

# THE WRITING PROCESS AS PARTNERSHIP

Professor Russell Kirkland  
Department of Religion  
University of Georgia

## INTRODUCTION

This guide is intended to provide students with helpful advice of a general nature about the writing process, especially with regard to academic courses in the humanities. It was prepared, in the first instance, to assist the preparer's students in their work in his courses at Oberlin College. For that reason, some of the attitudes and values expressed herein represent the personal perspective of the preparer himself, which may not coincide in every respect with the perspective of other instructors. Be that as it may, much of the advice presented in this guide has been developed in consultation with other instructors, and incorporates many ideas that evolved within a variety of instructional settings. For those reasons, much of what is presented here should prove helpful to many students in preparing papers for many courses in the humanities.

## WRITING IN AN ACADEMIC CONTEXT

In an academic context, the student's primary reader is generally the instructor of the course within which the paper has been assigned. That fact is important. But it must be kept within proper perspective. Even an instructor is still, above all, a reader. And the primary responsibility of the writer is to do for that reader what he or she would do for any other reader. The following points should be kept in mind in this regard.

**1. Your reader is your partner.** As a writer, your primary responsibility is to communicate effectively with your reader, and to do all within your power to make the reading process worthwhile for your reader.

**2. The fact that the reader also happens to be an instructor who is forming judgments about the paper should not detract from the primacy of the partnership of the reader/writer relationship.**

In a humanities course, certain things are inevitably expected. First, it is assumed that the student will have a satisfactory comprehension of the fundamental content of the course. Secondly, it is assumed that the student will have a satisfactory comprehension of the specific topic under examination. A paper that shows that a student has not taken the course seriously, or has not taken the assignment seriously, will not be well received by an instructor. That fact must not be overlooked.

On the other hand, an awareness of the instructor's role as evaluator must not be allowed to overshadow (1) the awareness that the assignment is a opportunity for intellectual development, and (2) the awareness that the instructor is, in the first instance, a reader.

(1) Every academic assignment has a purpose: it is seldom merely a test to see whether students have been paying attention. In asking students to complete a written assignment, the conscientious instructor is providing an opportunity for them to gain a different kind of learning than occurs through reading, lectures, or discussion. The skills and insights that one can gain in such a process may or may not be readily perceptible, or perceptibly consonant with the learning processes at work in other aspects of the course. Be that as it may, the writing assignment should be treated as an important learning process in its own right.

(2) In the first instance, an instructor will respond to a given piece of writing as would any other reader. Students who fail to appreciate this fact may lose sight of the essential writer/reader partnership, and allow other considerations to hinder the process of communication.

### **GOOD WRITING: WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO GET IT**

Academic writing is a craft, and requires a commitment to craftsmanship. The quality of one's writing depends upon the quality of one's preparation. Writers who give little attention to the quality of their preparation remain bad writers. Conscientious writers become good writers.

In regard to any piece of writing, it is tacitly assumed that the writer will have a basic mastery of the rudiments of written English. Few readers -- even readers who happen to be academic instructors -- are really all that interested in grammar or usage for their own sake. What is important to remember is that when someone reads something that is well written, one seldom really notices the writing itself: one is too busy paying attention to what the writer is saying, and deciding what one thinks about it. *The only time a reader notices the mechanics of what he or she is reading is when the language presents an obstacle to the reading process.* Mechanical "errors" are thus to be avoided not because "rules must be obeyed," but rather because *mechanical problems distract the reader* and interfere with the communication process. A poorly constructed sentence or a poorly chosen word will often confuse the reader, and frustrate her or his effort to appreciate the writer's point. One should bear in mind that it is not the reader's responsibility to struggle to figure out what the writer is saying: *the responsibility for clarity rests with the writer.*

## **I. THE THINKING STAGE**

### **1. Decipher the Assignment**

A conscientious instructor will provide students with a decipherable assignment. That is, the instructor will supply students with sufficient information about the assignment to enable them to prepare a paper that is likely to meet her or his general expectations. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon the student to make certain that he or she is clear about the nature of the assignment. Be certain to analyze the assignment carefully before attempting to work with it. If, after concerted effort to decipher the assignment, it remains unclear, do not hesitate to consult with the instructor for additional clarification.

