How to Write

Some advice for university students

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> "We cannot think if we have no time to read, nor feel if we are emotionally exhausted, nor out of cheap material create what is permanent. We cannot co-ordinate what is not there."
>
> *Cyril Connolly*

A scholar should write every day if possible, five days a week. In the evening, the scholar articulates one thing he or she knows in a simple, declarative sentence. In the morning (usually as the first order of business) the scholar writes a paragraph in support of that truth. The paragraph should be at least six sentences long and no more than 200 words. The session includes writing, reading out loud, and some editing. When it is over, the scholar takes a break and moves on to the next order of business.

By observing this discipline, the scholar's mind is formed in a particular way. A unit of knowing is shaped. The scholar is training an ability to produce prose of a particular kind, namely, scholarly prose. Scholars who are already good writers, are keeping themselves in shape, maintaining

also the ability to focus dependably. They are learning how to concentrate long enough to form a thought in prose and this discipline coordinates a "there" for the work of knowing.

To develop it, I recommend you focus on the composition of paragraphs. The challenge is to compose at least one paragraph a week, and preferably around five. Each paragraph should be written in under half an hour—in fact, I encourage you to spend exactly 13, 18 or 27 minutes on each paragraph. The idea is to try to get yourself "into shape" to produce what is really the working unit of scholarly composition. If you take it seriously, you will improve your ability to express the things you know in way that other knowledgeable people will appreciate.

What is scholarly writing?

Your exam guidelines will often stipulate that you should present "clear and coherent" arguments and "follow academic conventions" in your written work. They are asking you to engage in what is called "scholarly" (or sometimes "academic") writing, which is something other than literary, journalistic, technical, professional or personal writing. Writing a good scholarly paper poses a number of specific challenges but also offers many intellectual rewards. To be able to express yourself clearly, coherently and conventionally, will make it much easier for you to communicate your knowledge to others. In fact, it will make it much easier for you to know things.

The most important thing to keep in mind about scholarly writing is that it is intended to communicate what you know to other knowledgeable people. It does not just express your opinions or emotions (though these do have a place in scholarly writing) but presents what philosophers call "justified, true beliefs". And it doesn't present that knowledge to just anyone, but to people that are

specifically equipped to understand your subject, i.e., people who have an understanding of the theories that frame your knowledge and the methods that generate it. Scholarly writing is the art of writing down what you know in a way that lets other scholars (your teachers and your fellow students) discuss it with you.

To know something, after all, is not just (but certainly also) to form a justified, true belief about it. Knowing is also the ability to hold your own in a conversation with other knowledgeable people. Try to keep that in mind when choosing what to write about and how to write it. Ask yourself whether this is something that you and your fellow students are particularly qualified to talk about. The purpose of a university education, after all, is, at least in part, to give you special qualifications to discuss particular subjects. You are becoming an expert.

But in scholarship, "knowing" something is very definitely also the ability to write about it. We all know people people who hold a great many "justified, true beliefs" and who are both willing and able to discuss them with you at length. In an ordinary sense, we might say they are "knowledgeable". But we can also ask whether they really "know what they are talking about". At university, the proof of the pudding is the writing you are able to do. Writing opens the claims you are making to serious, critical engagement with your peers. So it's only if you are able to write something down in a way that actually supports what you are saying that you can be considered knowledgeable here.

What is a paragraph?

The bulk of a scholarly presentation is made up of paragraphs. A paragraph is a statement of something you know along with your basis for knowing it. We can say that it expresses a true belief along with its

justification, i.e., the reason you have for thinking it is true, which is also the reason you are giving your reader to believe you. In this sense, the paragraph is the unit of scholarly composition. To write competent scholarly prose it is not enough to write grammatically correct sentences, nor even true ones. You have to be able to compose yourself into paragraphs, into statements of what you know that also invoke your reasons for knowing. That's the function of a conventional paragraph. A good scholarly writer is someone who is able to organize their knowledge into paragraph-sized claims and to arrange those claims in a logical and coherent manner so that they add up to a larger point.

