you to discover a theory or as evidence for the case you are thinking of building. In other words, you must transcend the role of a simple text processor and become first a detective finding and sifting through the evidence in the research and planning stage, then when you write, you argue or debate as a lawyer in front of a judge or jury.
In Political Science courses you can use the same debating techniques to analyse an issue. Depending on the course, you may be asked to contrast governments, systems, or departments with each other, or to systematically analyse a particular political situation in the world, looking for causes and effects. In Public Policy or Public Administration papers, you first define the social or political problem, determine the trends, say, in the administrative practices of a government department, note how these trends have changed in response to environmental changes (war, economy, social values), and relate all of this to public policy theory. You often end this type of paper by identifying what a good solution would be, discussing and weighing the options available, and then concluding by recommending the best option.

Political Theory essays focus more on the history of ideas, looking at how one idea influences another, and these essays may ask you to describe how these influences play out in real-life politics. Here you will need to display a solid knowledge of the appropriate ideas or theories and think vigorously about them.

**The Argumentative Paper**

While politics, often described as “the art of the possible,” is messy, and theories and ideas are tempered by the flux of real life, philosophy is not. The papers you write in that discipline are completely dependent on the exercise of abstract logic, and this determines their structure.

Philosophy papers often begin with an introductory paragraph that would be considered too abrupt in other disciplines, and the thesis statement, which clarifies the philosophical position you are about to argue, may appear in the first two or three sentences.
In order to effectively argue a philosophical position, it is important not simply to agree with that position, but to understand why you agree with it, and to be able to offer arguments for it that would be compelling to an average, rational person, one who doesn’t necessarily share your personal, cultural or religious background.

Once you have your thesis argument laid out, there are several different ways to organize the rest of the paper. One of the most common structures begins, not by launching into the compelling and brilliant argument you’ve prepared, but by acknowledging the arguments that oppose your position. It is only after you have convincingly defeated these counter-arguments one after another with your logic that you begin to propose the positive arguments in favour of your position.

A Checklist for Argumentative Papers

☐ Does your argument have internal consistency?
List all the argumentative claims you make in support of your position. Do any of them contradict each other? For example, if you claim that stealing is morally wrong, you can’t also claim that someone starving to death would be morally justified in stealing food.

☐ Have you avoided overstating or overgeneralizing your position? Look for words like “all,” “always,” “everyone,” “none,” or “never.” If you use them, make very certain you can justify them; philosophically, these are extremely strong words. Consider the example on stealing above: it makes a world of difference whether you say “stealing is always morally wrong” or whether you only go as far as “stealing is wrong in most circumstances.”
Is your reasoning explicit enough to be understood? What sorts of assumptions are you making about the information or opinions your reader will hold? Do any of your argumentative claims fall apart if your assumptions are not valid? (For example, what if your reader was not raised to accept that stealing is necessarily wrong? Are you relying too much on your assumption?) Have you provided enough information to guide your reader step-by-step through your argument, or have you jumped to conclusions?

The Literature Review

“Literature” in this case does not refer to novels, plays, poems, fiction or other “works of literature.” It refers to studies, research, and scientific findings that are published in academic journals and books on a specific topic, often in the social and natural sciences (as in, “The recent literature shows that children in single-parent homes benefit from an increase in educational support services for the parent.”).

An assignment requiring a literature review or research review may be asking you to choose a specific topic and then to read journal articles written by experts on that topic. Your paper will compare and contrast research results and findings published in the articles. A portion of this review will generally have a “critical” evaluation—you will indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the source and to assess its validity or usefulness.

Often students treat literature reviews simply as a synopsis of individual journal articles: they devote one paragraph (or one section of the paper) to a description of one article, then
move on to the next. To them, this seems to be an easy and logical way to structure the paper, but this approach is less likely to produce good grades.

A good literature review goes beyond merely summarizing individual articles or experiments; it offers a structure that shows how this body of literature fits together. And once again, central to this structure is a thesis or an argument, even if it is only your finding that ‘most recent researchers in this field agree on/are interested in XYZ.’

