

How to Write at University

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Academic writing is the art of writing down what you know for the purpose of discussing it with other knowledgeable people. We write in order to expose our ideas to the criticism of our peers, not to provide entertainment or even information. Naturally, our readers also sometimes learn something from us, but this is not the primary purpose of the writing. The goal is to make our ideas corrigible, to render them in a way that puts others in a position to correct us. The value of presenting our thoughts on the stable surface of the page to this end has been clear for centuries, but its importance to society is sometimes forgotten. By writing, we maintain a system of communication that is especially conducive to criticism, and it is on this system that our intellectual culture depends. Our aim is to participate in a conversation with people who are qualified to tell us that we are wrong.

Here, the paragraph plays an essential role as the unit of scholarly composition. Scholars present their ideas one paragraph at a time, each of which affords the reader an opportunity to examine a claim along with the basis we have for making it. In their paragraphs, scholars tell us what they think and why they think so. The paragraphs are arranged in a series that establishes a larger thesis based on the ideas each of them expresses. The claims in our paragraphs stand and fall together, or at least in concert; revising one claim forces the revision of another. Since our writing is orderly, these effects are transmitted through the structure of our thinking in a traceable way. Knowledge is not so much a matter of being right as it is an orderly way of being wrong. In any case, “knowing” something in an academic setting implies the ability to compose one or more coherent prose paragraphs about it.

How do we develop this ability? The short answer is that we practice. Beginning in our early schooling we are taught to write paragraphs and by the time we arrive at university we have at least a vague sense of what an “essay” is. Before getting our first degrees we will, hopefully, have written at least hundreds of paragraphs, and by the time we get our master’s degree we should easily be in the thousands. Many of these paragraphs, of course, are never seen by a reader before being discarded as poor representations of our thinking (or entirely

accurate representations of poor thinking). But every time we sit down to compose a paragraph we are working on the core craft of academic discourse: saying what we know in terms that another knowledgeable person will understand. The more deliberately we do this — the more explicit we are about what we want to say and how we want to say it — the more we get out of the exercise. To that end, I want to suggest a very deliberate way of composing and arranging paragraphs for academic purposes. All it takes is a little discipline.

In academic work, discipline in fact has an important double meaning. On the one hand, it means doing your work in a conscientious and regular way: showing up for it and getting down to it. On the other hand, it suggests an intellectual community: scholars work within “disciplines” that shape their thinking and hold them to account. We are always writing for a community of peers – those “other knowledgeable people” I was talking about. Neither of these senses of discipline suggest anything very profound or difficult. Devoting as little as forty hours to your writing over eight weeks is often enough to keep your prose in shape, and even enough to produce a pretty good paper. As few as two dozen “peers”, meanwhile, is all you need to have in mind when thinking about your reader. This is why the classroom is such an iconic “academic” situation. It brings the discipline of regular attendance and homework together with the discipline of intellectual community. This is what university is all about.

We come to university to gain knowledge, or, perhaps better, to become knowledgeable people. We don’t just want to come away from our studies knowing a lot of things, but with an ability-to-know things. What is this ability? How does it work? How do I know that I know something? Since I got my early academic training in the discipline of philosophy, I know how complicated the answers to this question can be, but for the purpose of understanding the relationship between knowledge and writing, I’ve come up with a simple, three-part definition of knowledge that you might find useful. Knowing something for academic purposes is the ability (1) to make up your mind about something, (2) to speak your mind about it, and (3) to write it down. Academic knowledge, that is, has a philosophical, a rhetorical, and a literary dimension and you do well to ask yourself how well you perform on each of them. “Whatever satisfies the soul is truth,” said Walt Whitman. But only when you’ve satisfied yourself in mind, speech, and writing should you claim to know something at university. I hope the value of this competence is obvious, but let’s look at each component on its own.

First, then, knowledge is the ability to make up your mind about something. What you’re able to think about effectively depends on the discipline you’re in, of course. You may be able to judge the quality of a poem or the effectiveness of a social program; you may be

able to determine the cause of a banking crisis or the orbit of a comet. But your first order of business is to form a belief about it, an opinion about what is going on in the world. "The world is everything that is the case," said Wittgenstein; "it divides into facts, not things." You don't have to know everything, not even about the subjects of your disciplinary expertise (or the course you are enrolled in). But you have to have some sense of the facts; you have to hold some propositions to be true; you have to believe something. Knowing something is, minimally, a state of mind that is directed at the facts; we might say you "represent" the facts in a particular domain. When other people want to know these facts, they come to you. First and foremost, you tell them what you think, what you believe.