### **2. Review What You Know**

Carefully review all course material pertinent to the assignment (reading notes, class notes, etc.).

### **3. Explore the Different Approaches that are Possible**

There will almost never be a single "correct" way to approach a given topic. In virtually all academic work in the humanities, a variety of valid approaches are possible. The instructor will often suggest several possible approaches; students may very well discern other possibilities. Think carefully about the different possibilities, and weigh them against each other in light of your situation. It may be very helpful for you to work with an outline. Remember that different students will find that different approaches work best for them, so do not be concerned about the approaches that others may take.

### **4. Select the Approach that Seems Most Viable to You**

An excellent principle is simply to play your strongest suit. Your strongest suit may be the first approach that occurs to you, or it may be the one that remains after a process of elimination.

### **5. Focus your Approach**

At each step in the writing process, be very clear in your own mind about the following:

What are you trying to say?

Why are you trying to say it?

If, at any time in the writing process, you do not have a clear understanding of your answers to each of those questions, it would behoove you to stop and reflect upon them until you attain greater clarity. Your reader wants to know what you have to say and why you consider it worth saying. Most readers of academic papers expect to find a sustained discussion of a specific point or idea that is clearly focussed and coherently developed. In other words, **the reader expects to read a paper that makes sense, and that makes it worth her or his time to have read it.** If the writer is unfocussed, the reader is almost certain to be confused and disappointed.

It is difficult to write anything effective or worthwhile unless one reflects carefully and sympathetically upon *the experience of reading*. When one reads things that are written with little concern for one's experience as the reader, one generally learns little. Therefore, when you are writing, remember that there is a reader who hopes and expects to learn something from what you present in your paper. Be good to that reader, and success will crown your endeavors.

### **6. Outline Your Objectives, and the Methods by which You Plan to Achieve Them**

## 7. Formulate Your Thesis

In an academic paper, the writer's task is to provide insight into a specific area of interest. If a paper provides the reader with no insight, he or she may well feel that he or she has wasted her or his time in reading it. Remember that the real reason for writing a paper is **not** to hand someone a certain number of pages filled with words: the reason for writing a paper is to communicate an insight. One does not provide insight by merely summarizing known data. Sometimes students submit papers that do little more than assemble everything that they have read or heard about the assigned topic and re-present it all (sometimes not even in their own words). *Such papers will seldom be well-received: one is unlikely to impress an instructor by making her or him read several pages of prose that show merely that one has done one's reading and paid attention in class.* In general, a reader is not really interested in whether a writer can prove that he or she is cognizant with the pertinent data: such familiarity is tacitly assumed. What a reader really wants is to learn something. Your task as a writer, therefore, is to write something that is worth reading, something that is worth reading because it communicates something interesting and worthwhile. If a reader finishes reading a piece only to ask, "So what?," then the writer has not done her or his job properly. So as a writer, remember that your task is to do something worthwhile for your reader by communicating an insight.

For instance, your reader knows that Custer lost at Little Big Horn; it is incumbent upon you to suggest, say, a plausible explanation as to why Custer lost. To this end, it is incumbent upon you to **formulate a specific thesis** -- a coherent point or assertion -- and then to **demonstrate (as best you can) the plausibility of that thesis.**

You seldom need to worry about identifying the thesis: in the humanities, there is virtually never a single, final, irrefutable answer to any question. In fact, readers in the humanities are usually looking for new answers, new insights that they have not encountered before.

How do you formulate a thesis? Follow two steps: select the pertinent data concerning your topic, then analyze it until a thesis occurs to you. In other words, **THINK**. A writer who does not bother to think is unlikely ever to write anything worth reading. Since you have the ability to think, you have the ability to formulate a thesis and develop it properly.

## 8. Select Pertinent Data and Formulate Your Argument

No matter how brilliant your thesis may be, it is your responsibility to demonstrate to your reader why he or she should entertain your thesis. It is easy enough to assert, for instance, that Custer lost because he had not eaten a healthy, balanced diet. But few readers are going to accept such an assertion unless one provides them with *good reasons* to do so.