In order to shape this argument, try to find the common themes, ideas or methodologies among your materials, and use those to structure your paper rather than simply organizing the literature review by article. Looking for these commonalities means that you should be very selective about the articles you choose: don’t just use the first few you find; select ones that have some points of contact built in. The reference librarians will help you tailor your search strategy to find articles with this type of overlap.

Once you have identified your articles, read them through several times and list the areas of investigation, methodologies, conclusions, biases, and any other significant points they cover. Arrange your lists side by side if possible, and start drawing lines to match similar topics between articles.

Grouping your articles around those common points lets you compare and contrast what previous writers and researchers have written about them. You will probably have to discuss some articles in more than one paragraph if they touch on more than one of your categories, but it will give your reader a clearer picture of how the previous research fits together. Once you’ve shown what topics previous research has covered, it’s often easy to identify areas where there are gaps that require further
research, and this identification of areas for further research should be presented in the conclusion of your review. For more detailed information about writing a literature review, see our Fastfacts on “Writing a Literature Review.”

---

**Book Review, Book Report**

A book review or book report focuses on a single work. More than just a summary or paraphrase of the key points of the book, a good book review, like a good literature review, offers your critical opinion about the strengths and weaknesses of an article or book. You will have to read and understand the book in its entirety to get a perspective on what the author sets out to do and how well s/he accomplishes that goal. It will be necessary to identify the book’s thesis and evaluate how well the structure of the book supports that thesis. You might also need to identify any biases, methodological or theoretical stances, or even evaluate how sound the book’s thesis is; in more senior courses, you might need to consider how that thesis fits into the discipline or field. The paper you write will convey the results of that evaluation, often using this standard structural template:

- **Introduction** of author, book, thesis. Include any structural considerations (for example, is it written by an individual author or is it an edited collection of essays written by multiple contributors?) Where appropriate, this will also include a brief explanation of how or where the book fits into a research field or body of knowledge.

- **Summary** of the main points or arguments made in each section of the book and how they all fit together. Your summary of each section should be in proportion to the amount of space that section gets in the book.
Strengths of the book, including its arguments, data methodologies, structure, conclusion, etc.

Weaknesses in any aspect of the book, including those mentioned above.

Assessment of the overall significance of the book, in your opinion. You may also want to include whether this book would be useful for others to read. If you do, make sure you explain who would find this book useful to read and why or why not.

Smart Reading for the Book Review

Read actively to avoid “reading hypnosis.” It’s easy to succumb to “reading hypnosis,” where you just read the words on the page rather than engaging with the arguments that are being made. Try taking notes as you go; these may help you keep track of patterns in the text, such as themes, style/tone, citations of other authors, etc. Include your own reflections on what you’ve just noted: is the argument compelling and clear? Weak and unconvincing? Does the author seem to be jumping to conclusions without giving you enough evidence?

Map the book to help you see how the arguments fit together. Start with the table of contents listing of the major chapters or sections in the book. Under each section, outline in point form the main aspects of the argument being made in that section. Use this map to outline the “big picture” of the order in which the arguments are made and how the elements in the book fit together.

Don’t believe everything you read. Many students approach academic readings with the assumption that anything that has been published must be “right.” While
it is true that journal articles and books have usually gone through rigorous peer editing processes, that doesn’t necessarily mean that this book is the last word on its topic. If you feel intimidated by the thought of reviewing a book, start small: what did you like — or not like — about the book? Why? How might these things affect the author’s argument?

**Research Report**

Unlike the mainly argumentative paper types described above, the research report is more informational. This type of paper is often required in Psychology research courses. Rather than examining text(s) or artwork(s) and trying to build an argument that conveys your opinion about these works, a research report is usually based on data or evidence that you have collected and discusses what you think they mean. A report must be written as concisely and clearly as possible so that the reader can grasp the material quickly and could accurately repeat or expand on your research. While the specifics of formatting a research report might vary from course to course, most research reports in the social sciences follow a relatively fixed organizational pattern.