Simplifying somewhat, a paragraph is a group of at least six sentences and at most two-hundred words that makes a single, well-defined claim and supports or elaborates it. The claim will be made in what we call the "key sentence". This will normally be a relatively simple, declarative sentence that poses a particular difficulty: the reader may find it difficult to believe, or to understand, or to agree with. The rest of the paragraph, then, helps the reader overcome this difficulty. If the key sentence is hard to believe, the paragraph will provide evidence in support of its truth. If the key sentence is hard to understand, the paragraph will unpack the meaning of the terms used and the relationship between them. If the key the sentence is hard to accept, the paragraph will engage with the objections the reader presumably has. In all cases, you will note, knowing *how* to write the paragraph means knowing *who* you are writing for.

The key sentence does not have to be the first sentence of the paragraph. It can be placed anywhere in the paragraph, depending on what works best to accomplish the overall effect you are looking for. Sometimes you want to announce at the beginning what you want to say and then gradually bolster that claim with evidence. Sometimes you want to set up a series of premises and save your conclusion for the end. Other stylistic effects can be achieved by making it the second sentence or the second-to-last sentence, or by putting it right in the middle of the paragraph. At first, you may find

it easiest just to put it at the beginning of each paragraph, but as you develop you do well to give it some thought while you're writing. Experiment a little.

The Writing Moment

Like any other skill, your writing will only really improve if you practice. No amount of instruction will help you to write better if you don't put it to use in your own writing. This is also a way of saying that writing well takes discipline. You have to make writing a regular part of your life as a student, just as you would make playing your instrument or going for a run part of your routine if you wanted to become a better musician or get into better shape. Indeed, it can be useful to think of your prose as a kind of muscle. It is by regular practice that you give strength and precision to your rhetorical "moves". That's what we mean by "style".

Much of the writing you do will occur over periods of weeks or months while you're trying to complete your assignments. But try not to think of your writing as the mysterious "product" of a long process of equally mysterious "research". Rather, think of the process as something that can be analyzed into discrete moments, each of which you can make happen more or less at will. With your writing, this is in fact quite easy to imagine. Remember that the unit of scholarly composition is the paragraph, which is a well-defined block of prose of a least six sentences and at most 200 words. Give yourself an equally well-defined moment in which to write such a paragraph. Decide in advance (preferably the day before) what you want to say, i.e., what your "key sentence" is. Then, at an appointed hour, sit yourself down for 13, 18 or 27 minutes and write exactly and only that paragraph.

Work on it until you run out of time, not until you think you're finished. Then stop and take a two or three minute break. Then go on with your day, which could be another paragraph if you want.

After repeating this exercise for a few weeks, writing one or two paragraphs a day, always knowing the day before what you will say, you will find that you have a good sense of what you can accomplish in prose, given a clear task, and a particular amount of time. You can decide to increase or decrease the amount of time you give yourself as you see fit, but if you find you need more than 27 minutes I recommend training yourself to work faster, not simply giving yourself more time.

At this point it is natural to ask how you will know whether you're "doing it right", whether you're improving. Well, your fellow students and your teachers can tell your whether the writing you produce under these conditions is easy to understand. (Below, I offer some suggestions about how to give feedback.) Their opinion isn't the absolute truth of the matter, but their reaction to your writing is a good source of information about how you're doing. Ask someone to read a paragraph you've written out loud for you. If they can do this easily, and if you like the sound of it, then you're probably beginning to write well. Wherever they stumble, or you feel uncomfortable listening to it, you've probably got something learn.

