

## GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE WRITING

1. Dismiss the writing myths: “geeks” can’t write; only the brightest can write well; one is born with writing genes; writing is magic and can’t be learned. Writing is a set of skills.
2. To start: Study, think, make tentative observations based on your study, and write notes with evidence to support them. Once you have a sound overall idea, organize your thoughts and evidence, outlining your ideas in some logical arrangement (this will change drastically, if you write a good paper).
3. Effective writing is about making a sound and persuasive argument. An argument means a) expressing a point of view about content you have studied, which demonstrates your understanding, and b) supporting your point of view with evidence c) which you interpret for your reader clearly and persuasively. Generally, in your opening paragraph, you want to tell us what you will tell us; then tell us, in the body of your paper, using evidence, examples and arguments; and finally, tell us the import of what you told us (conclusion).
4. Construct one substantial paragraph first, with a compelling topic sentence. That serves as the “corral” for the other concise sentences in your paragraph. Support your single idea (only one per paragraph, normally) with examples, visuals, brief quotes or references to events or persons mentioned in the content you’ve studied. Include only details that bear directly on your claim. That claim could also be a question you raise, an answer you propose, or several possible answers. The engine (power) for this paragraph is your informed conviction and the relevant detail you use to support it. The paragraph should be focused and have no irrelevant details. Two or three vivid or convincing details are better than ten, which can overwhelm. (Less is often more, when explained thoughtfully.)
5. Once you have written a single, strong paragraph, proceed with more of them. There should be at least a couple of paragraphs per page, usually. Be sure to open new paragraphs for each new idea. Develop your paragraphs by comparing and contrasting, applying logical analysis, detailing a process, using chronology, or other methods. Don’t forget to use strong transitions between ideas.
6. For the first assignment, write two pages of paragraphs like the above, double-spaced. [If the oral medium is easier for you for getting your ideas organized, record yourself on tape, then transcribe and rework your ideas.] Reading your topic sentences for each graph should lead a reader through the argument of your paper, regardless of length.

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7. Once you have your ideas and arguments formulated, write a complete draft, then another draft, then read it aloud and ask yourself:
  - Do I care about the claims that I'm making?
  - Have I stated them clearly, concisely and with vivid detail?
  - Are my supporting details on point and as strong as they could be?
  - Is my central idea interesting (do I have one?), as well as my supporting arguments, taken together? Do they make sense?
  - Have I acknowledged alternative interpretations? (This strengthens your argument and respects opposing points of view.)
  - Be sure to use active verbs, not passive. Clarify and streamline sentences.
  - Are there any words that can be deleted? (fewer words increase power and clarity)
  - Did I run a spelling and grammar check? Are all awkward or unclear phrases gone?
8. Make your style consistent and make it in your own voice. Employ words you comfortably use (not those you read – don't try to impress, just state and clarify ideas, simply). Once edited, your ideas should be clearly worded, with illustrative detail to support your observations. They must be tightly constructed with no extra verbiage, awkward phrasing, errors of syntax, spelling, or punctuation.
9. Before you do a final draft, be sure to let someone vet your paper. Find someone who writes well, with whom you might trade favors. If you are doing an oral presentation, do a practice run (after you've rehearsed at the mirror) with a friend. Do not fail to apply this step. Why do we not let someone read our papers or hear our presentations before turning them in? Answer: Time constraints (plan ahead), fear of criticism (that's how we improve), whom to ask and how (simply, with reciprocity), etc.
10. Finally, REVISE your paper, seriously. Keep the handout on "Revising the Draft" for reference and find it on the course site. Examine carefully the improvements E. B. White, a professional writer, made between his third and sixth drafts of a single paragraph. Note his zippy opening line, which captures the reader. Make us want to read your paper and then hear your arguments. Finally, sum up your ideas with an engaging conclusion.

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