

Academic Writing
A Talk at Regis College
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1. Intro (5)

- Imagine you go to a lecture and it is bad. It's incomprehensible. It's boring. It's confusing. It's one long sentence delivered in a monotone. How do you feel? Disappointed; lost; deflated; trapped; enraged. If I were to summarize the situation in two words, I would say, "Oh no". I'll let you in on a secret. Just as students dread badly delivered lectures, professors dread badly written essays. It is important for you to know that when professors read the first page of a badly written 10-page essay—remember all the things you feel when you are in a bad lecture?—that's what we are feeling. It will not serve you well to be the cause of such feelings.
- This is a religious institution. If you write poorly, your professors will curse you. If you write well, your professors will bless you. I am here to tell you how to receive your professors' blessing.
- Let me start by telling you what a good academic essay is not. It's not telling a good story. (That is what fiction is about). It is not being funny. (That's what comedy is about.) It is not being brilliant. (That's what genius is about.) While stories, humour and brilliance are appreciated, they are not the heart of a good academic essay.
- But perhaps the most common mistake students make is this: a good academic essay is not a repetition of what a book says or of what a professor says. (That's what photocopiers and recording devices are for.)
- So what is a good academic essay? And how do you write one? That's what I'm here to tell you. I will concentrate on how to write a 10-20 page research essay; though what I am saying can also be applied to writing shorter essays.

2. Finding a Topic (10)

- First point: write about something that you care about. Do the essay that is most interesting to you; not the one that is easiest for you. This means: write about what you love; or what you hate; or what you have no idea about but which you think is really important or really cool. Write about something that energizes you and makes you feel alive and makes your blood circulate. (If you don't think your personal attitude towards your subject matters, think of lectures delivered by intelligent but bored professors. Expertise without excitement can be pretty dreary.)
- So—your professor gives you a list of things you can write about, and you pick the one you are most interested in. Then you start your research, right? Wrong. Even if a professor has given you a list of suggestions for your essay, you usually have to further specify your general area into a specific topic. A general area is too broad. Writing about the Council of Nicaea or The Gospel of John or The Papacy or The Problem of Evil isn't going to work. These are vast areas that you can't possibly treat in a 10-page essay. Invariably, the problem with student essays is that they are too broad and superficial. It is almost impossible to be too narrow. You must narrow a general area into a specific topic. How do you do that?
- Different techniques:

- Maybe you just know. Especially when you are knowledgeable in a particular area, it sometimes happens that while you are reading or listening to a lecture, you know exactly what you want to write about. In my experience, this is extremely rare.
- Take 5 minutes and start with a single idea that interests you and write about it and see what flows from it. As you write, more information about your interests will emerge and your topic will become more specific and clearer to you. “Definitely, I want to write on the parables of Jesus that he tells to the Pharisees.” (Image: spiral.)
- A second technique: define your topic by exclusion. While planning to record a CD, I wanted music that was spiritual but not churchy; not love songs; not stories. And I know an accomplished academic who typically starts his essays by listing a number of topics that are related to his but that he is not going to treat. (Image: shading out possibilities.)
- A third technique: brainstorm. Say whatever comes into your fool head and do not worry about the connections between the ideas. After 5 minutes, see what you’ve got and draw relevant connections between different points and exclude others. (Image: discrete points.)
- Now that you’ve got an interesting specific topic that’s narrowed down from a general area, it’s time to do research.