- Objectives
- Background (includes literature review)
- Methods
- Results (includes data analysis, conclusions, discussion)
Case Studies

Business-related papers often use the case study method, as will some courses in Public Policy, Public Administration, and Geography. They involve the definition and the analysis of a problem, and a prescription for a solution. Often case studies use a structural method called SWOT:

- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- Opportunities
- Threats

A HAFA paper might ask you to evaluate the layout and work design of a restaurant. Studies have found that the successful students are the ones who prepare in advance. By reading their textbooks before their restaurant visit, they can apply the textbook’s categories and business methodologies to the situation, and are able to think and observe in more complex ways than other students. They take notes on the site and thus have detailed information about the layout and work design, whereas less successful students not only leave their reading and note-taking until after the visit, they also tend to use their assignment sheet as a kind of dogmatic recipe which supersedes any models from the text or lectures (Walvoord, 1990). As a result, their papers are more superficial and formula-like.
Revision and Editing

The process of editing and revising is another aspect of paper writing that spans the different disciplines. It involves a reconsideration of the paper on a number of different levels. An effective paper needs to be unified, coherent and clear so that your reader can easily follow the logic of your argument. The paragraphs and sentences must be well-developed and structured. The tone of the essay should be appropriate and consistent, and the essay should be free from errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling. Thorough editing and revision requires a detailed and organized approach so that each of these areas can be addressed. You may find that you need to go through your paper several times in order to proofread effectively. So try to remember to allow yourself adequate time to critique your work properly.

Here are some helpful hints…

1. **Put yourself in your reader’s shoes.**

   Because your reader’s perception of your essay is so crucial to its success, it is helpful to put yourself in the reader’s position when editing and revising. A little critical objectivity and distance should help you to analyse your essay for weak, problematic or confusing areas. And putting your essay aside for a few days or a week will help you to see mistakes and problems with fresh eyes.
2. **Consider the argument and evidence.**

Is your thesis statement understandable and discernable? Is your thesis statement an argument? Are you citing your sources properly (both within the body of the essay and in the works cited section)? Is the evidence that you incorporate or quote really relevant? Does your evidence enlighten the idea under development in that section or does it belong elsewhere — or not in your essay at all?

3. **Make certain that you are not plagiarizing.**

Every time you use someone else’s ideas or words you **must** give them credit, either in a parenthetical citation or a footnote or endnote. Penalties for plagiarism can be severe. For more information about the rules for citing sources see our “Plagiarism and Academic Integrity” Fastfacts or our on-line Academic Integrity tutorial at [www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca](http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca)

4. **Check out the flow.**

Are your paragraphs, or points of evidence, being presented in the most advantageous and logical fashion? Does one idea naturally develop into the next? If the top-level structure of the argument as expressed in your introduction is not clear, then it is probable that the links between ideas in the body of your paper are not clear. Getting your introduction clear and logical is one of the primary ways you can use revision to make a paper better. First perfect the introduction, then re-read the whole paper, making sure that you make the links between the ideas in the body just as clear.
5. **Edit paragraph by paragraph.**

Does each paragraph relate to the thesis and to the other paragraphs? Does each paragraph contain one idea only? Does the paragraph cover that idea in its entirety or is further development required? Are the sentences within the paragraph logically ordered, cohesive and related?

6. **Scrutinize your sentences.**

Are your sentences varied in structure and length? Is your tone constant and your style academic rather than colloquial? Beware, though; don’t go to the opposite extreme and commit the sin of using big words in an attempt to sound more intellectual. It is not uncommon for first-year students in particular to attempt to inflate their prose in order to seem more intelligent. Often they end up using their “impressive” words inaccurately and their attempt backfires. Remember, the best writing is clear writing.

7. **Grammar, diction and spelling.**

Check for pronoun/antecedent agreement, subject/verb agreement, tense agreement, tense shift, modification, punctuation, spelling errors, awkward phrasing, colloquialisms, and jargon.

