Introduction to Graduate School Writing

JOHN LOCKE

SUMMER 2019

Graduate Writing Center
Naval Postgraduate School
the last thing you want to hear
The Ideal Reader Reaction

- I understood your purpose
- I knew how your argument was organized
  - You delivered on that promise
- Your logic convinced me
- I found your evidence sufficient
- Maybe even:
  - I learned something
  - You changed the way I look at the world

Your writing is adorable!
Following My Own Advice...

• What's the point? Looking at the big picture of academic writing
  • What’s different about it?
  • Keeping goals realistic
  • Serving the reader
  • Grad-school expectations
Writing addresses many different needs

Each type has a **unique objective** which dictates:
- rules
- methods
- standards
- styles
- formats
- best practices
What’s the objective of academic writing?

• To share new knowledge
  • Research:
    • Creates new knowledge.
    • Explains how the world works.
  • Published academic writing (journal articles, academic books, conference papers, etc.) provides a formal record of research.
  • *Coursework is generally a learning exercise that models academic conventions.*
• Theses and dissertations form the bridge.
Our fundamental problem . . . is the immensity of existing knowledge.

Knowledge goes to infinity in every direction.
Published knowledge all-time:
130 million books (600,000+ in the U.S. every year).
50 million journal articles published all-time.

Academic inquiry is theoretically unbounded.

- Practical considerations
  - Relevance . . . who cares?
  - Significance . . . does it have value?
  - Who pays the bills?

Even with those allowances, our problem is still immense!
The Virtues of Narrowness

How do mere mortals deal with this immensity?

• Keep the topic narrow.
  • Drive toward the specific, away from the general.

• Use the topic definition as a boundary.
  • Avoid the trap of wandering into fascinating, but irrelevant, blind allies.

• Stay within that space, but be thorough.

• In your reading, observe the narrow focus of academic articles, and even books.
The Reader’s Dilemma

Writing would be *so easy* if there was no reader. —no rules for writing a personal diary.

The *academic reader* knows that the topic can go anywhere, and is specialized enough not to care about most of the destinations.

What about this commonplace object? *Why am I discussing it? What’s the issue?*

- This *specific* shirt?
- Materials
- Manufacturing
- Style
- Marketing
- History of shirts
- History of word “shirt”
Solving the Reader’s Dilemma

• Conclusions come first, proof follows.
  • Define the box . . . immediately!
  • The introduction is the conclusion.
  • The details that follow fit in that narrow space.
  • Especially important for abstract, hard to visualize, ideas.

• But doesn’t that ruin the suspense?
  • Yes! Spoiler alert!
  • Suspense, mystery, and surprise belong to other forms of writing.
  • Doubt frustrates the academic reader.
  • We’re explainers, not entertainers.

• Still, a kind of suspense remains.
  • The introduction is just a claim; the proof is in the body of the paper.
  • If the specialized reader is interested in the topic, they’ll want to know the reasoning behind it.
A Large-Scale Example

• The issue
  • The widespread perception that we live in violent times
• The puzzle
  • Is it true? What is the trend of violence in human history?
  • Why violence has declined
• Features
  • Broad “meaning of life” question
  • Large-scale study
    • 4 years to write
    • 15 major themes
    • 700 pages of text
    • + 42 pages of endnotes
    • + 34-page bibliography

The Better Angels of Our Nature, page 68:

. . . the oddest journal article I have ever read is “Losing Face, Saving Face: Noses and Honour in the Late Medieval Town.”* Here the historian Valentin Groebner documents dozens of accounts from medieval Europe in which one person cut off the nose of another. Sometimes it was an official punishment for heresy, treason, prostitution, or sodomy, but more often it was an act of private vengeance. . . . These mutilations were so common that, according to Groebner, “the authors of late-medieval surgical textbooks also devote particular attention to nasal injuries, discussing whether a nose once cut off can grow back . . .”

Knowledge and Ideas

- Knowledge is not a monolithic entity. It’s in a constant state of growth and destruction. A giant, endless debate about everything.

- Your voice is important. Knowledge benefits when many take part in the conversation.

- Is the military ethic of following orders compatible with how orthodoxy is challenged in academia? How can these worlds be merged?
The Internet

Friend or Foe?

*It’s both, of course!*

**The good:** Massive amounts of data; ease of access.

**The bad:** It *is* an evil swamp of temptation. From a research perspective, it gives the illusion of having everything that matters at one’s fingertips.

Research means more than moving information from one place to another.
Both, of course!

The good

• Comprehensive on major topics
• Usually well-sourced
• A fantastic resource for getting a quick-start on a new topic, or
• Looking up commonplace info

The not-so-good

• Variable quality-control
• No peer review
• Pages can change at any time

Therefore, Wikipedia is generally not approved as a source for academic work.
Organization: The Secret to Clear Writing

Topics covered:
  - What do these ideas look like on the page?
  - How and why of paper organization
  - Practical matters
  - Reliable writing practices

Thursday, July 18, 1300-1400
Dudley Knox Library, Room 151

(workshop given to NS3011: August 12, 13)

Sign up at GWC website:
  https://my.nps.edu/web/gwc
The BLUE button
WCOOnline: pick Workshops Calendar

“\[\text{I used the framing and outlining method, which saved me about 40-50 hours on another final paper (that ended up being 17 pages)!} \]

—NSA student