THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
WRITING PROGRAM

Writing in College, by Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney

1. Some crucial differences between high school and college writing

From high school to college

Some students make very smooth transitions from writing in high school to writing in college, and we heartily wish all of you an easy passage. But other students are puzzled and frustrated by their experiences in writing for college classes. Only months earlier your writing was winning praise; now your instructors are dissatisfied, saying that the writing isn't quite "there" yet, saying that the writing is "lacking something." You haven't changed--your writing is still mechanically sound, your descriptions are accurate, you're saying smart things. But they're still not happy. Some of the criticism is easy to understand: it's easy to predict that standards at college are going to be higher than in high school. But it is not just a matter of higher standards: Often, what your instructors are asking of you is not just something *better*, but something *different*. If that's the case, then you won't succeed merely by being more intelligent or more skillful at doing what you did in high school. Instead, you'll need to direct your skills and your intelligence to a new task.

We should note here that a college is a big place and that you'll be asked to use writing to fulfill different tasks. You'll find occasions where you'll succeed by summarizing a reading accurately and showing that you understand it. There may be times when you're invited to use writing to react to a reading, speculate about it. Far more often--like every other week--you will be asked to *analyze* the reading, to make a worthwhile *claim* about it that is not obvious (*state a thesis* means almost the same thing), to support your claim with good reasons, all in four or five pages that are organized to present an *argument* . (If you did that in high school, write your teachers a letter of gratitude.)

Argument: a key feature of college writing

Now by "argument" we do not mean a dispute over a loud stereo. In college, an argument is something less contentious and more systematic: It is a set of statements coherently arranged to offer three things that experienced readers expect in essays that they judge to be thoughtful:

- They expect to see a *claim* that would encourage them to say, "That's interesting. I'd like to know more."

- They expect to see *evidence*, *reasons* for your claim, evidence that would encourage them to agree with your claim, or at least to think it plausible.

- They expect to see that you've thought about *limits* and *objections* to your claim. Almost by definition, an interesting claim is one that can be reasonably challenged. Readers look for answers to questions like "But what about . . . ?" and "Have you considered . . . ?"

This kind of argument is less like disagreeablewrangling, more like an amiable and lively conversationwith someone whom you respect and who respects you; someone who is interested in what you have to say, but will not agree with your claims just because you state them; someone who wants to hear your reasons for believing your claims and also wants to hear answers to their questions.

At this point, some students ask why they should be required to *convince* anyone of anything. "After all," they say, "we are all entitled to our opinions, so all we should have to do is express them clearly. Here's my opinion. Take it or leave it." This point of view both misunderstandsthe nature of argument and ignores its greatest value.

It is true that we are all entitled to our opinions and that we have no duty to defend them. But universitieshold as their highest value not just the pursuit of new knowledge and better understanding but the sharing of that knowledge. We write not only to state what we have think but also to show why others might agree with it and why it matters. We also know that whatever it is we think, it is never the entire truth. Our conclusions are partial, incomplete, and always subject to challenge. So we write in a way that allows others to test our reasoning: we present our best thinking as a series of claims, reasons, and responses to imagined challenges, so that readers can see not only what we think, but whether they ought to agree.

And that's all an argument is--not wrangling, but a serious and focused conversationamong people who are intensely interested in getting to the bottom of things *cooperatively*.

Those values are also an integral part of your education in college. For four years, you are asked to read, do research, gather data, analyze it, think about it, and then communicateit to readers in a form in which enables them to asses it and use it. You are asked to do this not because we expect you all to become professional scholars, but because in just about any profession you pursue, you will do research, think about what you find, make decisions about complex matters, and then explain those decisions--usually in writing--to others who have a stake in your decisions being sound ones. In an Age of Information, what most professionalsdo is research, think, and make arguments. (And part of the value of doing your own thinking and writing is that it makes you much better at evaluating the thinking and writing of others.)

In the next few pages, we're going to walk you through a process of creating an argument in a Humanitiesor Social Science paper. Note that we're describing "a" process and not "the" process. We're not describing the way that everyone does go about writing an argument. We're certainly not describing the way everyone must go about writing an argument. Further, we can't cover everything, and some of your teachers will expect something other than what we describe here. There are even some differencesbetween how you write papers in Humanitiesand in the Social Sciences. But within all these limits, we can lay some groundwork for writing college papers.

We begin with the assignment that gets you started; then we discuss some ways to plan your paper so that you don't waste too much time on false starts. We conclude with some strategies for drafting and revising, especially revising, because the most productive work on a paper begins

after you have gotten your ideas out of the warm and cozy incubator of your own mind and into the cold light of day.