3. Research (5)

- Start with class notes and class readings and see if any bibliography is provided.
- Ask professors, students (past and present) and librarians if they know anything particularly helpful on your chosen topic. “You’re writing on the mythological background to the book of Genesis? Look at Westermann’s commentary.”
- If you go to Google, you will end up in Wikipedia. Not the worst place, but not the best place, either. Often it is better to go to U of T Libraries webpage and search relevant databases (such as ATLA) and on-line dictionaries and encyclopedias. (Mary Reynolds and Teresa Helik offer workshops on this.) You might also try going to the stacks themselves and seeing what you find!
- Once you have located your material, and bought or photocopied or bookmarked what you need, mark up your text. Write notes in the margins. Mark i. what you think is important (= underline); ii. what you don’t understand (= ?); and what delights or outrages you (= !). This makes returning to your reading much easier.
- Take notes on the relevant passages. Great benefits come from taking notes. Rather than passively absorbing what your author’s saying, when you take notes, you become active: you are constantly asking yourself, “What’s important and what isn’t? Do I understand what he’s saying? Is it true?” You start noticing that certain ideas come up again and again; and that the author makes distinctions where you didn’t initially perceive any. “Oh look, he’s contradicting what he said 3 pages ago. On p. 10, he says this, whereas on p. 7 he said the opposite—no wait! He was talking about knowledge on p. 10 but wisdom on p. 7.”

4. The Heart of an Academic Essay (20)

- Having defined a topic and done preliminary research, it is time to come up with the hypothesis for your essay. (This is sometimes called the ‘thesis’—but I prefer the more humble word ‘hypothesis’. A hypothesis states what you think is going on in your text—something you try out. Actually, the very word ‘essay’ is nothing but the French word that means ‘attempt’.) Your hypothesis should be a single sentence that asserts or denies something.
- A hypothesis is not a question—but it is an answer to a question. The key to having a good hypothesis is coming up with the most vital question that arises from your research.
- “But what if I don’t have any vital questions to ask?” Then you are in trouble. Either you understand everything (and therefore have no questions) or you have chosen a topic that is of no interest to you (I personally have no vital questions to ask about the video game *Grand Theft Auto* because I have no interest in it) or you have picked up the notion somewhere that a good essay doesn’t raise any real questions about your material because questions are signs of ignorance and doubt; and good students are neither ignorant nor doubtful. Students who think this way are condemned to write essays that repeat what the book says or what the professor says. Such essays are built on fear (of revealing your ignorance) and pretense (that you understand what in fact you do not understand) and they are as demoralizing for the professor to read as they are for the student to write.
- Do not write as if you were a frightened child trying to pacify a raging teacher by showing that you understand everything that has been assigned. Write as if you were an intelligent adult who has some questions that you want answered.
- Two equal and opposite errors: “Repeat everything (and question nothing)” or “Be free; express yourself; it doesn’t matter what the book says”. The first is all object and no subject; the second is all subject and no object. A good alternative model: read what has been given you (objective element) and ask intelligent questions about it (subjective element).
- Find out what you’re interested in and ask the deepest and most vital questions about it you can. A whole fascinating world opens up when you do. You will experience a conversion: from boredom to curiosity; from dread to eagerness; from inauthenticity to authenticity.
- **Don’t ignore the questions that arise from your reading.** Good academic writing thrives on examining different answers to a real question. Just as a good story resolves a conflict, a good joke makes you laugh, a good academic essay offers answers to a question.
- Having questions is not a problem. Having questions is the only way to the answer.
- You will have many questions—but ultimately you should focus on *the* question—your deepest and most vital. What does such a question look like? Jared Diamond, a geography professor from UCLA was wondering why Europeans were able to take over most of the world from the 1500s to the 1900s. Some used to think that Europeans were smarter than everyone else. But Diamond’s answer to the question is found in the title of his 1997 bestseller *Guns, Germs and Steel*. Although it is a controversial and complicated book, the question motivating the book is dead simple.
- A more homely example of a good question: Ted on ‘form’ in Aristotle.

