

# Conventions of U.S. Academic Writing

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In order to familiarize yourself with U.S. conventions, some of the rhetorical strategies that are most commonly used for U.S. academic audiences are discussed below.

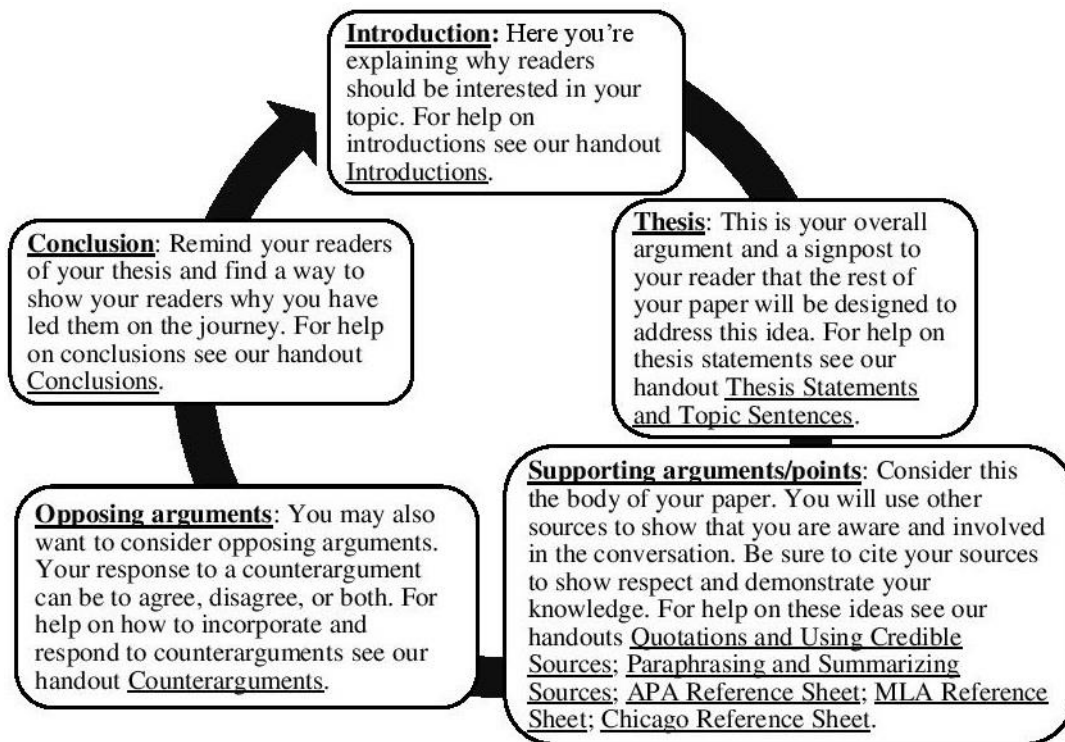
## Audience Expectations

In the U.S., writing is seen as a conversation between you and the reader. As a writer, you will have the greatest concern for your audience and should plan your paper so that it is concise and organized to benefit your reader as they consider your ideas. Even though you are having a conversation with the reader, you should consider whether the genre calls for formal or informal language and if colloquial language or slang is appropriate.

Additionally, you're most often writing for your peers and instructor. Consider academic writing as an apprenticeship to your discipline while you are learning the language and ideas of your field. Writing can be used to learn subject matter, develop new connections in your field, and communicate to an instructor/mentor where you are headed in your training.

## General Paper Outline

While all papers will be unique, many share the same general format. Below you can see an outline of what most papers will be expected to contain:



Notice how the arrow suggests a continual loop. You will be moving through various stages of the writing process several times and may revisit certain sections of your paper repeatedly. Additionally, all sections of your paper should connect and relate to each other. If they don't, you will need to go back and revise so that they do. Keep in mind this outline is very general and the exact format for your paper will depend on genre and discipline.

In addition to meeting certain expectations about the general paper format, there are a few other elements that you may employ to ensure readability for your audience.

**1. Start broad and get specific.**

Introduction/Thesis: Some instructors will expect you to use this technique to begin your paper. In order to ease your readers into the topic at hand, you should start with some general information about your topic and work your way to your most specific sentence: your thesis statement. It is essentially like a funnel: wide and general near the top and narrow and specific at the bottom.

**2. Avoid wordiness and redundancy.**

To avoid wordiness and redundancy, you will want to use clear, simple, and concise language to express your ideas. Remember to vary your sentence structure to make reading more interesting. Also, certain verbs don't carry much meaning. For example, the verb *to be* can often be revised for a stronger, more active verb.

**3. Use topic and transition sentences.**

Topic sentences will begin your paragraph and briefly introduce the main idea. Consider it a forecast of what your reader can expect you to discuss. Transition sentences are used as a way to close discussion of one topic and begin moving toward the next idea. These are often the last sentence (or last few sentences) of each paragraph.

**4. Be direct.**

- In academia, it is expected that you will state your opinions directly and confidently using an authoritative tone. Be direct with these opinions and watch out for qualifiers like “might” or “I think.” While these can be appropriate at times, overuse of them may make your reader believe you have not done enough research and that you don't know what you're discussing.
- Additionally, when writing papers, it is expected that you will make an assertion about a topic and then back that assertion up with facts, details, and research to support your idea. Readers won't accept your ideas simply on the basis of your authority as an author. You must, in a sense, “prove” it to them.