There are two elements involved in presenting a thesis effectively. The first is the quality of one's **evidence**, and the second is the quality of one's **reasoning**. Together, the writer's evidence and reasoning constitutes her or his **argument**. Good arguments make good papers; bad arguments make bad papers.

In constructing one's argument, the following points should be kept in mind:

### a. Express your thesis clearly and comprehensibly.

Your reader is not going to find your paper worthwhile unless he or she can

readily understand what you are saying and why. Of course, your reader will make every effort to understand what you are saying, but the ultimate responsibility for communicating your thought is yours alone. Writing is, in the last analysis, a process of communication, a process of sharing. The reader and the writer operate together in a partnership. Within any partnership that involves communication, the initial responsibility for ensuring effective communication rests with the party who *initiates* the message; in the reader/writer partnership, that party is the writer. When you are writing, therefore, take care not to force the reader to take your responsibility upon her or himself: *don't make your reader struggle to figure out what you are doing or why you are doing it.* **NB: Do not begin writing until you know what you are going to say.**

**b. Identify the important data pertinent to your argument.**

It is the writer's responsibility to make every effort to identify as much of the pertinent data as possible. One should not be overly concerned that one may have overlooked some significant data; no scholar has ever identified all the data pertaining to a given topic. We learn from each other, and continually add to inherited insights. Your reader does not expect that you will be the world's first omniscient writer. But he or she does expect that you will have done your best (within the existing constraints) to identify the data that is pertinent to your topic.

**c. Use the pertinent data to substantiate your thesis.**

Okay, so Custer had twinkies for breakfast every day since he left West Point. How do we know that that fact is relevant? What is the causal relationship between twinkie consumption and military disaster? *To assert a connection is one thing; to demonstrate it is quite another. One demonstrates such a connection by meticulous analysis and skillful presentation of pertinent data. Your thesis should be substantiated by means of well-reasoned arguments that are solidly based upon pertinent and reliable data.* How well you substantiate your thesis is the primary measure of the quality of your paper as a contribution to human knowledge.

**d. Do everything in your power to present the most effective possible argument.**

Translated: Have you really, really, thought, clearly and carefully, about what you are saying? If so, your argument will probably be strong, and your reader will likely have reason to be satisfied. If not, you are letting your reader -- and yourself -- down. **The writing process is a reflection of the thinking process.** One who does not think well will not write well. The more carefully one thinks, the more effectively one will write.

**e. "Give the devil his due."**

You have satisfied yourself that twinkies were the necessary and sufficient cause for Custer's defeat, and have evidence to support your contention. But is there any contrary evidence? Are other explanations possible? The answer to such questions is almost always in the affirmative. Therefore, do not slight your reader by acting as though such were not the case. Your reader deservedly wants to know the truth. *So don't pretend that there are no plausible alternatives to your thesis, and don't ignore the existence of data that seems to work against your thesis.* (E.g., if the Sioux also ate twinkies every day, you had better re-evaluate your thesis.) Give due attention to alternative explanations and to the data that might seem to support

them. Then, demonstrate as best you can -- through solid evidence and careful reasoning -- why your thesis is worthy of your reader's serious consideration.

**f. Do not overreach your evidence:** Avoid hasty conclusions, and avoid broad generalizations based on very limited evidence. No matter how sure you might be that you have a good thesis, you must be certain that your conclusions are based firmly upon reliable evidence. If the evidence is circumstantial or incomplete, open acknowledgement of that fact will assure the reader that you are being open and honest about the issues involved.

## II. THE WRITING STAGE

Unless the instructor specifies a particular method of working, you should write your paper according to the method that works best for you. Helpful advice can be obtained from many sources, including handbooks and stylesheets, writing tutors, and faculty members. Above all, however, remember **(1)** that *the goal is to formulate an effective argument in favor of a coherent thesis*, and **(2)** that *one formulates such an argument by reasoning carefully about pertinent data, and by sharing that process of reasoning with one's reader in a clear and comprehensible manner*. In crafting a paper, therefore, be certain that you remain constantly aware of the following considerations:

**Aptness of Wording:**

Does the word that you have selected enhance the reader's appreciation of your thought?

