

Introduction to College Writing

Getting Started

What is College Writing?

The classroom looks the same. Squeaky clean chalkboards. Fresh textbooks with unbroken seals. Knapsacks not yet carrying scars from heavy loads and wet weather. Students wide-eyed in either confidence or bewilderment....

Yet college writing is not the same as high school writing. You may have blown like a breeze toward straight As in high school English courses, or you may have heavily trudged toward other grades. However, as a college student you are not destined to repeat your past successes or failures with various aspects of the English language. College writing will offer you the chance to redress the “type” of English student you are. If your clear, concise, poetic language drew accolades from your teachers in the past, it may still. If knowing every grammar rule backward and forward produced neverending high marks in the past, your grammar knowledge will be incredibly useful.

Yet college writing is not the same as high school writing. The skills and tasks will focus on writing and research to prepare you for *critical thought* and *rhetorical awareness* for your future collegiate and professional careers. College writing will need to be mechanically sound. Spelling, punctuation, grammar, readable sentences, and well-managed paragraphs: For these skills you can thank each of your previous English teachers, as well as yourself. Each of these “mechanical” skills will be the basis for your foray into your development as a communicator. You will add an awareness of how each writing task changes the criteria through which you construct your ideas.

College writing instructors will focus on issues that you may not have fully explored during past English courses. During your years in college English classes, you will discuss some eternal notions that the most ancient of writing theorists realized surround all writing and communication. By the time you leave your first-year writing classes ideas such as audience and purpose, exposition and argument, critical thought, and having a “process” will be just a few of the ideas and vocabulary that you take with you.

If your memories of high school English are writing an essay on the tragic qualities of Hamlet, or learning about The Great Depression while reading *Grapes of Wrath*, you’ll certainly have opportunities to discuss these topics in college English, but reading Shakespeare and Steinbeck won’t be the focus of your writing class. Discovering different ways to analyze and interpret Shakespeare and Steinbeck may be. More importantly, you’ll be asked to focus on critical thinking as a process applicable to any text, whether a newspaper article, a fairy tale, a novel, a satirical cartoon, or a political ad on late-night television. Specific courses will focus on specific writing tasks and types of texts so you won’t be asked to do high school English better. You’ll be asked to do something different: college writing.

Argument and Critical Thought

Argument proper seeks to persuade or convince your audience to accept a claim as truthful or reasonable. Potentially, your argument may hold a higher goal of getting your audience to act upon

that truth claim. Argument is not a synonym for “fight,” nor should it lead to holding a grudge. Although war metaphors abound when it comes to describing argument, argument as defined in college and intellectual realms has more to do with “debate” and, hopefully, cooperation. You may find yourself and others raising your voice or voicing your frustration, but in proper argument you are doing so through means of expressing your views of both a problem and a solution.

Not everyone will agree with your claims. Most arguments, unlike boxing matches, do not have a clear winner. The purpose of argument is to share at two or more viewpoints and solutions for a given subject. Along the way, each participant is expected to include only relevant information and claims that present both a valid and lucid background and framework for the problem, as well as for the implementation of the solution. Because the goal of argument is not winning, but understanding, it has been suggested that the best metaphor for argument is not war, but “conversation.” The metaphor of a conversation aptly sums up the goal of all intellectual argument. You have entered a room where many people are talking. They’ve been talking a long time. You enter and listen for awhile. You begin to understand much that has been argued and decided before you entered, and you hear what everyone is saying now. After listening, you speak, saying what seems sensible to you, then you leave as others enter and begin to listen. This view of argument depends upon cooperation, as well as “listening” to the research and opinions available to you.

Argument is a system analyzed by many ancient civilizations. In the Western tradition, the Greeks were the first to discuss and outline the ethics and the structures of argument. The ethics of their argumentative system centered around the same premise as modern argument in the United States: democracy. Not all arguments deal directly with government, of course, but the Greeks knew what we still believe today. If all people belong to the decision-making body of society, then each member of society must be educated and must have the ethics of greater society guiding their purposes and goals. These goals will vary from person to person depending upon their experience, learning, and beliefs. Each individual’s unique background gives them strong feelings on a subject. You may not be able to change their beliefs despite using the structures of argument expertly, and they may not be able to change your beliefs either. People’s past is a primary factor of what they find acceptable, and this has long been known to argument theorists and to anyone with a healthy dose of common sense. Each person has their own view to share with the world. You may not convince someone wholly that your opinion is the correct one, so the goal of argument is always to listen openly to new viewpoints and to open someone else’s mind to your viewpoint.