Hopefully, however, you've had the experience of being wrong. You looked at the issue seriously and did your due diligence, and then you made up your mind. A few days or weeks later, however, new information was made available to you, or your assumptions were confronted with the plain facts of experience. You had to concede that you had made a mistake. You had formed a belief and your belief turned out to be false. This is a completely normal experience and it is nothing to be ashamed of; in fact, it is worth celebrating and sometimes we simply call it learning. It also gives you important insight into the nature of something philosophers are very interested in, namely, "truth". In order to expose a false belief we have to discover the truth of the matter. We can be much more sophisticated about it if we want, but for the present purpose you only need to acknowledge a practical, working distinction between true and false beliefs in the ordinary way. Knowledge is not "mere" belief but belief of a particular kind, belief of especially high quality. Knowledge is stored in the subset of our beliefs that are also true.

But not even this is enough. Sometimes we form perfectly true beliefs on the basis of prejudice and rumor. In a particular case, our only reason to believe something may be a snap judgment we have made based on irrelevant features of a person or situation; or we may have done no more than believe what someone told us about the contents of a book or the details of a case. Even when the belief we form this way is true, we cannot be said to know it for academic purposes. We must imagine someone asking us why it is true, and we must then imagine giving a serious and honest answer. We must not just hold true beliefs, we must be "justified" in holding them, we must have good reasons to believe what we do. This isn't mainly to ensure that we're right but because our reasons provide the ground on which our beliefs may be applied in practice and corrected in the light of criticism. Even the truest belief needs to be contextualized before it can play a meaningful role in our system of knowledge and it is by way of our reasons for believing that this context is established.

At one level, then, knowledge is justified, true belief. Professional philosophers will tell you that it's a great deal more complicated, but most will grant that it's a good place to begin. (That's why the definition appears in so many introductory philosophy courses and textbooks.) When asking yourself whether a particular claim should go into the paper you're writing, you should consider whether or not you know it. And this should lead you to consider whether you believe it, whether it is true, and whether you have a good reason to believe it is true. Don't settle for mere belief, but also don't settle for justified truths you don't really believe. Don't succumb to the temptation to deliver what might be called "publishable truths", orthodox opinions. Make that extra effort of internalizing your beliefs, of really making up your mind. Sincerity isn't everything, but it is good for your style.

While its virtues are hopefully obvious, the problem with this definition, is that it is philosophical. It seems to suggest that knowledge is "in the head" — that it is some exalted state of mind that you must achieve at all costs. All of us know scholars who have committed themselves too deeply to this way of thinking about knowledge and are now stuffed full of "justified, true beliefs". It's just that they have a very hard time explaining what's on their minds when we need them to. Often, we will help them nurture their illusion by taking their helplessness as yet another sign of how knowledgeable they are. It's not my aim here to undermine them, but I do want to suggest a different approach in your own case. Don't tell yourself (or anyone else) that you know something until you are able to talk intelligently about it. At a university, knowledge isn't just justified, true belief; it is also the ability to hold your own in a conversation with other knowledgeable people. It's not the ability to win every argument; it's just the ability to credibly participate in discourse.

What does it mean to be "conversant" in your subject? First, consider the old pedagogical myth that there is no such thing as a stupid question. I'll grant that it serves a noble purpose in some classes and situations, but it is, at bottom, a lie. We have all asked stupid questions. We have all heard others ask them. In a community of knowledgeable people, there are questions that do nothing other than expose your lack of qualifications to speak, or at least your unpreparedness to speak on this occasion. The simple case is that of not having read the required reading in preparation for your lecture. Anyone who has done the reading will know that you wouldn't have asked the question if you had read it too. A discipline is grounded in a shared basis of disciplinary knowledge that determines whether or not a question is appropriate, whether it identifies a legitimately open area of discourse, whether this is something we need to talk about. Being knowledgeable means being aware of these areas, but do please remember that calling a question "stupid" is not a demonstration of

conversational ability. The good conversationalist is someone who is able to politely steer a conversation away from a fruitless area of inquiry and on to more fertile ground. Sometimes your interlocutor doesn't even know that this is what has happened.

Conversation isn't always easy and it helps if the participants have a shared sense of humor. Consider the fact that knowledgeable people work within a common frame of reference that allows them to play on words that others don't know the meaning of and invoke a gallery of characters that laypeople don't know exist. They will share a repertoire of anecdotes that can be alluded to for comic effect and they will even harbor stereotypes of other disciplines that can be used to construct the butts of jokes. Humor is a natural part of being human and it finds its way into our scholarship too. A lecture may not be a series of jokes and our seminars are not filled exclusively with mirthful banter, but the potential for humor is always there. Sometimes our style emerges from the joke we deliberately disdain to tell. This obviously requires a sense of humor too.

