

## Guidelines for Academic Writing

Common failings in poor academic writing include: (1) Amassing data and organizing it in categories--giving the appearance of a good paper. A *large* number of *long* block quotes strung together through the document is one symptom that the writer has not begun with a problem or question to investigate. The written product typically does not stimulate thought or lead the reader to consider a developing argument or emerging thought. (2) Presenting data in some chronological sequence without careful thought to purpose or direction. In some cases, presentation of information in chronological order is a sign that the writer hasn't thought carefully enough about the information to discern themes or issues that require engagement. (3) Presenting a summary when asked to give a review or analysis.

In good academic writing the process of writing itself is an act of academic discovery. One begins a writing project not by gathering as many notes as reasonable about a topic, and then organizing the notes into preliminary patterns with a view to entering into a conversation with an idea that is as yet unresolved. This phase is similar to picking up and examining the pieces of a puzzle before putting them into place. Skilled writers seldom begin with a fully formed thesis statement followed by a complete outline (which then requires data from the library to fill in the blanks). Good academic writers often *discover* the thesis after writing one or more drafts, playing with sample titles, conversing with colleagues, consulting research sources, and making rough notes about aspects of the puzzle. Genuine inquiry leads to good academic writing. The writer is a patient and skilled detective--who for every good lead, follows and discards many more unproductive leads.

John Bean offers six steps in the process of good academic writing (1996. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 30-31):

1. The writer 'feels' a question, observes a piece of unexplained data, suspects that a perspective is mistaken or incomplete, or articulates a problem.
2. The writer begins to gather data, writes notes and ideas on notecards or napkins or on the backs of envelopes. A tentative title or part of an outline may suggest a direction.
3. The writer takes periodic breaks from the writing task to allow ideas to incubate.
4. The first draft allows the writer to get ideas down on paper--often without coherence.
5. As this preliminary draft forms (or once it is completed), the initial problem may be refocused, new discoveries may be made, the project may be expanded, errors in thinking may be revealed. At this stage, the writer often begins to redirect his or her writing more precisely to an audience.
6. Editing often results in several more draft copies. Sentences are polished, more appropriate words are chosen, organization and structure is revised. During the editing process (which is, in reality, an ongoing process), new meanings may be discovered which may require rewriting parts of the document.

In general, the most productive time for teachers in relation to the development of good academic writing, is spent in conferences before the writing task, or as the writing task is ongoing (e.g., proposal and dissertation writing) than in writing comments on finished papers.

### Learning Task

One person in the group articulates a question or problem or puzzle that has been stimulated through interaction with colleagues and subject matter in the seminar. Discuss the matter in a way that 'sets up' a writing task. Once the matter is appropriately clarified and several ideas have been explored, develop a tentative strategy for the writing process. At a subsequent meeting, each member of the group will propose, in writing, several possible titles, write out part of an outline, or write the first 1-2 paragraphs of the first draft. Share these in the group and discuss how each sample could potentially affect the written project.