Although there are many systems of argument when one examines theoretical nuts and bolts, there are some basic ideas common to all. You will see these basics of argument not only in your college English courses, but in all of your courses, from philosophy to physics. Later chapters will explore these methods in greater detail, giving you a system to evaluate your own argument or someone else’s argument and to generate a variety of argumentative thoughts.

One of the most basic (and possibly oversimplified) argumentative structures is the following:

Claim/Opinion:

Reason/Grounds:

Counterargument/Opponent’s Opinion:

Examine the following exchange for claim, reason, and counterargument:

Bill: Listen little sis, I need the car on Saturday night because I promised the guys I’d drive them to the movie.

Tiffany: Listen big brother, you had the car last Saturday because you were driving your friends to the movies.

Bill: Even though it was your weekend to have the car, you didn't even go out last Saturday night. I only was able to use it because it was sitting in the garage.

You can see the claims and reasons, as well as ongoing reasons and counterarguments, from Bill and Tiffany. Each makes a claim in their opening statement followed by a “because” statement that gives their reason for their belief. This is not to say that all “reasons” in argument are signaled with a “because” statement or that all reasons can be summed up in a single sentence. However, you can see how even the most everyday argument works from a claim and reason basis. You can also see how the claim and reason format would continue for the siblings as they continue to try to persuade each other that each has a right to the car on Saturday night. Perhaps most important, you can see differing sets of values behind each siblings claim to the car. While Bill trusts in a concrete every-other-week rotation, Tiffany believes that her forfeiture and Bill's use of the car during her forfeited week entitles her to the car, breaking the every-other-week rotation. Thus, each has a different “ethic” for how a car should be shared, and each argues on claims and reasons specific to their ethic.

Yet it is also easy to see where we get the idea of argument being heated by passion and possibly resentment. Each side takes a turn. A huge gap exists between what each desires. Sometimes one side must “lose” what they desired. However, in civics as well as many careers, you'll be expected to “civilly” argue a point and persuade your audience without looking like you'll hold a grudge or throw a tantrum should a decision not work in your favor. You'll also be expected in professional and civic situations to abide by the basic argumentation structure. If you don't, your audience, also attuned to the structures of argument, will most likely sense your breakage of the rules and not trust you. We'll examine a variety of frameworks for strong and weak argument in future chapters.

Do people break argumentative structures and ethics? Of course. Although the reasons can vary with the situation, it may often be because their argument has no strong claims or reasons, yet the person does not wish to change their views or goals. This may not be the only reason, as in the following:

“Mommy, why is the sky blue?”

“Because why?”

“Just because...”

When a child asks this question, they may receive the “just because” answer because their parent does not feel like explaining the answer—for example, if mommy is an astrophysicist who knows exactly why the sky is blue, but knows that her audience, a toddler, will not understand the science of the blue sky. As budding intellectuals though, you'll be expected to both explain your argument energetically and to critically question any argument you come across. “Just because” answers are not seen as acceptable to those who are trained in the rules of ethical and knowledgeable argument.

If the “just because” answer comes from someone familiar with the structures of argument, it can often derive from a person who knows they have a weak argument but does not care, or the “just because” answer can derive from a writer or speaker who does not have the topic knowledge to make a stronger argument. The first reason is not forgivable by the rules of ethical argument; however, the second means the person simply has not done their research. This is not a crime, and not having an answer to every question is not a crime either. A lack of topic knowledge simply means that you need to do more research to discover and understand both the problems and potential solutions before claiming to present a fully informed argument. Socrates was the first to develop and question both the ethics and structure of argument. His advice is still sound today: “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Part of college's mission is to teach examination of the world around you. This is why it is impossible to passively absorb and remain unchanged by all the material and experience of your college years. By the time you leave college, you'll be so used to examining claims and evidence for strengths and weaknesses that you won't be aware that you are doing it. Reading critically will simply be a part of your reading process. Thinking critically will be a part of your everyday thought, just as you may not have been unaware that you were engaging in the timeless strategy of claim and reason every time you bargained with a sibling.