8. **Pump up the volume.**

Read your paper out loud at least once. This is often the best way to locate run-on sentences, awkward constructions, leaps in logic and poor transitions.
9. **Do consider aesthetics.**

Your paper should be visually appealing. It should be neatly typed and in compliance with the recommendations and requirements of your course instructor. If your instructor has not given you any specific details, number your pages, and use a twelve-point font, double spaced. Include a title page with the paper’s title, the instructor’s name, the course number, the date of submission, and your name and ID#. If you are taking a Psychology course make sure that you check on the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, since it has particular requirements: among them that you include a running head beside the page numbers at the top right hand of every page of your paper.

10. **Find a second set of eyes.**

Ask friends, classmates or family members to proofread your paper. And doing the same for them will increase your own critical power, so that next time you will notice more of your own errors and can correct them before your instructor or marker has to.
As you go through the process of writing your essay you learn a great deal, not only about how to express your ideas, but also about the nature of thinking in that particular discipline, and, not least about the topic of your paper. But if, as many students do when their essays are returned, you glance at the last page to discover your mark and then toss the essay aside, you are losing a great opportunity to learn more as well as to improve your performance next time.

First of all, you should sit down in a quiet moment and read all of the marker’s marginal and end-of-essay comments. Any general comments about the argument, structure, style or grammar should be noted on a separate piece of paper. Then you should go about setting up an essay folder. In it you should put all your returned essays, along with that piece of paper, which can be called your essay-writing journal. Keeping a file of your marked essays helps you to identify areas of strength and weakness in your writing. This way, when you are about to embark upon a new project you can look back at your old essays, and think about the comments they received.

It is almost universally true that we see things from a different perspective with the passage of time. It is often only after we have written something that we realize how it could have been improved, so this is a good time to reflect on the way you wrote that particular essay and to note any problems (or successes) that could have affected your grade. For example,
write down anything you can think of about how you went about the project (ask: was your time management appropriate, was there a point at which you became blocked or frustrated, did you do enough research and was it the right kind, did you spend too much time on one stage of the process and not enough at another, was your thesis argument strong or focussed enough?). Attach this piece of paper to your marked essay, and look at it when you are beginning to write your next or subsequent essays so that you can avoid re-living your mistakes and enhance what you do well.

It also helps to keep a running list of the spelling and punctuation errors you consistently make. Often, just being aware of them improves your writing. Refer to a reliable grammar textbook to find out the explanations.

Improving your essay writing takes time and practice. One thing that will help is to practice rewriting troublesome passages from previous essays. If you really rethink as well as rewrite this is a good way to work out your problems. Keep the original with the revision so that you can see your progress. It is also particularly important to keep a back-up copy of your paper, as it is not unknown for a submitted essay to get lost in the shuffle, and you may be asked to resubmit your paper, or, when you come to print your paper a problem may occur with your first file. Title your revised files by number, so that you know which is the latest version.

**Learning from Someone Else’s Mistakes**

Michelle says that one essay she wrote in first year was such a bad experience that it changed her writing patterns for the better. “I had a lot of other stuff going on, like mid-terms, and I was also getting ready for commencement which was the
weekend before the essay was due. I had started the essay. I had an introduction, so I had a false sense of security. For me, that meant that I had started it. I kept saying: ‘I’ll work on it,’ but there were those mid-terms, and I had way too much of a social life. It’s hard to say ‘Go away, I’m working.’ And I didn’t want to miss out on anything that was going on in residence. So I didn’t really get back to the essay until the day before, and it was supposed to be ten to fifteen pages long. I’ll never do that again.”

She says that lots of people do their research a couple of nights before the essay is due, and then come home and try to start writing it without even making an outline. But her advice is to “make a schedule and stick to it. Start working at your research four weeks before the essay is due; start writing at two weeks. Set a day when you will do research and then reserve a certain amount of time each week to work on the essay.” Sometimes it takes a bad experience to make you see how important time management is when you are at the University of Guelph with its semester system.

