

American Academic Writing Conventions

This handout will describe some common writing practices and assignments in American colleges such as The College of Saint Rose. For more assistance, come see the tutors at the Writing Center! Go to www.strose.edu/writingcenter for more information.

TYPES OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Always talk to your professor about his/her assignment guidelines and requirements. They may differ from some of the general guidelines we have listed below.

A note about audience: Each type of writing assignment you complete in college has its own specific audience. This audience may be only your professor, but it could also be classmates or someone in the outside community. Many writing assignments are also designed to give you the experience of writing in your field, so you may have to imagine that your audience is clients, colleagues, students, the general public, etc. Each type of audience will have a different level of understanding about your topic, so the amount and kind of information you include will depend on who your audience is.

Reflection Essay: In this type of writing, your professor will request that you write about your thoughts on a specific idea, topic, situation, or experience. You generally use the pronoun “I” in this type of assignment. You may be asked to connect your reflection to concepts learned in class.

Case Study: This assignment is common in the fields of education and the social sciences. It involves writing your observations and analysis of a specific interaction with a client, a person’s behavior, an event, or specific situation in regards to the theories and practices involved in your field of study. For example, a Communication Sciences and Disorders major would write a case study about a client he/she is working with in a clinic placement; a Social Work major might write a case study about the functioning of a charitable agency.

Case Study Analysis: This assignment involves studying a case study written by someone else. You will often evaluate the interactions and practices of the professionals with the clients, the functioning of the agency, a person’s behavior, the circumstances surrounding the event, etc. It is a way for you to relate the theoretical information learned in class to possible real life situations.

Response Paper: For this assignment, you are required to write about a certain text. Your task in this assignment depends on the course and instructor. You might make connections between texts or between a text and the real world, evaluate the writer’s ideas, analyze the meaning of the writer’s ideas, discuss contextual issues, or analyze how the writer make his/her point. You may be allowed to use the pronoun “I,” but check with your professor for his/her preference.

Critical Analysis: (also called a Close Reading Assignment) Your main purpose in this assignment is to examine how a writer expresses his/her opinions and to determine if he/she succeeds in making a point. You do not merely provide a summary of what the author says. You analyze *how* a writer conveys a message (for example, the writer's organization, use of evidence, logic, style, and language), not *what* the message is.

Annotated Bibliography: This assignment consists of the bibliographic information for the sources you are using for a research assignment. The sources are listed according to MLA, APA, or Chicago Style specifications. After each citation, include an annotation—which may be in the form of a summary, evaluation, or reflection—for each of the sources listed. These annotations follow the bibliographic information for each source.

Literature Review (or Review of Literature): In this assignment, often a precursor to an actual research paper, you discuss what others in the field have researched and theorized about your topic. It basically sets up your own research and provides background information as to why you are approaching your research in a certain manner.

Research Paper: In this assignment, you will be assigned a topic to write about, or you will be able to choose a topic on your own. You will research the topic using sources such as books, journal articles, interviews, research studies, your own empirical study, and other reputable resources. Depending on the class and subject matter, you may be allowed to use newspapers, websites, and certain magazines. Based on your research and your own views on the subject, you will formulate a thesis statement about the topic. You will then support the thesis statement in the paper with your research and ideas. You are expected to give credit to the authors of your research through in-text citations and a Bibliography, Works Cited, or References page. Depending on your discipline, you will use either MLA Style (common in English and the humanities), APA Style (common in Education and the Social Sciences), or Chicago Style (common in History and Art).

ORGANIZATION / LOGIC FOR THESIS-BASED PAPERS

Introduction of Topic: Your topic needs to be mentioned at the beginning of the paper in the introduction. Your readers will want to know what you're writing about and your point-of-view on the topic within the first couple of paragraphs.

Thesis Statement: In American education, students are expected to form opinions and ideas about topics in their writing, class discussions, and through projects. American academic writing often focuses around a **thesis statement**, which is the main point you want to convey about a topic. It is also sometimes called an **argument**. It is placed in the Introduction paragraph or section. Your readers will want to know what your main point is right at the beginning of the paper.

Paragraphs: Each of your paragraphs should focus on **one** main idea. This main idea should be conveyed in the first sentence or two of the paragraph in what is called a **topic sentence**. A topic sentence can be thought of as a thesis statement for the paragraph. Paragraphs are generally at least a few sentences, but there is no required length.

Pattern of Reasoning is Deductive: Start with the general and move to the specific. Generally, your introduction will describe your topic for your reader in a way that makes him/her understand the background about the topic and what your main point is. You will then discuss your topic more specifically as you continue to write your essay, looking at the different components of it.

Organizational Style: Essay structure is straightforward and linear. Stay on topic; everything you write should relate to the main point. Avoid going off on tangents or going into detail about topics that do not serve as support for your main purpose in writing the essay.