- “OK, Sean. I’m ready to admit that I might have some questions. But now I’m worried. I may even have *the* question—but what if I don’t have *the* answer? Now I’m in trouble. You’ve led me out into the desert, you’ve abandoned me, and now I’m afraid I’ll never get back alive.” To this worry, I have 3 responses:
 - Your answer is a hypothesis. It is not written in stone. It is the best answer you can come up with for now. And if your hypothesis changes as you are writing your essay, so be it. That is fine. (Actually, it is very exciting. You’re learning as you go and not just repeating a foregone conclusion. And—you’ve just developed some brilliant objections to your new thesis.)
 - Don’t be paralyzed if you have more than one answer to your question. Maybe you have three different answers, and you can’t figure out which is the best. That’s fine. Articulate the three alternatives; and then say which one you think is the most probable.
 - Maybe your question is too big to answer in such a short space. Can you think of a more modest question that you are able to answer—one that might serve as a first installment on answering your bigger question?
- A good hypothesis is a release to the tension of your question. The articulation of a hypothesis is a moment of receptivity and creativity. (Oh! This is what I think is going on.) It connects two ideas that haven’t been put together before.
- The heart of a good academic essay is the deepest, most vital question you have about your topic. Without an underlying question, your essay will be stillborn.

5. The Evidence for your Hypothesis (10)

- Now that you’ve tuned in to the most vital question you have about your topic and have formulated an answer to it (= your hypothesis), you need to provide your reader with evidence that your hypothesis is true. You have to move back from the excitement of the “Aha!” moment to gathering and presenting your evidence in the clearest and most compelling way for your reader. In an academic essay, evidence is usually put forth in the form of an argument with premises and a conclusion.
- Your essay may contain one long argument for your conclusion, or it may consist of several independent arguments, because it is possible to argue for the same conclusion from different premises. For instance, if your hypothesis is that one should become a vegetarian, you could argue for this on grounds of health (North Americans eat way too much meat), or on economic grounds (raising cattle is much more expensive than raising vegetables) or on moral grounds (killing animals for food when other options are available is immoral) or on religious grounds (cows are sacred to Hindus). Each argument independently establishes the same conclusion.
- When gathering evidence, it is often useful to quote your source directly. It is particularly helpful to quote your author when he says something important or controversial or in a particularly striking way. But it is rarely sufficient to quote your author and then move on. After all, Kant may be 100% right when he says that the central question of metaphysics is, “Whether synthetic a priori judgments are possible?”, but that statement is totally opaque to most of us because we have no clue as to what a synthetic a priori judgment is. When you quote an author, you usually also need to explain the quotation in your own words (define terms such as ‘synthetic’, ‘a priori’, and ‘judgment’, for instance) and offer some examples of what

the author means. A good example illustrates your meaning in a dramatic way. And if you can't offer your own example of what your author is saying, you probably don't understand what he is talking about.

- After you have presented the evidence for your hypothesis (complete with quotation, explanation, and examples), your argument will be made more convincing if you raise some objections against your hypothesis and show how they might be answered. Ignoring objections is a sign of fear and makes your case less rather than more persuasive. Come up with the strongest objections against your hypothesis and state them as clearly and as fairly as possible; and then show how these objections are based on misunderstandings or are not ultimately fatal to your position. Again, examples are important. A well-chosen counterexample can be particularly devastating to your opponent's argument. If your opponent is arguing that all swans are white and you show up with a black swan, you've silenced him pretty effectively.

6. Putting it All Together (5)

- Only after you've developed your question, your hypothesis, your evidence for the hypothesis and your refutation of objections do you write your introductory paragraph. Students can waste a lot of time coming up with a witty introduction to their essay before they have written it. But you can't write your introduction before you have written your essay because you don't yet know what you are going to say.
- Your introduction should show your reader why the subject you are considering is worthwhile. A good introduction answers the question, "Why in the world would anybody be interested in this topic?"
- Intro; The Question; The Hypothesis; The Evidence; Some Objections; Conclusion.
- For your conclusion, summarize what you have said and show the implications of what you have done for the bigger picture: for your personal growth, for your chosen academic field; for future research; and, if you wish, for the universe at large.
- Edit. Make sure your footnotes and bibliography are infallible (we'll do that after the break)—and that's all there is to it.