At the outer reaches of our humor, however, we must also recognize that being conversant in a particular subject area means knowing what it is "not okay" to say. Every discipline has a set of values that make it possible to offend your interlocutors. This is the problem of "political correctness" and it exists in all disciplines, no matter how "liberal" they imagine themselves to be. There are things you can say that expose, not your ignorance, but your malevolence. These sentiments, when expressed, suggest that you are not, after all, a "peer", not "one of us", that you do not belong here because your morals are out of key with those of the community. This rhetorical constraint has already had serious career consequences for some scholars, sometimes in highly publicized cases. You ignore it at your peril.

But I am not simply warning you away from controversial subjects. Astrid Lindgren, who famously gave us Pippi Longstocking, also gave us a medieval role model named Ronia, the Robber's Daughter. When she reaches adolescence, she is allowed to explore the forest around the castle on her own, and her father, who loves her endlessly and is concerned for her welfare, warns her of the dangers she might meet there. "You must be very careful down by the river," he tells her, "it is a dangerous place. You must be careful, too, by the Abyss of Doom. Take care you don't fall into it." Does this lead our heroine to stay well away from the river and its dangers? Does she keep her distance from the Abyss of Doom? No, of course not. She goes right down to the bank of the river — and "takes care" there. She goes right up to the Abyss and takes great care there; in fact, she jumps over it and back again, very carefully, mind you. I think this is the right attitude to take with the boundary to offence. We must learn

to face the very real dangers of discourse, without barring ourselves from the experiences that it offers us.

To develop this skill, we depend on help from our friends and, sometimes, the kindness of strangers. Please remember that, just as it is no art to call a question “stupid”, we demonstrate no skill merely by taking offence, no honor in merely causing it. Being conversant here means being able to provoke constructively, to take a conversation through a patch of controversy and emerge on the other side still friends, or at least still peers, and everyone a little smarter than when they started. We must let each other make mistakes, and interpret each other’s intentions as charitably as we can, but also express our objections to the language our peers use, and the ideas they present to us. If we are at once honest and kind, we can help each other develop this important art. It is the art of overcoming our differences, and differences must be made explicit in discourse before we can transcend them. Not only are we all getting smarter, we’re all becoming better people too. Confucius said that “the great learning resides in watching with affection the way people grow.” That’s the attitude I recommend in these matters.

Now, we all know people who are good at making up their minds, and many of them can also talk your ear off about it if you let them. While that’s all well and good, some of them struggle to get their ideas down on paper. That’s why I recommend that you not be satisfied until you have mastered a third component of the competence we call “being knowledgeable”. At university, I submit, to know something is to be able to compose a coherent prose paragraph about it.

As I said at the outset, the paragraph is the unit of scholarly composition, and this unit can be characterized quite precisely. Scholars compose themselves in paragraphs of, generally speaking, at least six sentences and at most two-hundred words. Each paragraph says one thing, which is stated in what we call its “key sentence”, and supports, elaborates or defends this claim. In each posture, it addresses the difficulty the reader presumably experiences. If the reader finds the claim hard to believe, the paragraph must support it with evidence. If the reader finds the claim hard to understand, the paragraph must elaborate its meaning. If the reader finds the claim hard to agree with, the paragraph must defend it against the reader’s objections. Notice that in each case, we answer the question “How shall I write this paragraph?” by asking another: “Who is reading this paragraph?” Or, better, we ask: “What does the reader think?”

Remember, now, that your reader is a peer: a fellow student or fellow scholar. So you have a good sense of the difficulty they face, having shared the same formative experiences,

read the same texts, and engaged in the same conversations. On this basis you may decide, for example, that the reader simply doesn't know that what you are saying is true. You must then present your reasons for thinking so and sometimes this will mean citing authoritative sources of available information on the company, country, or region you have studied, or the history and politics of the practices you have looked at. Or it may mean drawing on your data to support your findings. Either way, you must use sources that your reader is inclined to trust, whether because of the credibility of the authors you cite or the care you took in applying your methods. The reader must find your claims more believable after reading your paragraph than they would appear if merely asserted or baldly stated. The paragraph, in short, must be more believable than the key sentence.