Notice that you can also do that yourself. Read your paragraph out loud after you've written it. (Do this within your writing session, not afterwards. I.e., use some of your 13, 18 or 27 minutes to do it.) There's a simple question you ask your yourself: does reading your text out loud give you pleasure? In fact, even the minutes you spend writing should become increasingly pleasurable as you develop as a writer. Competence in any skill is, in part, the ability to enjoy the work; you will begin to take pleasure in solving problems of expression. You can compare this, again, to getting into to shape or learning a musical instrument. Whether you're "improving" is, on the whole, pretty obvious. Running five kilometers or playing Bach's thirteenth sinfonia simply comes to feel better over time. It's all about

not pushing yourself too hard each time you make an attempt, or going on too long after it stops being enjoyable. You'll get the hang of it.

What you are learning to do, more generally, is to give yourself a focused moment in which to write. If you develop this ability, you'll not only become a better, more confident writer. You'll also develop a comfortable relationship to your writing process, which you'll come to see as a reliable producer of the prose you need for your assignments when you need it.

Some Varieties of Paragraph

Scholarly writing is not just a way of composing paragraphs but a way of putting them together. There are many different kinds of papers and it is important for you to try to understand exactly what sort of paper any particular assignment you are given is asking you to write. As a point of departure, however, it can be useful to understand the structure of a what I like to call the “standard” scholarly presentation in the social sciences. It inclues a great deal of the variety of different kinds of paragraph that you might write. A standard paper will normally consist of (1) an introduction, (2) a background section, (3) a theory section, (4) a methods section, (5) an analysis, (6) a discussion, and (7) a conclusion. Fields (and teachers) differ, so you may be asked to do something slightly different, and an individual assignment might well not ask you to do all of these things at once. But it will almost certainly be useful to know how to write the paragraphs that go into each of these particular sections. Let's go through each of them in turn.

1. In the introduction, you might devote a paragraph to the world in which we live, another to the science that studies it (this is your academic discipline), and a third to your paper itself. To write

this kind of introduction, you'll need to learn how to write a paragraph that clearly and crisply introduces the real-world practice that your paper is about, framing it in an interesting but not very controversial way. This is where you and your reader meet; it establishes common ground. You and your reader, however, also share an understanding of the current consensus or state of controversy in your field, so write another paragraph that tells the reader where you would like to start the scholarly conversation. This will require your draw on your understanding of "the literature", i.e., what other people have written about your subject. Finally, write a paragraph that says, essentially, "This paper shows that ...", and support this claim with a quick summary of your methods, your analysis, and your discussion. Remember that each of these three paragraphs should use no more than 200 words, and you should be able summarize each of them in a single key sentence.

2. The background section is intended to inform the reader. It provides information about the company, industry, country or region that you are interested in that might not be familiar to reader. After all, you share, say, your theory of institutions with your reader but not, perhaps, an understanding of recent Danish fiscal reforms. These paragraphs will be based on credible sources, not your own data; that's one way to tell them from your analysis.

3. A theory is basically a set of expectations about what your analysis will show. You are constructing an object that is expected to behave in a certain way. If you are doing quantitative research, this will often mean that your theory tells us how you arrived at "the null" (i.e., what we think will happen if the effect we're looking for doesn't exist). In qualitative research, the theory will tell us how we expect people to behave under the circumstances described in the background. Another way to think of this section is as an attempt to structure the reader's curiosity about your study. What questions does it raise? What sorts of answers are you in a position to answer?

4. The goal of a methods section is to get your reader to trust your data. You are explaining what you did in such a way that that your analysis will become credible, i.e., believable. Be honest, of course, but remember that you are trying to persuade the reader that you are competent inquirer. Tell the reader how many interviews you did, and how carefully you selected the people you interviewed. Tell the reader the reasoning behind the questions you asked in your interviews or survey. Tell the reader how you selected the field site or the archive of documents your studied. Throughout, remember that what you say and how you say should make your data more credible, and you, more trustworthy.