Interpreting assignments: a guide to professors' expectations

Not all of your instructors will be equally clear about what they expect of your paper. Some will tell you in detail what to read, how to think about it, and how to organize your paper, but others will ask a general question just to see what you can do with it. Some instructors will expect you to stay close to the assignment, penalizing you if you depart from it; others will encourage you to strike out on your own. Some few instructors may want you to demonstrateonly that you have read and understood a reading, but most will want you to use your understanding of the reading as a jumping-off point for an analysis and an argument.

So your first step in writing an assigned paper occurs well before you begin writing: You must know what your instructor expects. Start by assuming that, unless you see the words "Summarize or paraphrasewhat X says about . . . ," your instructor is unlikely to want just a summary. Beyond this point, however, you have to become a kind of anthropologist, reading the culture of your particular class to understand what is said, what is not, and what is intended.

Start by looking carefully at the words of the assignment. If it is phrased in any of these ways, one crucial part of your task has been done for you:

- "Agree or disagree: 'Freud misunderstoodthe feminine mind when he wrote . . . .'"
- "Was Lear justified in castigating Cordelia when she refused to . . . ?"
- "Discuss whether Socrates adequately answered the charge that he corrupted the youth of Athens."

For questions like these, you start (but it's only a start) by considering two opposing claims: Freud understood the feminine mind or did not , Lear was or was not justified, Socrates did or did not answer the charges against him. For reasons we will discuss below, you will *not* want the claim of your paper to be merely yes or no, he did or he didn't. But an assignment like this can make it easier to get started because you can immediatelybegin to find and assess data from your readings. You can look at passages from the reading and consider how they would support one of the claims. (Remember: this is only a start. You do not want to end up with a claim that says nothing more than "Freud did (or did not) understand the feminine mind." "Lear was (or was not) justified in castigating Cordelia " "Socrates did (or did not) adequately answer the charge.")

More likely, however, your assignments will be less specific. They won't suggest opposite claims. Instead, they'll give you a reasonably specific sense of subject matter and a reasonably specific sense of your task:

"illustrate," "explain," "analyze," "evaluate," "compare and contrast,"

"Discuss the role that the honor plays in *The Odyssey.* "

"Show how Molière exploits comic patterns in a scene from *Tartuffe*."

None of these assignments implies a main point or claim that you can directly import into your paper. You can't just claim that "honor does play a role in *The Odyssey*" or that "MoliËre does exploit comic patterns in *Tartuffe*." After all, if the instructor has asked you to discuss *how* MoliËre used comic patterns, she presumably already believes that he *did* use them. You get no credit for asserting the existence of something we already know exists.

Instead, these assignments ask you to spend four or five pages explaining the results of an analysis. Words such as "show how" and "explain" and "illustrate" do *not* ask you to summarizea reading. They ask you to show how the reading is put together, how it works. If you asked someone to show you how your computer worked, you wouldn't be satisfied if they simply summarized: "This is the keyboard, this is the monitor, this is the printer." You already know the summary--now you want to know how the thing does what it does. These assignments are similar. They ask you to identify parts of things--parts of an argument, parts of a narrative, parts of a poem; then show how those parts fit together (or work against one another) to create some larger effect.

But in the course of so doing, you can't just grind out four or five pages of discussion, explanation, or analysis. It may seem strange, but even when you're asked to "show how" or "illustrate," you're still being asked to make an argument. You must shape and focus that discussion or analysis so that it supports a ***claim*** that you discovered and formulated and that all of your discussion and explanation develops and supports. We'll talk more about claims -- also known as points -- in later sections.

A third kind of assignment is simultaneously least restrictiveand most intimidating. These assignments leave it up to you to decide not only what you will claim but what you will write about and even what kind of analysis you will do: "Analyze the role of a character in *The Odyssey*." That is the kind of assignment that causes many students anxiety because they must motivate their research almost entirely on their own. To meet this kind of assignment, the best advice we can give is to read with your mind open to things that puzzle you, that make you wish you understood something better.

Now that advice may seem almost counterproductive; you may even think that being puzzled or not understanding something testifies to your intellectual failure. Yet almost everything we do in a university starts with someone being puzzled about something, someone with a vague--or specific--dissatisfaction caused by not knowing something that seems important or by wanting to understand something better. The best place to begin thinking about any assignment is with what *you* don't understand but wish you did.

If after all this analysis of the assignment you are still uncertain about what is expected of you, ask your instructor. If your class has a Writing Intern, ask that person. If for some reason you can't ask either, locate the Academic Tutor in your residence hall and ask that person. **Do this as soon as possible**. You're not likely to succeed on an assignment if you don't have a clear sense of what will count as success. You don't want to spend time doing something different than what you're being asked to do.

Another key feature of college writing: what's your point?

However different your assignments may seem, most will share one characteristic: in each, you will almost certainly be asked to make a point. Now when we talk about the "point" of your paper,

you should understand what we do and do *not* mean. If asked what the point of their paper is, most students answer with something like, "Well, I wanted to write about the way Falstaff plays the role of Prince Hal's father." But that kind of sentence names only your *topic* and an *intention* to write *about* it.

