

Helpful Hints from an English Teacher

by April Whitman

We have been talking a lot about the technical aspects of writing an effective argument—the rhetorical triangle, Toulmin outlines, essay outlines etc. I'd like to shift gears for a while and talk about some of the “nuts and bolts” of writing an effective argument paper. These topics include using research effectively, avoiding plagiarism, and miscellaneous hints for academic writing. Much of this is information that many teachers just assume students know, but often students are left guessing what makes a “good” paper. So here are my hints to help you write better papers.

Using Research Effectively

- Helpful Hint #1: Use the library's online databases.

Most students are fairly adept at finding sources for their papers if they can find enough time to devote to research. Likewise, most students know that good sources are ones that come from respected journals, magazines, newspapers, and websites. Although I highly recommend physically going to the library at least once a semester (if for nothing more than to wander around in the stacks and the architecture alone will inspire you), you can probably find most of what you need by visiting the library's website and accessing their databases.

To do this go to www.libraries.ou.edu and click on LORA located in the top navigation bar. From here you can search by database or by subject. I recommend clicking on Databases and searching general databases like Academic Search Elite, Article1st, FirstSearch, and WorldCat. Many of the articles you find will be full text articles. If this is the case, you can immediately use them as needed. If you are given only a citation or an abstract (summary), you will have to go find the source yourself in order to use it. It is never appropriate to quote from an abstract.

- Helpful Hint #2: Know why you cite sources in a Works Cited page.

Academic writing is written for others in the field to read, digest, and respond to, thus creating a sort of conversation that takes place across time and venue (in academic journals usually). In order for someone to respond to your work, he or she has to be able to evaluate your points and how you support them. This means that your readers must be able to FIND YOUR SOURCES. Therefore, the idea is to give your readers enough information about your sources in your Works Cited page so that they can go find the sources themselves.

Sometimes citations can get tricky when you are using sources you found online. If you found your source in a database, give the name of the database. Give both the date the work was published and the date you accessed it online. Give a typable and specific web address so that the reader will be able to type in the address and be taken directly to the source.

Sometimes when you are searching in a database, the address that appears in the address window is a very long random string of characters. This is not typable and not helpful for your readers. Do not use these search addresses.

Follow MLA guidelines as closely as you can, but I am most concerned that you are consistent in how you cite your sources. If you are consistent from entry to entry, then the readers will learn where to find certain information in your citations.

Finally, don't forget to alphabetize your entries on your Works Cited page.

- Helpful Hint #3: Use sources effectively in your papers—The Hamburger Paragraph Method

Do not expect your reader to do all the work in making important connections in your paper. You must explain to your reader the significance of any quote you use and how it supports your point. To do this, use the Hamburger Paragraph Method: your own thoughts are the buns and fixins in a paragraph; your sources are the meat.

Begin most body paragraphs with your own ideas, your own point to make that advances your argument. This should take at least two sentences. Then introduce your quote. You can use an attributive tag like, "Whitman argues eloquently in her essay" Once you have introduced your quote, give the quote and the proper parenthetical citation, which is usually the author's last name and the page number and looks like this (Whitman 25). Then, and this is important, comment on the quote. Explain how it supports your argument. Tell why it is significant (it must be if you are quoting, right?). This should take at least two sentences. See how this works? You sandwich the quote with your own ideas.

Never use a quote without commenting on it! Inevitably the reader will misunderstand why you are using the quote. And by the way, you can use more than one quote in a paragraph, but the same rules apply to each quote.

Avoiding Plagiarism

- Helpful Hint #4: Know how to paraphrase correctly

Read the source so that you understand it. Put it down. Wait a while. Write what you learned in your own words without looking at the text. This is probably the best way to paraphrase correctly. It is a tough skill to learn because it isn't enough that you change a few words here and there. Even the sentence structure of your paraphrase has to be different from the original! Again, the best way to accomplish this is to make sure you understand the source and then put it into your own words without looking at the source.

Remember also that paraphrases need parenthetical citations just like direct quotes.

- Helpful Hint #5: When in doubt use a direct quotation with quotation marks and a parenthetical citation.

Paraphrasing can sometimes be difficult and take too much brain power to do correctly (especially if you are working under the gun, late at night, hopped up on too much caffeine). If

you aren't sure how to paraphrase something correctly, it might be easiest to just use a direct quotation and a parenthetical citation.

- Helpful Hint #6: Take responsibility for learning how not to plagiarize.