5. This trust becomes important because **your analysis** will often challenge the expectations you've set up in the theory section. The reader, remember, thinks the theory is largely correct as a point of departure, so you have make a strong case to change their mind—showing that people (or firms or markets or whatever you are studying) don't behave exactly the way our theory would have them behave. You are selecting aspects of analysis that push against your theory in interesting ways. There should be a kind of "tension" between your theory section and your analysis. You are not just pouring your empirical material into a theoretical frame. You challenging your reader's way of seeing the world.

6. It's this confrontation of the theory and the analysis that **the discussion** then has to work through. One option is to recommend changes to the theory that will capture the actual, observed behavior of your particular object; another, however, is to recommend changes to practice that will bring the behavior of the people you have studied into closer alignment with the theory. While some fields favor theoretical over practical implications, and others vice versa, both strategies are normally legitimate in most social sciences. The discussion section doesn't really introduce any new information, but draws consequences that your reader will, hopefully, find to be logical, or at least reasonable. There are often infinitely many consequences that could be drawn from any study, so you will be selecting the

ones you think are most interesting and you will try to make them as compelling to the reader as they are to you.

7. One kind of **conclusion** will restate what you said in the introduction, keeping in mind that your reader has just read your entire paper. Here you have an opportunity to write a strong, simple statement of your empirical conclusions that presupposes your best arguments and a very well-disposed reader. After all, your reader has just read everything you wanted to tell them so you can now treat them as an intellectual equal. Let the reader know where they stand now, invite them squarely into your way of seeing things. This also means that should be able to describe what sort of world we live in, or what sort of science we should be doing, if you are right in your conclusions. Remember that this might well imply a shift of perspective—sometimes quite subtle and sometimes very dramatic—from the way you presented the world and your science in your introduction. These “before and after” images are worth thinking seriously about and learning how to write well.

Citing Your Sources

Academic writing is governed by a lot of conventions. Please don't approach them as arbitrary rules that are designed to make your life difficult. Rather, see them as resources that allow you to address your reader in a way they will easily recognize and make sense of.

This goes for both the concepts you use and the authors you cite. The concepts will often have technical names but they have entirely conventional, recognized meanings in your field. Don't use them "just because you have to”; use them because they are the best and most efficient way to express your knowledge to your peers.

By a similar token, you should cite authors that are recognized by your peers. Remember that your peers include your fellow students, your teachers and the people who write the texts you read. And cite them according to the conventions of your field. In your case, this means using the author-date system.

Here's an example of how it looks in the text:

> There is good evidence to suggest that people believe that "unearnable" outcomes are possible through effort, i.e., that they can in fact be earned, even where there's no connection between the effort and outcome. This has been called the "lucky loyalty" effect (Reczek, Haws, & Summers, 2014).

And here's how it looks in the reference list:

Reczek, R. W., Haws, K. L., & Summers, C. A. (2014). Lucky Loyalty: The Effect of Consumer Effort on Predictions of Randomly Determined Marketing Outcomes. *Journal of Consumer Research* (4), 1065-1077.

That's an APA-style reference, which is a very common convention. Your teachers may ask you to use a different system, with slight differences in order and punctuation. Make an effort to learn these conventions. They are as important as learning how to spell the names of the key concepts and key authors in your field. They show that you know what you are doing.

Giving Feedback

The first rule of feedback is not to overthink it or demand too much of it. Always remember that you are giving feedback on a text that has taken a finite amount of time to write; and always keep in mind that you will spend a finite amount of time reading and critiquing it. Decide in advance how much time you're going to spend.

Remember what I said earlier: A paragraph consists of at least six-sentences and at most two-hundred words that say one thing and supports it. It is intended as a one-minute reading experience. Treat each paragraph of the text you're giving feedback on that way. Spend exactly one minute reading it and see what you get out of it. In a sense, your feedback is just telling the writer how well that minute of reading went. Now, very quickly make a judgment about what you think the key sentence is. What is the one thing that this paragraph is trying to convince you is true or explain to you so you understand it? Tell the writer what you think the key sentence is. The writer wants this to be obvious; they want you to "get the point" even if you don't agree with their argument. So by telling them what you think their point is, you're giving them an important piece of information about how effective their writing is.