**Where to Look for Help**

If, after your essay is returned, you want to find out why you received the grade you did, or how the paper could have been improved, you can make an appointment to talk about it with your TA or Professor. And all students at the University of Guelph, undergraduate and graduate, are entitled to three free individual consultations per semester with the professional staff members at The Learning Commons. They will attempt to diagnose your strengths and weaknesses as an essay-writer as well as provide you with any help you need to improve your writing skills.
First-year students can also make an appointment to see one of The Learning Commons’ trained Writing Peer Helpers. A Writing Peer can serve as an extra pair of trained eyes, and make suggestions for the future improvement of your papers. You can make these individual appointments before you hand in your papers, and when you are at any stage of the writing process, no matter whether you are having difficulty getting started, or at the final draft stage. What you should avoid doing is making an appointment the day before the essay is due, when timing will not allow you to make any extensive changes or rewrites. You can make as many appointments with our Peer Helpers as you wish.

To make an appointment with either staff or Peers either call extension 53632 or come in person to the Learning Commons desk on the first floor of the Library.

The Learning Commons also offers Drop-In help sessions, so if you are not able to make an appointment ahead of time, you can bring specific questions about your draft paper, or just your worries about writing, to one of these. Hours and locations of Drop-In help sessions may vary slightly from semester to semester; check at the Learning Commons desk or on the Website for current information.
Appendix 1: Common Grammar and Punctuation Errors

The following list outlines some of the common errors in grammar and punctuation we find in student papers and shows you how to avoid them.

Commas

Make sure you use a comma:

- After introductory phrases:
  Certainly, grammar can be a nuisance.
  If you are really interested, you can pick up several good grammar guides.

- Around non-restrictive clauses: a non-restrictive clause adds descriptive information that isn’t essential to defining who or what is being described. (Compare with restrictive clauses, described below.)
  The instructor, who wears black pants, is a real stickler for grammar and spelling.
  (There’s only one instructor, who, by the way, happens to wear black pants all the time.)
Before co-ordinating conjunctions in independent clauses:
I didn’t think grammar was easy, **yet** it truly is.

Don’t use commas:

Around restrictive clauses: a restrictive clause adds descriptive information that is essential for defining specifically who or what is being described. (Compare with non-restrictive clauses, described above.)
The instructor **who wears black pants** is a real stickler for grammar and spelling.
(There are lots of instructors, but you specifically mean the one in the black pants.)

To create a comma splice: Commas alone can’t join 2 independent clauses (complete sentences). Either break the clauses into individual sentences, use a semi-colon, or use a comma and a co-ordinating conjunction.

✗ I didn’t think grammar was easy, it truly is.
✓ I didn’t think grammar was easy. It truly is.
✓ I didn’t think grammar was easy; it truly is.
✓ I didn’t think grammar was easy, **but** it truly is.

Agreements

Subject-verb agreement:
✗ The **rules of grammar makes** writing easy.
✓ The **rules of grammar make** writing easy.
Noun-pronoun agreement:

- When a student hates grammar, they are more likely to make mistakes.
- When a student hates grammar, she is more likely to make mistakes.
- When students hate grammar, they are more likely to make mistakes.

Parallelism: any elements that serve the same grammatical function in a sentence must take the same grammatical form.

- I like reading, writing, and to parse sentences.
- I like reading, writing, and parsing sentences.

Grammatical Sentencing

Sentence fragments: are missing a main subject, predicate, or main clause.

- The students who were so tired of grammar review. (The phrase “who were so tired of grammar review” is a restrictive clause [see above] that describes the students, so this fragment identifies a subject, but doesn’t include an action — something that would explain: What about them? What are they going to do?)
- The students who were so tired of grammar review vowed never to misuse a semi-colon again.
- **Fused sentences:** contain two main clauses that have been joined together without the appropriate punctuation.

  - ✗ A comma splice is a type of fused *sentence*, *writing* one will lose you marks.
  - ✔ A comma splice is a type of fused *sentence; writing* one will lose you marks.
  - ✔ A comma splice is a type of fused *sentence*. *Writing* one will lose you marks.
  - ✔ A comma splice is a type of fused *sentence, and writing* one will lose you marks.