Alternatively, the reader may not doubt that what you are saying is true but find it difficult to understand. You may be describing unfamiliar practices, exotic locations, or complicated notions. Less radically, the reader may simply want to know more precisely what you mean. This will often happen when writing about your theories and methods, both of which should be familiar to your reader but often require specification for the purposes of conducting a particular study. In your theory section, you may wish to specify how the familiar concept of "cognitive frames" informed your coding scheme. Reading your methods section, the reader may know what a "semi-structured interview" is but be curious to know exactly what your interview guide looked like, or how the subjects were selected. In some cases, you will be introducing a concept you don't expect the reader to be familiar with. In any case, you've got your work cut out for you.

Finally, there may be no question of believing or understanding what you are saying. The reader may have already made up their mind that the claim you are making is false. Here you will have to defend the claim against the reader's objections. While you should try to be persuasive, you should not expect to change this reader's mind. Often such paragraphs are there merely to note a point of disagreement that will presumably survive this particular encounter. (Some of your readers will agree with you, but will also want to see this claim defended, rather than supported or elaborated.) It is a condition of participating in discourse that some of our opinions are not universally shared. If you write as though there is nothing to dispute, no other reasonable position take, then your text will seem either naive or closed-minded. Perhaps it will help to remember that a paragraph takes about a minute to read. Would I be able to persuade you that you are wrong about something in one minute?

Notice the common theme here. You can't decide on your rhetorical posture without thinking of your reader. It is not the claim itself that requires support, elaboration or defense;

it is the reader that demands these things of your claim. As you write your text you are constructing this reader, or at least an image of this reader – what Wayne Booth called the “implied reader”. It is not necessary that your actual readers identify with the implied reader, but it is necessary that they respect the reader your text associates them with, the reading they are “implicated” in. Booth also talks about how a text suggests an ethics by showing us “the company we keep”. A text is always looking for someone to understand it. Perhaps this is why Virginia Woolf could say, simply, “To know whom to write for is to know how to write.” In composing each paragraph, you are seeking the company of your reader.

Good writing should of course be visible on the surface of the text. If what you have written doesn’t finally get your ideas across, it’s hard to consider it a success. And whether your writing succeeds in this sense is something you really only discover when you hear from your readers. (When you do get feedback, remember to distinguish between your reader’s reaction to your ideas and their reaction to your writing. If they don’t like what you think, but it actually is what you think, then there may not be anything wrong with your style.) Even before your readers see your text, however, I would suggest you learn to evaluate your own product. Develop an eye for grammatical errors and stylistic gaffes. Crucially: read yourself out loud. And do please learn to see that your writing is improving. As scholars, we write a lot, and this should be as obvious in our prose as the regular practice of athletes is apparent in their posture.

But what is it that you are actually good at? What is it that you are getting better at through practice? This is where I encourage you to take a moment to observe your process, indeed, I challenge you to take a series of moments. The basic idea is to decide what you want to say at the end of one day and then sit down the next day at a particular time to write a good, clear paragraph that says it. Spend 18 or 27 minutes doing some very deliberate writing — writing that has a well-defined end and makes use of predetermined means. You are trying to support, elaborate or defend a single idea in at least six sentences and at most two-hundred words. This is as easy (and as hard) to be “good at” as running 5 kilometers over varied terrain in 25 minutes. There’s no mystery about whether you’re succeeding or how much effort it takes. Most importantly, there’s no mystery about your progress.

As I see it, a “good” writer is someone who can make effective use of 20 or 30 minutes (including a short break) to produce a paragraph. A good writer is therefore someone who is able to choose what to write about; there is, after all, no skill that can be applied generally to everything. A good athlete knows what field to step onto and what ring not to get into. A good musician knows what stage to perform on. A good surgeon doesn’t make an incision into just

any part of just any body. Likewise, a good writer knows what subjects to write about, and who their reader is, and what subjects to leave to other writers for other readers. The standard, I suggest, is whether you're able to produce a workable prose paragraph in under half an hour. Within your discipline, that is a skill that is very much worth having.

And that means that it is worth investing the effort it takes to develop it. At this point, I probably don't need to tell you what the effort looks like. You can imagine it. At the end of every day, five days a week, over an eight-week period, pick something you know and write a good clear sentence expressing it. The next morning, sit down to compose a paragraph in 18 or 27 minutes. Then take a two- or three-minute break and get on with your day. Don't think too much more about it. Just do it and then do all the other things you have to do that day. Experience yourself writing. Experience yourself getting better. In an important sense, "good writing" just is that experience.