As time permits, and occasion demands, your feedback can get more detailed. I recommend that you read at least some of the paragraphs out loud. You can then tell the writer whether that was easy or hard to do. Did you stumble over the words? Did you find the sentences easy to parse? Was it easy to know where to put the emphasis as you read? Was it a pleasure or a chore to form the words? Does the paragraph sound good? In general, what do you think of the style and the grammar of the paragraph? What was the best sentence? What was the worst sentence? (Notice that this implies neither that the

best was good nor that the worst was bad. If there are eight sentences, one of them will be the best one, and another will be the worst.)

Next, look closely at some of the most important paragraphs in the text you've been asked to give feedback on. Does the rest of the paragraph seem well-organized to support or elaborate the claim in the key sentence? Do you feel that the paragraph is carrying the weight of the claim? Do you feel like you're learning more about it as you read? Are there leaps of logic or irrelevant facts?

As you are reflecting on these things, write them down as a set of notes to the writer. Be kind and charitable. After all, you know exactly how it feels to make one of these things. You, too, have spent exactly thirteen, eighteen or twenty-seven minutes saying something in prose. You know what went into it, and you know that this isn't the full expression of the writer's competence. It's just what the writer is capable of in a focused moment of writing. Also, remember that whatever you tell them will not be interpreted as a judgment on their knowledge or intelligence, or even their general ability as a writer. You are merely giving them some input that will go into their subsequent attempts to write new paragraphs (or perhaps to rewrite this one a few times). You're suggesting things to do during their upcoming practice sessions. You're in no position to tell them, finally, how "good" they are.

Plagiarism

Scholarly writing is part of a conversation with another knowledgeable people. It is therefore very important to acknowledge the contributions that others have made before you. Doing this properly shows that you understand your place in what is being talked about. This means using quotation marks

when you say something exactly the way someone else has said it before, and citing your sources for facts and ideas you use in your writing.

If you write in well-defined "writing moments" you will feel the difference between "original" writing and plagiarism very precisely. If you are cutting-and-pasting something into your text, always put quotation marks around the material, or block indent it. Do not try to construct a paraphrase by changing a few words. If you are not quoting, type the whole sentence from scratch in an attempt to represent what is on your mind.

Plagiarism is cheating when you are trying to conceal your weaknesses as scholar or a writer. By using other people's words and ideas instead of your own, you are trying to appear more knowledgeable or more eloquent than you really are. You are misleading your reader about your competence. If you make a habit of it, you begin to mislead yourself as well. I recommend you spend your writing moments actually experiencing how well you write. Show yourself what you are capable of. And then try to improve.

What to Write About

I am suggesting that you make writing a part of regular routine, not just an activity you engage in when you have an assignment due. This experience—that of writing for yourself, not for someone else—is important part of your formation as a scholar. But it poses the problem of choosing something to write about.

If you want to improve your writing it is important to choose to write about something you already know quite well. If you try to write about something you are struggling to understand, you will

not be able to concentrate your attention on the particular problem of writing. When you make your decision about what tomorrow, therefore, don't write about something you just learned this week. Write about something you understood already before the weekend. Given only five minutes, it should be possible for you to come up with a sentence you know is true, and why it is true—that is, a sentence that expresses a "justified, true belief".

Also, make sure that you know what sources you'll need to properly reference your reasons to believe it is true. You'll probably not need more than two or three for a given paragraph. Part of the decision to write should be to get your notes ready for tomorrow. (Though I don't recommend this approach, you might make do with just putting the sources, properly bookmarked, next to your computer for tomorrow.) Finally, it can be a good a idea to choose something that interests you to write about. As much as possible, try to make the challenge of writing an enjoyable one, not just a chore. Pick something to write about that you will look forward to composing a paragraph about tomorrow. Be curious about how well you'll do tomorrow.