- **Run-on sentences:**

  - ✗ Run-on sentences just go on and on and contain far too many ideas that sometimes come into your head at the time that you are writing and you can’t bear not to write them down but you should always remember to organize and punctuate them correctly and if you don’t some instructor is going to take off marks for bad grammar.
  - ✔ Run-on sentences go on and on and contain far too many ideas. **Sometimes**, ideas come into your head at the time that you are writing and you can’t bear not to write them down, but you should always remember to organize and punctuate them correctly. **If** you don’t, some instructor is going to take off marks for bad grammar.
- **Vague pronoun references:**

  - The student and her instructor tried to improve her grammar.
    (Whose grammar needs improving?)
  - The student tried to improve her instructor’s grammar.

- **Dangling modifiers:** have nothing in the sentence to modify.

  - Walking in the woods, my heart ached.
    (Something was walking in the woods, but what? The only eligible noun is “my heart,” but it couldn’t go walking in the woods by itself.)
  - While **I was walking** in the woods, my heart ached.

- **Misplaced modifiers:** cause confusion because they occur too far from what they’re modifying.

  - The professor **wrote a paper** on sexual harassment **in his office**.
    (The topic of his paper might be sexual harassment that occurred in his office?)
  - The professor **wrote a paper in his office** on sexual harassment.
Apostrophes

Possessives

- **Singular:**
  
The writing peer's advice was helpful.
  (one peer giving advice)

- **Plural:**
  
The writing peers’ advice was helpful.
  (many peers gave advice)

*It’s* vs. *Its*

- “It’s” is ONLY the contraction for “it is” or “it has”:
  
  It's important to use good grammar.
  (It is important to use good grammar.)
  It's been useful going over grammar rules.
  (It has been useful going over grammar rules.)

- “Its” is the possessive form—the exception to the apostrophe rules given above.
  
  Grammar reared its ugly head.
A Select Bibliography of Books on Essay Preparation and Style


— —. A Short Guide to Writing about Literature. 9th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2002. (a good sampling of common approaches to literary criticism and a clear discussion of literary techniques.)

Barzun, Jacques, and Henry F. Graff. The Modern Researcher. 5th ed. New York: Harcourt, 1992. (This is particularly good for history essays.)


Buckley, Joanne. Fit to Print 5th. ed. Toronto: Harcourt, Brace, 2001. (One of the most popular essay-writing guides.)
* Gibaldi, Joseph and Walter S. Achtert. *MLA Handbook for

Hacker, Diana. *A Canadian Writer’s Reference*. 2nd ed. Scarborough:

Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 2000. (or
www.bartleby.com/141/)

* Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and

— —. *Student’s Guide for Writing College Papers*. 3rd ed. Chicago:


There are also several series focussing on writing papers in
particular disciplines. They are: *The Heath Writing Across the
Curriculum Series* (History, Life Sciences, Political Science,
Psychology), Prentice Hall’s *Student Writer’s Manuals* (Philosophy,
Sociology, Political Science etc.), and the *Making Sense* series,
published by the Oxford University Press (Social Sciences,
Psychology and the Life Sciences). You can also look at the
subject pages on the Websites of educational textbook publishers.
Some publishers, such as Nelson, attach a list of essay writing
reference resources to the subject areas of their on-line higher
education catalogues. They also have a list of links to other
Websites with information about writing in various disciplines.
In the arts, the *MLA Handbook* is the most commonly used style guide, although History often chooses the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and Music usually uses Kate Turabian’s *Manual for Writers*, a variant of the Chicago style. In many of the social sciences the *APA Manual* is favoured, although Sociology professors will often ask that you follow the referencing style of one of the major journals in the field. But whatever field you are in, be sure to ask the professor in each course which style she/he wants you to follow, because even within one discipline there are people who prefer one particular referencing style over another.
References


Other books in this series

Learning at University

Exam Strategies for Success at University

Time Management for University Students

Writing Your First University Papers

Writing in the Sciences

Referencing in the Sciences