Visit websites on how to avoid plagiarism. Learn the university's policies on plagiarism and academic misconduct. Practice using sources and cite, cite, cite!

- Helpful Hint #7: Don't intentionally plagiarize.

It may be tempting (especially if you are working under the gun, late at night, hopped up on too much caffeine), and it is certainly easy copy and paste these days. Each of you, however, has your own writing style, and it is easy for instructors to detect when this writing style changes and someone else's words are inserted into the essay.

Miscellaneous Hints

- Helpful Hint #8: Don't use second person "you."

You have probably been taught at some point that you should never use first person "I" in academic writing, and for the most part, this is usually true. Sometimes, however, you want to use personal experiences or simply state your own opinion, and in these cases using "I" is much more acceptable than the awkward "one" that some student use. I'm sure you've all seen sentences like this, "In this combative political climate, one believes that the mudslinging has gone much too far." Doesn't this sound stilted? Using "I" would sound much more natural.

But what about second person "you"? This is the only writing rule where I get close to using the word "never." I recognize that there are some exceptions (such as when writing direct instructions) but for the most part, you should never use second person "you" in your essays. And you have to be vigilant! It will sneak in there when you least expect it.

So why not use second person "you"? Part of the reason is just tradition; most academic writing has traditionally been written in strictly third person. But part of it is because it is sometimes awkward to directly address your audience. They don't always like being dragged into the essay. They are reading along, minding their own business as a sort of objective observer when all the sudden the writer addresses them directly and it catches them off guard. It disrupts their role as an objective observer of your ideas.

So remember it like this:

First person "I"—sometimes

Second person "you"—never

Third person—always

- Helpful Hint #9: Never underestimate the power of a clever title.

How boring is this title, “Microtheme 2”? Take a few extra minutes to come up with a clever title and it will go a long ways in enhancing your ethos. I once was told by an English professor when I was an undergraduate that the best and most esoteric academic essay titles include the requisite colon and a meaningful quote, such as “‘A small part of the battle:’ An Examination of a Series of Firsts for Black Entertainers.” (The quote is from Cose in your text *Writing Arguments*.)

- Helpful Hint #10: Work hard on your conclusion.

Don’t neglect your conclusions. I understand that when you sense your essay is wrapping up it is easy to make your final point and then just click “save” (especially if you are working under the gun, late at night, hopped up on too much caffeine). But taking a few more minutes to craft a conclusion can sometimes make all the difference in your paper. An abrupt ending to your essay leaves your readers (and your instructors) wondering if a page got lost somewhere or if you suddenly ran out of ideas (which I admit happens to the best of us). A well designed conclusion signals to the reader that you view your essay as a complete package and that you have given thought to both ends.

So what do you do in a conclusion? You have probably heard the Five Paragraph Essay answer to a conclusion, which is to restate the thesis and close with some general statements. This is satisfactory if you are in a bind, but more sophisticated conclusions do a bit more. Here is a list of some conclusion strategies:

Boring but acceptable:

- Restate your thesis.
- Restate one of your most important points.

Thoughtful and sophisticated:

- Put out a call to action. What should readers do now if they are convinced of your argument?
- Speculate on the future. What will occur if your argument is put into action?
- Explain consequences. What will be lost if your argument is not accepted? What will be gained if it is? What is the seriousness of these consequences?

Traditional Academic Conclusion:

- Call for further research. Your work can never cover it all. What needs to be researched now? This gives the next guy or gal something to do.

- Helpful Hint #11: Use the correct third person pronoun.

What is wrong with this sentence?

“When a student writes a paper they usually put forth their best effort.”

Hint . . . look at the pronouns. The pronouns are plural (“they” and “their”), but the noun they refer to is singular (“a student”). You could correct this by changing the pronouns to singular

ones, but you have to make sure they are not gender biased. In this case, the sentence would read, “When a student writes a paper, he or she usually puts forth his or her best effort.” Technically this sentence is now correct, but with all those pronouns it is a little cumbersome and bulky. A smoother way to revise the original sentence would be to just change the noun “a student” to a plural one so that you may keep the more economic plural pronouns. In this case the sentence would read, “When students write papers, they usually put forth their best effort.”

Note that in informal writing and speaking it is becoming more acceptable to mix a singular noun with the plural (and gender neutral) pronouns. Someday, this practice might make the leap to academic writing, but probably not any time soon. Until then, use singular pronouns with singular nouns and plural pronouns with plural nouns.