**Lucidity of the Sentence:**

Is its guiding thought clear to the reader?

**Coherence of the Sentence:**

Is it effectively planned and executed?

**Lucidity of the Paragraph:**

Is its guiding thought clear to the reader?

**Coherence of the Paragraph:**

Is it effectively planned and executed?

**Lucidity of the Paper:**

Is its guiding thought clearly evident to the reader as he or she moves through the paper?

**Coherence of the Paper:**

Is the paper effectively planned and executed?

**Documentation:**

Is all data properly documented?

## III. THE REVISION STAGE

Writing is not a single act: it is a process, a process composed of a series of distinct and interrelated acts. *Many of the most important such acts occur during the process of revision. **Revision is always essential.*** Composing an academic paper in a single sitting is never to be recommended. *Revision is not a luxury: it should be considered mandatory.* The revision process not only allows one to refine one's writing: it provides an indispensable opportunity for a writer to discover the flaws that exist in earlier drafts. The more thoroughly one revises one's writing, the more such flaws will become apparent, and the more thoroughly they can be eradicated. No one has ever written anything flawless, and it is doubtful that anyone ever will. It is nonetheless in the interest of both the writer and the reader for the writer to make a concerted effort to improve her or his composition as thoroughly as possible.

An excellent principle to remember in the process of revision is that **distance makes the flaws become clearer**. In other words, the more fully the writer can detach her- or himself from the text he or she has composed, the more readily its flaws

will come to her or his attention. It is often a good idea to put aside a piece of writing long enough to forget precisely what it says. "Long enough" may be a few hours, a few days, or even longer. In general, the further one is removed from what one has written, the more easily one gains a clear perspective on it. The reason for that fact is that the further one distances oneself from one's initial position as writer, the closer one comes to the position of the reader, and the more readily one can appreciate the problems that the reader may encounter in dealing with the paper.

*Revision entails more than merely re-reading a paper and making haphazard changes. There are specific goals to be accomplished in the revision process.* In brief, the aim is to ascertain where one has failed to achieve the goals that are involved in the writing process (discussed above). The following checklist may prove helpful:

1. Does the paper have a consistent focus?
2. Is the paper's focus clear to the reader?
3. Is the thesis well developed? Are the arguments clear? Do they withstand careful analysis? Is there sufficient evidence to substantiate the points raised? Is the evidence properly documented? Are the logical connections clear? Is the paper well organized? Would the communication process be enhanced by re-organizing some of the material? **In brief: does the paper demonstrate careful thought, and proper attention to the needs and concerns of the reader?**

After one has critically analyzed the paper in accord with such a method, a different method is often a helpful adjunct to the revision process. That method involves hearing the text. In terms of general human communication, the phenomenon of writing and reading is basically an artificial process. The process of speaking and hearing involves both speaker and hearer in a primary, immediate experience. But in the process of writing and reading, the writer is not personally involved at the level of primary experience in the way that the reader is. A skillful writer takes that situation into account. For instance, it is often a good idea for the writer to read the text aloud, very slowly, listening to the words and sentences as if one were hearing them spoken by someone else. One might even enlist a second person to read the text aloud to her or him, so that the writer can experience the paper in the immediate, personal way that the reader eventually will. One should listen carefully to the words themselves, rather than to the ideas behind the words. Are the words clear? Would the presentation be enhanced by re-phrasing, by re-organizing sentences, by choosing different words? Are sections of the text wordy or repetitious? Are there logical jumps missing? Such problems frequently come to the attention of the brain more readily through the ear than through the eye. To the extent that a composition does not sound good, it probably needs additional polish.

Finally, it should be borne in mind that *there is really no such thing as too much revision*. Virtually any academic paper -- be it a student's course assignment or a professor's presentation to colleagues -- can generally benefit from all the revision that the writer has the time and patience to perform. There does eventually come a point at which a halt should logically be called (i.e., a point at which the paper is as polished as one can reasonably expect anything to be). But given the hectic schedule of most students, it is doubtful that one will often reach that point before one reaches the end of the time available for work on the assignment. Therefore, one should probably have little fear of doing too much revision.