**5. Write critically.**

It is important to understand the difference between being “critical” and “criticizing.”

- Critical thinking means you are considering your own reasoning. By doing so, you are looking at the path of your paper and determining if one idea moves to the next and if your observations, conclusions and evidence are sound. You might also include information (examples, facts, statistics, details) or ideas (reasons, logic, comments from authority and comments from alternative views) throughout the path of your paper.
- Criticizing refers to degrading or ridiculing the author in a manner that is neither constructive nor appropriate.

Ensure that as you are considering your own ideas, you are thinking critically about how your readers will view your logic. If one idea seems out of place or the evidence doesn't fit, consider revising.

## Writing from Research and Giving Credit

In the U.S. writers like to think of their ideas as personal possessions, like a car. Therefore, when you're using material or ideas from someone else, you have to provide credit to their originality. You can also consider ways to incorporate the material using your own voice and language through paraphrasing and summarizing; however, you still must provide a citation since the ideas are not your own. A few notes about writing from research:

- **Incorporate outside research to strengthen your argument.**

Anytime that you incorporate outside research or information not coming from you, this backs up and strengthens your argument because more than one person is arguing the same point. For more information about how to evaluate your sources, visit the NC State library website or check out our handout [Quotations and Using Credible Sources](#). Below is an example of how research can strengthen your argument.

- Weak Argument Example: *Playing football is a dangerous sport because it can lead to traumatic brain injuries.*
  - Your point probably makes sense and is most likely true, but it sounds like it might be an opinion because you aren't an expert in the medical profession. If you use the words of a medical professional, your argument will be much stronger.
- Strong Argument Example: *Dr. Garza at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine has stated, "teens who play contact football have higher risks of concussion, chronic traumatic encephalopathy, and cervical spine injury."*
  - This way you are demonstrating that you know what is relevant information in the field and that you have read a paper by a main scholar studying this topic.

## Personal Experiences

In U.S. college classrooms, it is quite common to be expected to include your own personal experience and opinion in academic writing. There are several reasons why your personal experience may be included:

- Readers want to know what you think
- Readers want the information expressed in a straightforward manner
- Professors may want you to reflect on what you have learned or experienced
- Professors may construct an assignment that asks you to consider controversial topics, such as religion, gender, and/or politics

Additionally, your personal experiences may also be appropriate evidence for various claims in an argumentative paper. You may have experience using famous writings as proof because your culture sees these as valid. While these may still be appropriate, you can also include your personal experience as a form of evidence while writing in the U.S. However, if you are unsure whether the genre or your instructor will accept personal experiences as evidence, be sure to ask.

At times, you may also be asked to recount your personal experiences in the form of a personal essay, literary narrative, or autoethnography. Narratives often require you to analyze and reflect on your own life experiences. For more information on these genres, see our handout [Narrative Basics and Autoethnography](#).

## Considering Word Choice and Using a Thesaurus

- Avoid making extreme and definite statements without proper evidence. Strive for neutral language and when necessary accommodate both sides of a heated topic.
- Academic writing is often much more formal than spoken English. The best way to become familiar with the tone that is expected of formal academic papers is to read a few articles from scholarly sources. Pay attention to how they structure their sentences and the words they select. In addition, follow these general tips:
  - Avoid using first and second person pronouns, such as I, you, we, they (unless required by assignment or discipline)
  - Avoid contractions and slang
  - Avoid run-on sentences
  - Utilize standard spelling and grammar

### Thesaurus Tips

- One of the biggest concerns is often using higher-level vocabulary. We suggest using a thesaurus to keep you from repeating the same words and to learn new ones to use. However, ALWAYS define the word before you use it so that it makes sense in the sentence!

Here's an example. Let's say you are writing a paper on the effects of smoking cigarettes:

*Smoking has been proven to make people appear older because it destroys collagen, elastin, and tissue making it harder to maintain a youthful look. For a more youthful appearance, avoiding cigarettes is recommended by doctors.*

Perhaps instead of saying youthful in two consecutive sentences, you want to find a word substitute. Turning to your thesaurus you find the following:

youth·ful  
/'yooTHfəl/

*adjective*

young or seeming young

“people aspiring to remain youthful”

*synonyms:* young-looking, spry, sprightly, vigorous, active; young, boyish, girlish; fresh-faced, in the springtime of life, in one's salad days; immature, callow, juvenile, adolescent

Looking at the suggested words, you decide that you want to use the word juvenile; however, you need to check the full meaning of this word. While the definition states that it does “relate to young people,” juvenile often has a negative connotation, meaning “childish or immature.” You may want to consider a different word, such as boyish, girlish, or fresh-faced.

Be sure to also consider temporal, regional, or stylistic markers in your thesaurus. Temporal markers tell you when the word may have been used. *Obs* means obsolete and indicates that the word is no longer commonly used. You may want to avoid these words. Regional markers help you know whether the word might be suited for a particular audience in your geographic area.

Works Consulted:

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>); Temple University Writing Center (<https://www.temple.edu/writingctr/support-for-writers/documents/ToneandFormalityinAcademicWriting.pdf>); *The Longman Writer's Companion*, 3rd ed. (Anson, Schwegler, and Muth); *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers* (Leki)