Reading in College

What is reading? Ask someone this question and the answer they are likely to give will be along the lines of "looking at the words." Perhaps a stronger answer may be akin to "figuring out what the essay means." Most of us read passively at most times of the day. And why shouldn't we read passively? We aren't the experts, right? Whoever wrote and delivered the messages we receive, from political statement to junk mail, must certainly be playing fair and must certainly know about their subject, right....

Reading includes recognizing words that are strings of letters, and reading includes trying to get the point of the text. But if you are reading to write or reading to analyze, you must read to believe and to doubt—both are active reading processes. Most of the day, we read by the rules of a shallow passive version of belief. That is, we don't question in-depth the messages that are communicated to us. We accept them and go on with our day. This may be because most messages aren't highly argumentative, and they do not have major bearing on our life.

The successful college reader will begin by reading for an understanding of the author's thesis. Yet as this reader reads, they are also examining if the author is playing by the rules of fair argument and asking if the claims, reasons, and truths are sensible and based on solid knowledge of the topic's background. This is a strong version of the believing game. Yet, even if a reader finds that the author's argument seems solid and probable, they are still formulating an equally valid counterargument based upon their own beliefs. Thus, one reads to "believe"—to see if the author has created an informed and sensible argument that potentially solves the problem; yet the educated reader also reads any argument with their own values and thoughts on the subject, using the text in front of them to explore issues and claims they may not have previously encountered or answered fully. An attentive, active reader is always producing potential counterarguments and wondering what opinions and evidence exist other than those the text in front of them presents.

A variety of opinions exist on nearly all, if not all, issues in our society. One example of how a reader may read actively to understand *and* critique can be found in the debate over video game violence and its effect on young users. If an essay argues that child violence has increased since the release of violent video games in the last several decades, one can believe, but one can also start asking questions of this thesis. An active critique would question whether the violence could be influenced by other societal factors, such as less parental supervision or poverty. An active critique may also question whether there is evidence that disagrees with a thesis linking video games and violence, such as any research existing on rates of violence for children with violent video games and children with no exposure to violent video games.

Strategies for being an active reader will be presented in an upcoming chapter, but for now you can become a better reader by simply doing two things: Reading with a pencil in your hand and taking notes on both the author's ideas and your own feelings on and critiques of the author's claims.

Knowledge, Research, and Your Field

Returning to argument as “conversation,” college instructors understand that the courses they teach (and that you are taking) require knowledge you do not necessarily have but are building. The knowledge is often encyclopedic and found in books. From time to time, your personal knowledge may be highly useful. Do not discredit it. Your own experience can be a useful tool to begin to formulate opinions, especially on issues that are based upon opinion and are highly arguable. You will know the basics of many social issues, as well as the typical claims and counterarguments, because of the massive amount of media exposure prominent social issues receive. Yet after you begin to formulate an opinion and research that opinion, you will often find yourself moving briefly into a more “encyclopedic” world of facts, histories, and expert opinions that are on a much more subtle level of thought than you’ll typically see on television or hear in soundbytes. In college and in life after, class readings, library books, and internet searches will expediently introduce you to the basic conversation of a subject so that you can create a sensible opinion quickly. After researching through these opinions, your final argument will often be a mix of your older values informed and perhaps changed by your more subtle research and understanding.

Most subjects you will study in college will fall into the category of encyclopedic knowledge—subjects such as nineteenth-century American political history, small animal zoology, subatomic structures, or the crisis in Darfur all require book learning. So college requires hitting the books and owning knowledge, not just waving at facts and arguments as you pass by. So *how* you read becomes important not only for daily success on your homework. How you read determines how much you understand. Critical readers that both believe and doubt tend to “own” the opinions and ideas of a reading quicker. So a reader’s strategy may determine how much usable information one will retain and whether or not the reader can factor this new information into the “big picture” when writing.