USING RESEARCH

Plagiarism: In American culture, writers are required to tell their readers when they are using the words and ideas of others to help advance their own writing. When proper credit is not given to others for their words and ideas, this is called *plagiarism*. In higher education, plagiarism is a serious offense and can result in failure of an assignment, course, or even expulsion from the college. For more information, see the Writing Center's [resources on plagiarism](http://www.strose.edu/writingcenter) at www.strose.edu/writingcenter.

Citing:

In-text citations: Each time you include an idea from one of your sources, you need to include an in-text citation. This is also sometimes called a parenthetical citation. Each of the three main styles (MLA, APA, and Chicago Style) has different guidelines for how to format these citations. However, they all have the same function: to show your reader where in your sources the idea can be found.

List of Sources: At the end of every research paper, you should include a list of the sources you used to write the paper. There are three main types of lists:

Bibliography: this is a list of all the sources used in your research process, including those not specifically mentioned in your paper. There may have been some sources that informed your thinking or the direction you decided to take in writing your paper, but you did not cite from them specifically in your paper. These sources would be included in your Bibliography along with the sources you cited.

Works Cited or References: In MLA, writers include a Works Cited page; in APA, writers include a References page. Both of these pages consist of only the sources you specifically referred to you in your paper and cited. All sources included on these lists should be cited in your paper.

Works Consulted: This list contains sources you came across in your research that may have informed your thinking or guided you in a specific direction, but that you did not actually include or cite in your paper.

Quoting: This is when you use the exact words of a writer in your own writing. Indicate that these are not your own words by placing them within quotation marks: “ ”. It is very important that the text you place within the quotation marks contains exactly the same words in exactly the same order as those of the author.

Summarizing: If you have ever written a book report, you've written a summary! It is a condensed version of a text, containing only the main points and ideas. The details are omitted.

Paraphrasing: When paraphrasing an author's idea, you put it into your words and phrasing. Sometimes an author may not convey a certain idea clearly or concisely. In these cases, you are encouraged to paraphrase the idea to help your reader with his/her understanding of the idea. Paraphrasing also shows your professor that you have thought about your research and spent some time trying to understand and convey its meaning.

STYLE

Be Concise: Say what you mean as efficiently as possible; do not use two words where one word would suffice. Do not repeat words or ideas. If you write it clearly, there is no need to rewrite it for your reader.

Examples:

 **Avoid:** Teaching students about issues of social justice can be difficult for instructors. They often face many challenges when trying to teach their students.

Do: Teaching students about issues of social justice can be difficult for instructors.

The 2nd sentence has the same meaning as the 1st sentence.

 **Avoid:** Mark saw a variety of different animals on his trip to Alaska.

Do: Mark saw a variety of animals on his trip to Alaska.

Variety and different have similar meanings, so only one of the words is needed.

Be Objective. Avoid subjective, emotion-based statements when writing an academic paper. For example, saying someone's perspective is "terrible" or "wonderful" is not recommended. In many academic papers, it is also not acceptable to say "My opinion" or "I think." Instead, you are expected to just write your opinion or what you think. Your reader will know they are your ideas because your name is on the paper.

Examples:

 **Avoid:** Smith's ideas about the economy are **ridiculous and stupid**.

Do: Smith's ideas about the economy are **not based in fact**.

 **Avoid:** The article did not progress in a logical way, **which made me angry**.

Do: The article did not progress in a logical way, **so understanding the main points was difficult**.

Be Unbiased. Do not use masculine pronouns to refer to an unknown or anonymous person. Instead, change the sentence from singular to plural or use both masculine and feminine pronouns.

Examples:

Avoid: When completing a homework assignment, **a student** should always check **his** syllabus.

Do: When completing homework assignments, **students** should always check **their** syllabi.

OR

Do: When completing a homework assignment, **a student** should always check **his or her** syllabus.

Avoid extreme descriptions that cannot be supported with evidence. For example, do not say that an idea is the best solution to a problem unless you can support why it is the best solution with evidence.

Examples:

Avoid: Chocolate ice cream is the best flavor of ice cream in the world.

Do: Chocolate ice cream is the most popular flavor of ice cream in the world, according to Smith’s research on ice cream preferences (45).

For more assistance with the information in this handout or any other writing questions you may have, schedule an appointment with a Writing Center tutor! Check out our website for more information and for more resources: www.strose.edu/writingcenter

Resources Used

Gocsik, Karen. “English as a Second Language.” *Dartmouth Writing Program*. Dartmouth College, 2005. Web. 28 March 2012.

Harris, Muriel. *Prentice Hall Reference Guide*. New Jersey: Pearson / Prentice Hall, 2008.

Maune, Michael, Hwanhee Park, Tony Cimasko, and Joshua M. Paiz. “Tips for Writing in North American Colleges: The Basics.” *Purdue Online Writing Lab*. Purdue University, 2012. Web. 19 November 2012.

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The College of Saint Rose Writing Center

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