

## **SOME IDEAS (AND HINTS) FOR EFFECTIVE WRITING**

**Dr. Paul R. Carr**

This short list of concepts and thoughts in relation to writing a well thought-out and effective paper stems from my review of students' work over the years. Writing is probably more art than science, and I don't presume to have the exact, ultimate recipe for writing the perfect paper. Rather, I think there are some things that students can do that will certainly make the exercise, and end-product, more meaningful and productive. There are many excellent resources available to assist students, and I would recommend contacting the various Centers on campus and elsewhere to interact with staff who are able to work through problems and issues on an individual basis.

### **GENERAL**

1. Writing is an evolutionary process. Don't expect to get it right the first time.
2. To write well, one must read. Read voraciously. Read the newspaper, magazines, books, manuals, studies and other materials. Read critically, looking for what is omitted, what is different, the political context, and the analytical and conceptual framework.
3. Observe and take note of different styles of writing. Absorb and expand your vocabulary.

### **PREPARATION**

1. Make sure you understand the assignment before you write. How long is it to be? What style? What format? Is it to be descriptive or critical, or both? How should it be structured?
2. Think about how the paper will be received. Remember that the Instructor may know very little about the topic, or rather that she/he may not want to make inferences about the content. Write a paper that you would like to read yourself, one that is clear, articulate, informative, interesting, and tightly-written.
3. Unless that is the intent of the assignment, avoid using a journalistic style. If it is an academic paper, write it with that in mind.
4. If you are not sure about the above, talk to your Instructor.

### **WRITING (STYLE)**

1. Write clearly. Use words that you understand. Make sure that you are correctly

- using vocabulary and terminology. Have a thesaurus handy.
2. Make every word count. Does the sentence need to be three or four lines long? Should you use the same verb three times in a paragraph? Are there better ways of making the point?
  3. Use vocabulary that most accurately and effectively captures the essence of what you are discussing. Instead of the verb shows (as in This study shows how Americans are not doing as well on standardized tests as the British.), consider words that have more impact and precision, such as illustrates, demonstrates, highlights or elucidates.
  4. Avoid acronyms without clearly stating what they are.
  5. Avoid jargon as it can easily be misunderstood.
  6. Avoid colloquial language that can diminish the strength of the text.
  7. Avoid bold, audacious statements. Try to nuance your work. You can always condemn something but remember to not be so strident that the tone will override the content. You want your arguments to be compelling, and not to be considered devoid of content.
  8. When building your arguments, back up your statements. Generalizations can be made but will have more credibility when related to real events, phenomena and empirical data.
  9. Punctuation is important: don't put "...” in quotations unless it really is necessary. Also, use commas to separate concepts. Know the difference between a colon (:) and a semi-colon (;).
  10. Conjugate verbs properly. Make sure that the text reads as a well thought-out paper, not as if you were talking. Try to use the active voice wherever possible.
  11. Avoid starting a sentence with AND.
  12. Avoid using weak words that could be more properly replaced by stronger ones. For example, the word "like" could be replaced with "such as". Some weak verbs are: show, do, give, and make.
  13. Avoid "etc." because it can mean everything and nothing at the same time. Make sure that it is only used sparingly, if at all.

## **STRUCTURE**

1. Re: formatting: does your paper have page-numbers? a title? sub-titles, where appropriate? proper references? If the Instructor is not bogged down with these details, she/he will more easily and comfortably concentrate on the content, which should be the focus of the work.
2. Re: references: make sure that references are standardized and complete; most academic journals use the APA style, which provides full information according to the type of publication (i.e., book chapter, book, academic journal, internet-site).

## **RESEARCH**

1. Re: types of sources: the internet is full of wonderfully useful information as well as academic references; the reverse also applies; make sure you are dealing with bone fide sources, and that the data is relevant and well documented; avoid newspapers as an academic resource; there are a number of excellent search engines that can facilitate tracking down peer-reviewed academic journals (see the section on my website).
2. Plagiarism is an extremely serious offence. Be careful about how you cite someone else's work. This refers to someone else's ideas as well as words.
3. Be careful to not infer a causal linkage between two variables when clearly the issue at-hand is much more complex than that. For example, providing meals at school will not eliminate poverty, although it may facilitate learning for those who are socio-economically disadvantaged.
4. When analyzing a phenomenon, consider the factors (i.e., economic, legal, social, and political) and stakeholders (i.e., interest-groups, teachers, administrators, parents, and minority-groups) involved. Also be cognizant of the role of the media in shaping an issue as well as the various ideological vantage-points. Accept that everything is political, and, therefore, no problem/issue is neutral. To be critical is to reach beyond the description of a particular issue. What is not said about it, and why? Who benefits, and what can we infer about marginalized groups in relation to the issue? What is the difference between the rhetoric at the formal level and the actual implementation and lived experience at the informal level?
5. Consider how the particular issue that you are looking at has been studied. Have researchers and others generally gathered quantitative or qualitative data, or both, or some other type of information? Were they funded by groups which have a vested interest? What particular angle was used to define the parameters of the problem?

## **WRITING (CONTENT)**

1. Where do you start? Consider the subject-area, and what has already been written, where the gaps in the literature are, and why people have taken certain positions?
2. Depending on the type of assignment, make sure that you have adequately and effectively identified the issue you will be dealing with.
3. Structure your paper so that it is pleasurable and informative. Remember that communicating effectively is a key element in a liberal arts education, and that it is critical to be able to convey thoughts and arguments on paper in addition to oral presentations.
4. Make sure that the text has a flow to it. There should be an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Each may take on a different form depending on the assignment but, generally, it is important to lead readers in the direction you would like them to go. Define the issue, and inform the reader how the paper develop.
5. Remember that our opinions have much more resonance when they are backed up with knowledge of what others have said.
6. Make the conclusion pertinent. Don't simply repeat what you've already said. Provide, perhaps, a summary statement or two but then tie it into the broader picture. Are there implications and considerations for further study? What can we learn from this paper or the issues raised herein?

## **LAST WORDS**

1. Writing requires discipline and rigor. Proof-read your paper. Take a break, and then proof-read it again. Look for ways to enhance the writing, sharpen the vocabulary, accentuate the key points, and to generally make for enjoyable and compelling reading.
2. To sum up, writing is a process. Many components, factors and skills are required. Know your topic; do some solid research. Lay out a plan for the paper, starting with a coherent identification of the problem or issue to be discussed. Structure the various sections and pieces of the paper. Ask yourself: Am I saying something that is relevant and well argued, or am I simply regurgitating what I have read? Am I effectively communicating the central arguments through this paper? Will the reader understand this paper as I have written it? Is there anything I can do to tighten the core content as well as the structure and style of the paper?

3. Good Luck, Bonne chance, Buena Suerte, and Enjoy!