When most of your instructors ask what the point of your paper is, they have in mind something different. By "point" or "claim" (the words are virtually synonymous with *thesis*), they will more often mean the most important *sentence* that you wrote in your essay, a sentence that appears on the page, in black in white; words that you can point to, underline, send on a postcard; a sentence that sums up the most important thing you want to say as a result of your reading, thinking, research, and writing. In that sense, you might state the point of your paper as "Well, I want to show/prove/claim/argue/demonstrate(any of those words will serve to introduce the point) that

> 'Though Falstaff seems to play the role of Hal's father, he is, in fact, acting more like a younger brother who . . . .'"

If you include in your paper what appears after *I want to prove that*, then that's the point of your paper, its main claim that the rest of your paper supports.

But what's a *good* point?

A question just as important as what a point is, though, is what counts as a good one. We will answer that question here, even though it gets us ahead of ourselves in describing the process of writing a paper. Many beginning writers think that writing an essay means thinking up a point or thesis and then finding evidence to support it. But few of us work that way. Most of us begin our research with a question, with a puzzle, something that we don't understand but want to, and maybe a vague sense of what an answer might look like. We hope that out of our early research to resolve that puzzle there emerges a solution to the puzzle, an idea that seems promising, but one that only more research can test. But even if more research supports that developing idea, we aren't ready to say that *that* idea is our claim or point. Instead, we start writing to see whether we can build an argument to support it, suspecting, hoping that in the act of writing we will refine that idea, maybe even change it substantially.

That's why we say we are getting ahead of ourselves in this account of writing a paper, because as paradoxicalas it may sound, you are unlikely to know *exactly* what point you will make until *after* you have written the paper in which you made it. So for us to talk about the *quality* of a point now is to get ahead of ourselves, because we haven't even touched on how you might think about drafting your paper, much less revising it. But because everything you do at the beginning aims at finding a good point, it is useful to have a clear idea about what it is you are trying to find, what makes for a good point.

A good point or claim typically has several key characteristics: it says something significant about what you have read, something that helps you and your readers understand it better; it says something that is not obvious, something that your reader didn't already know; it is at least mildly contestable, something that no one would agree with just by reading it; it asserts something that you can plausibly support in five pages, not something that would require a book.

Measured by those criteria, these are *not* good points or claims:

- "*1 Henry IV* by William Shakespeare is a play that raises questions about the nature of kingship and responsibility." Sounds impressive, but who would contest it? Everyone who has read the play already knows that it raises such questions.

- "*Native Son* is one of the most important stories about race relations ever written." Again, your readers probably already agree with this, and if so, why would they read an essay that supported it? Further, are you ready to provide an argument that this point is true? What evidence could you provide to make this argument? Are you prepared to compare the effect of *Native Son* with the effects of other books about race relations?

- "Socrates' argument in *The Apology* is very interesting." Right. So?

- "In this paper I discuss Thucydides' account of the Corcyrean-Corinthian debate in Book I." First, what significant thing does this point tell us about the book? Second, who would contest this (who would argue that you are not going to discuss Thucydides' account?).

None of these is a particularly significant or contestable point, and so none of them qualifies as a good one.

What does qualify as a good claim? These might:

- The three most prominent women in *Heart of Darkness* play key roles in a complex system of parallels: literally as gatekeepers of Africa, representatively as gatekeepers of darkness, and metaphorically as gatekeepers of brutality.

- While Freud argues that followers obey because each has a part of themselves invested in the leader, Blau claims that followers obey in order to avoid punishment. Both neglect the effects of external power.

You should recognize, however, that you will only rarely be able state good points like these *before* you write your first draft. Much more often, you *discover* good points at the end of the process of drafting. Writing is a way of thinking through a problem, of discovering what you want to say. So do not feel that you should begin to write only when you have a fully articulated point in mind. Instead, write to discover and to refine it.

One note on the language of point sentences. If you're like us, you will want your readers to think that your points are terrifically interesting and significant. What almost never accomplishesthis is to say: "My point is terrifically interesting and significant." Many writers try to generate a sense of importancefor what they write by simply adding some synonym of the word "important:" "An important question to consider . . ." "It is essential to examine . . . " "A crucial concern is whether. . ." This isn't going to work. What convinces readers that a point is important is not the word "important," but the words that tell us the substance of the point. If, during your first draft, you find yourself using words like "important," you should make a note to yourself to come back during your revisionsto replace "important" with more substantive language. Then don't forget to do it. It's really important.

Now: in order to prove that important point -- or to go through a process that will help you develop one -- you'll need a strategy for gathering evidence and writing a first draft. We offer advice on these matters in the next section: "**Preparing to write and drafting the paper**."

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