Ultimately, the point of choosing a major in college is to take as many courses as possible that relate to a certain field to give you the “biggest” big picture. Your reading strategy in college will determine how big the frame of your picture is, how well you can write as both a “believer” and a “doubter,” and how well you can speak as a trustworthy authority on a given subject. Your professors, your future employers, and the community at large will be all ears every time you attempt to give them the big picture through a feasible argument filled with researched knowledge.

Not all subjects are argumentative. Science is famous for its ability to experiment and produce universal physical truths that cannot be disproven with humankind’s current knowledge. So scientific truths and the field of science are viewed as the least argumentative. Reading in the sciences may often require readings for memorization of procedure and outcome for whatever knowledge you are studying. The social sciences and the humanities, however, are famous for argument. Both the outcomes (particular findings through application of a method) and the methods (a particular way of analyzing an object or subject) of both the social sciences and the humanities are open to critique through sound argument. If you are in any of the fields comprising the social sciences or humanities, you should always have an understanding of why you chose your methodology for your particular topic, and you should be prepared to defend it as a proper methodology to explore your subject and make argumentative claims about your subject’s qualities.

Genre and Your Field

I mentioned earlier encyclopedic knowledge, the knowledge of one’s discipline or field through books and coursework. I also mentioned that experience is important as well. This is

why good grades *and* an internship will make you a well-rounded addition to your field, a better candidate for the job you want, and a benefit to a society that depends on your field's success. Yet a different type of knowledge works in conjunction with this field knowledge. This knowledge is *communication knowledge*. This is the valuable knowledge that English and Communication courses will be teaching you, even if you are not an English major and do not consider yourself an “English” person.

Basics exist in all forms of communication. For example, audience, purpose, argumentative frameworks, and other principles which are field specific are found in a different variety in every field. After all, we must communicate our knowledge, and we find it easiest to talk to each other in consistent forms so that our messages are as clear as possible. Each different form is often referred to as a “genre,” which is simply a term for a “type” of communication form. Each of the following is a genre specific to a purpose or task. Writers use them to deliver their message to us in a predictable and persuasive form that we understand because of our previous experience with the forms.

- Science Lab Reports
- Business Memos
- Recipes
- Rent Checks
- Sales Flyers
- Case Folders
- Book Reviews
- Medical Reports

Naturally, some genres are broad and break down into smaller genres. Medical reports, for instance, come in a wealth of varieties.

These forms play a crucial role in delivering our message in an understandable way. They are roadmaps guiding us toward predictable destinations, even if we do not know what we will find when we get there (some type of solution or hypothesis, most likely). If you defy a genre's conventions, you risk losing your audience or sending indirect messages that you don't intend. The indirect messages may interrupt your audience's understanding of your argument. They may try to understand why you've chosen a non-traditional format to present your information and lose focus on your ideas; or the indirect messages may tell your audience that you haven't yet mastered the communicational competence of your field. Each is potentially devastating to the information you wish to get across to your audience and the argument you wish them to consider.

Much of the introductory college writing course is dedicated to developing an awareness of genre and communication formats. English teachers, after all, do not have encyclopedic knowledge of everything about which their students write. English instructors, as well as all instructors in other departments, do have a great facility to analyze an argument and see the big picture even in areas where they do not have expertise. This questioning process is one skill they will pass on to you. The second skill they will pass on to you is the specialty of English departments—an awareness of language and its ideas, better known as genre and argument.

When one gets down to the subject of genre, there are too many genres in each of dozens of fields. English courses cannot cover all genres. Even the classes in your major may not cover all genres. You will learn many of them only when life demands it. Thus, English courses prepare you to begin to evaluate how information, whether cold scientific facts or blood-boiling argument, is structured in typical situations. Your instructor will most likely discuss how the essay forms you are assigned can be models for your own similar writing purposes. You can use this rhetorical knowledge for your own field in the future. Because argument has a prominent place in democracy as well as in many collegiate and professional fields, your English instructors will spend much

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of their time on the various methods of sound argument. Exposition, or explaining, will be equally important: Exposition is also an important type of communication; often, it buttresses argument. Once you are adept with genres, exposition, and sound argument, you can deliver your opinion, secure that the knowledge of your field as well as your opinion are understandable to your audience.

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