graduate-level writing

Professors often talk to students about "writing at the graduate level" without detailing their exact expectations. Without clear guidelines, some students find it difficult to improve their writing. This handout will help you identify the expectations of graduate-level writing.

What is Graduate-level Writing?

Undergraduate-level Writing

Undergraduate writing revolves around assignments. Often, you write to prove you did your homework. For example, you may be asked to respond to a class reading. These assignments are designed to measure specific skills, such as your ability to find and incorporate sources.

While some undergraduate writing may have relevance outside of the classroom (e.g., an opinion piece for a local newspaper), most undergraduate writing lives and dies in the classroom.

Graduate-level Writing

The difference between undergraduate and graduate-level writing is the difference between student and scholar. While assignments may still serve as the impetus for writing, the ideas and arguments you write about should strive for wider relevance. As a graduate-level writer, you engage other scholars as peers, building on and challenging their ideas in order to advance the frontier of knowledge.

Far from being a simple assessment of ability, graduate-level writing extends beyond the classroom and seeks to impact the broader world.

Graduate-level Content

A Contribution to the Conversation

Graduate-level writing is about conversation. When you write at the graduate level, you contribute to the conversation about a specific issue. In other words, you add to the body of knowledge.

To contribute, you must first learn what has already been said about a given topic. This usually takes the form of a literature review. As you review, take note of important figures, theories, and controversies. Most importantly, note what is still unknown—what has not been said.

Next, add to the conversation by addressing an unknown aspect of the issue. By focusing on filling a gap or hole in the conversation, you will help advance the frontier of knowledge.

Finally, leave the conversation open. Like all scholarly work, your writing and research will have limitations,

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so suggest ways that other scholars can build on or challenge your contributions.

A Well Supported Argument

Graduate-level writing depends on arguments, and arguments require evidence. While the specific requirements for evidence vary from discipline to discipline and even from project to project (i.e., certain arguments may only require textual evidence from a specific document instead of results from a randomized controlled trial), your writing will usually need support from something other than personal experience.

Read within your field to determine what counts as evidence for your intended audience.

Evaluating and Synthesizing Sources

As a scholar, you will need to evaluate the work of others. This means not only evaluating what was said, but how, when, where, and why it was said. Do not take the sources you find at face value. Just because it is in print, doesn't mean it is beyond critique.

Synthesizing sources means more than summarizing them. When you synthesize sources, you incorporate them into the body of **your** argument. Instead of reading sources for quotes to insert into your material, approach sources as a whole and engage with their ideas and evidence. In some disciplines, direct quotes from sources are discouraged, except in cases where the language of the source is particularly relevant.

Note: For more information on evaluating and synthesisizing sources, please see our "Analyzing Information," "Synthesizing Information," and "Incorporating Sources" handouts.

Graduate-level Style

Style and Style Guides

Specific style requirements vary from discipline to discipline, so be sure to familiarize yourself with your discipline's style guide (e.g., APA or MLA). Style guides standardize the use of language within disciplines to help scholars focus on content.

Some disciplines have very specific recommendations of usage. For example, some fields prefer person-first language, emphasizing that disability, hardship, or trauma are only an aspect of a person.

Non-person-first Language:	rape victim	the homeless
Person-first Language:	rape survivor	individuals experiencing homelessness

While a distinct style and voice are not only appropriate but essential for some disciplines, for others they are inappropriate and unprofessional. In general, your style should not call attention to itself.

Choose an Appropriate Level of Diction

Diction describes your tone and word choice. Scholarly writing is formal writing, so avoid using casual words and phrases. Informal writing may signal to scholarly readers that you are not serious about the topic.

However, do not simply use "big words" in order to sound smart. Beginning writers often turn to a thesaurus in order to find "smarter" synonyms for their writing. A thesaurus is a place to remember words, not learn them. Many words in the thesaurus have special, nuanced meanings and are not exact synonyms.

Example (Casual): Participants showed up for four sessions, watched a movie, and answered some questions.

Example (Formal): Participants attended four one-hour sessions, during which they viewed a 30-minute video and then completed a survey of open-ended questions.

Example (Overdone): Participants graced four one-hour hearings, concurrently they witnessed a 30-minute motion picture and then consummated an inquiry of open-ended queries.

Point of View

Certain **first person** constructions (i.e., "I" and "we"), such as "I think" and "I believe," not only sound uncertain but are also usually redundant. If you are the author, a statement is typically something you think or believe. While you occasionally may need to qualify a statement as a personal belief, your writing will be more direct and powerful if you do not.

Qualified Statement: **<u>I think that</u>** mass incarceration is symptomatic of larger systemic issues.

Unqualified Statement: Mass incarceration is symptomatic of larger systemic issues.

However, writers often use first person constructions when discussing research procedures.

First person: **<u>We</u>** measured negative affect using the Negative Affect Inventory (NAI).

If you choose to incorporate life experience to support an argument, do so in a scholarly way, using a formal tone and keeping it relevant.

Incorrect: One time I was downtown and saw a bunch of guys gang up on this one black guy.

Correct: Having witnessed violence against African American males firsthand, I can attest to its implications.

Second person constructions (i.e., "you") are rare in academic writing. Instead, most writers use the **third person** (i.e., "he," "she," "it," "they," etc.).

Second Person: If **<u>you</u>** are experiencing homelessness, **<u>you</u>** often have no income and no mode of transportation.

Third Person: **<u>Those</u>** experiencing homelessness often have no income and no mode of transportation.

Figures of Speech

Graduate-level writing tends to avoid figurative language like metaphors and similes (although some metaphors are woven so tightly into the fabric of English that it hard to avoid them). Other devices like rhymes, puns, and heavy alliteration are also typically avoided.

Clichés are phrases that were once sharp and interesting but that have become dull and boring through overuse. Avoid clichés in your graduate-level writing since they detract from, rather than add to, your content.

Clichés: **<u>Out of the blue,</u>** these students had to **<u>fight fire with fire</u>** and **<u>dig deep</u>** to overcome discrimination in the classroom.

Rhetorical questions are used sparingly in academic writing. While they serve as effective signposts in casual writing or in oral presentations, rhetorical questions can appear patronizing to scholarly audiences. Instead of asking the question, you can usually frame the information as a statement.

Rhetorical Question: **<u>What do these results say about the population?</u>** Some scholars would argue that....

Presented as a Statement: **<u>These results indicate several things about the population</u>**. Some scholars note...

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