You are cordially invited to attend:
OGS Workshop #2

Writing in Graduate School: Overcoming Common Problems

November 20th, 2013
Reception Hall,
Main Administration Building
3:00 pm – 4:00 pm
Graduate Writing Support

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Overview

- Raise awareness about the nature of academic writing
- Address some common writing problems at the graduate level
- Provide some general writing tips to get you started
- Suggested Reading
- Handout- confused pairs; commonly used transitions; online writing resources
What is Academic Writing?

• The forms of expository and argumentative prose used by university students and researchers to convey a body of information about a particular subject.

• Generally, academic writing is expected to be precise, formal, impersonal, and objective.

• Academic writing is more than a set of grammatical rules or the ability to string words into sentences. It’s a developed skill, a mental game of persuasion.
Undergraduate Writing vs. Graduate Writing

- You may notice some differences between writing at the graduate level and your previous academic work. This is because graduate writing:

1. Requires more active and engaged critical thinking
2. Is expected to contribute productively to your field of studies
4 Main Characteristics of Graduate Writing:

1. critical thinking
2. research
3. academic style
4. academic integrity
What is Critical Thinking?

• Critical Thinking: The ability to make connections between ideas and explain the significance of information. In graduate studies, you are asked to show an even greater degree of critical thinking.
How to Think Critically

• You should seek to:
  1. Think independently—go beneath the surface and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of others’ arguments;
  2. Provide an original perspective on previous research;
  3. Synthesize ideas that have not been considered together or make connections between your work and other areas of research (cross-disciplinary or otherwise).
• When you write, you show critical thinking by:
  1. Organizing your discussion into logical points;
  2. Establishing clear connections between ideas;
  3. Citing relevant works to support your argument or ideas;
  4. Explaining—not just describing—examples, quotes, arguments, etc.
Research

• In general, research is done for two main reasons:

1. To become aware of the current knowledge in your field

2. To contribute to the knowledge in your field

• You will write about your research in order to share your original results or new perspective with others.

• Becoming familiar with the research in your field will help you identify what research has not been done and what new perspectives have not been explored.
Academic Integrity in Writing

• Academic integrity in writing is concerned primarily with the use of intellectual property. (*Intellectual property is any material such as ideas, words, images, data, inventions that is the original creation of one person or group*).

• There are several things to remember in regard to intellectual property and writing:

1. Give credit for intellectual property that you borrow by referencing correctly.

2. Paraphrasing and summarizing correctly.

3. Using a quote correctly.
Academic Style

• When writing, you should use a formal, academic style. *Academic writing does not have to be elaborate or complicated. A well-structured, straightforward paper is more easily understood—and your ideas better appreciated—than one filled with complicated sentences and words.*

• Present an analysis that is critical without being too negative or positive;

• Every field has its style of writing. The best way to become familiar with the style used in your field is to read and note how effective authors write.
Overcoming Common Problems in Graduate Writing
Problem # 1: Disorganized Writing

**Causes**

- Your writing lacks “flow”; ideas jump from one to the other with no clear connection
- No use of models of frameworks to guide the writing structure

**Solution**

- Allow yourself to brainstorm and jot down the “flurry of ideas” you experience when the inspiration hits.
- Then make a plan (what point(s) do you want to explore further?
- Create an outline to bring order to the chaos
- After you write, try to imagine you are the reader; make sure all of your questions/ concerns are thoroughly addressed
Problem # 2: Unclear Thesis/ Focus

Causes

• Students typically want to tell everything they know about a topic.

Solution

• Narrow the thesis statement
• Only focus on one main point in each paragraph.
• The first sentence of each paragraph is the topic sentence
• All other sentences in the paragraph MUST add additional information about the topic sentence.
• If it isn’t directly related to the main topic, get rid of it!
Problem # 3: Developing Ideas

**Causes**

- Ideas are generally undeveloped. Examples are not concrete.

**Solution**

- Make sure you have good background knowledge related to the writing task
- Understand that the reader is **NOT** in your head
- Let someone else read your paragraph, if they don’t understand your point, you probably need to spend more time developing it!
Problem # 4: Revising/Editing

**Causes**

• Students typically consider their first draft the final draft.

**Solution**

• Understand and accept that writing is a process

• Participate in each stage of the process *(research the topic, brainstorm, first draft, edit for meaning and coherence, proof read, analyze and reflect on the topic, do additional reading, refine, redraft)*

• Even native speakers and experienced researchers go through this process.
Problem # 5: Documentation Inconsistencies

**Causes**

- Students are confused about or unaware of the appropriate documentation style to use.

**Solution**

- Get a copy of the citation style handbook used in your field... and reference it!
- Be very careful not to switch between citation styles throughout your paper.
- Documentation styles are extremely detailed but very useful to your audience, so make sure to edit your citations and references carefully.
Problem # 6: Improper Use of Conclusion

**Causes**

- Conclusions are usually rushed
- Often introduce new information.

**Solution**

- The conclusion is NOT the time to get lazy in your writing!
- Many readers will skim through the body of your work and rely on the conclusion to sum up what your work is about.
- Make sure that you dedicate two or three sentences to summarizing each of the main points discussed in your paper.
- NEVER introduce new information/details in the conclusion.
Problem # 7: Poor Knowledge of Conventions

**Causes**
- Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage errors are prevalent.

**Solution**
- Read more
- Edit closely
- Reference EFL guidebooks
- Practice
- Take your written assignments to a writing specialist for feedback
But all of Those Things Take Time to Improve; What Can I do to Help my Writing Now?
General Writing Tips to Get You Started

• Do not use contractions or slang.
• Use the terminology of your field, but don’t let it overpower your sentences.
• Avoid using the first person (“I” or “we”) or second person (“you”).
• American English or British English…just be consistent.
• Use active rather than passive verb structures.
• Avoid direct quotes wherever possible
• Authors names are key, so take measure to spell them correctly.
• Give your readers clues (transition words, summaries, etc.) to let them know where they are in your argument.
• If possible, use subtitles or section headers to break up long papers or mark out main points.
• Continually remind your reader of your thesis/focus.
Supplemental Reading

• The Craft of Research (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2003).
• The Elements of Style (Strunk & White, 2000).