Tips for Writing in North American Colleges: The Basics

This handout summarizes a variety of writing conventions that may be unfamiliar to you if you are starting your college or university studies in North America. Many of the standards of American and Canadian schools are the same in other countries—but not all of them, even in countries where English is used regularly in education. Depending on the instructor, failing to observe a particular standard may mean a lower grade, or failing a course, or even suspension.

This handout covers:

- Rhetorical strategies (also known as logic or persuasion)
- Writing from research
- Bibliographies and in-text citations
- Plagiarism
- Directness
- Using "I," "we," and "you"
- Tips for using Microsoft Word and other word processing programs

Rhetorical Strategies

The word "rhetorical" has many different shades of meaning, but they all point toward a similar definition—successfully connecting with and persuading audiences. For college and university students, those audiences are usually professors and other course instructors. Some strategies are unique to a subject area, but there are many basic strategies that work in all academic contexts:

Start big and get small

After introducing your subject, make sure that in the first paragraph you summarize everything that you plan to discuss in the rest of your paper. At the beginning of each subsequent paragraph, make sure the first sentence covers everything you plan to discuss in the rest of the paragraph. This will be the topic sentence or the focus of that paragraph.
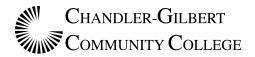
Enrich your vocabulary

A more sophisticated vocabulary can boost the effectiveness of your writing. Use a thesaurus to find synonyms and related words for concepts you already know. After finding a new word, make sure it is a good choice by asking someone or looking up examples of how the word is used in different contexts and whether the word works in

the context that you are writing about. If you are not in a position to do this, type the word into a search engine like Google, and see how others have been using it.

Keep your language neutral

During your studies, it is likely that you will have the opportunity to write about topics that inspire or infuriate you. Regardless of your passion for a topic, academic audiences prefer clear, precise, and neutral descriptions to emotional or moralistic language.

For example: Education is the single most important factor in career success.

This is a statement that an overwhelming majority of people would agree with, but saying that education is the single most important factor tells readers more about your response to education than about education's real role in having a successful career. When academic readers see this, it leads them to believe that you cannot help imposing your attitudes on a subject. A more neutral and persuasive way of writing would be:

Education is one important factor in career success. **Don't be extreme.** Academic readers are often suspicious of superlative claims. These are statements that begin with "the most" or "the least" or end with "–est," and are applied to all situations. You can make it less extreme by narrowing the situations in which the statement is true.

For example, instead of writing: New Horizons is the fastest spacecraft ever built.

It would be more restrained (and accurate) to write,

As of 2007, New Horizons is the fastest spacecraft ever built.

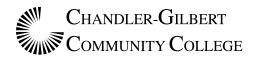You can also quantify the information, rather than using a superlative:

New Horizons is traveling at 16.21 kilometers per second.

Find opportunities to be critical

Often (though not always) instructors are eager for evidence that their students are thinking and writing critically. In this case, being critical does not necessarily mean criticizing, but instead means to question, to interrogate. In other words, don't accept things at face value. Writing critically means to look carefully at a subject, and to ask tough questions about different aspects of it. Bring in different perspectives and talk about how they view the subject. Being critical also means not believing something because of a person's high status; even if a writer you found in your research is very prominent, that does not mean that they are right. Interrogate them just as thoroughly as you would an unknown writer.

Writing from Research

Many (though certainly not all) first-year writing assignments are expressive in nature, writing based on your own memories, impressions, and emotions—what's "in your head," essentially. As you advance to higher-level classes, though, you will need to base more of your writing on researched information, knowledge from "outside your head," so to speak. Writing from research has considerable rhetorical advantages. Academic readers feel more confident about research-based writing: since the information comes from someplace else, there is a strong chance that it was verified before it was published, and if a reader is in doubt, they can find the original source(s) and confirm it themselves. Likewise, readers are more likely to trust and be persuaded by an opinion that is grounded in solid researched information, instead of just what the writer feels. Conversely, writing in higher-level classes that comes from what's "in your head" will not be seen as dependable and is likely to earn a lower grade from an instructor.

When writing an academic paper from research, keep the following essential points in mind:
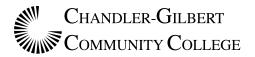
- Instructors value academic sources, preferably that are located through the school's library website, more than any other. Some non-academic information (such as newspapers) might be necessary depending on your topic. In addition to the school's library website you might want to consider using Google Scholar (it works just like Google, but it generates only academic responses).
- The Internet has a wealth of sources, but it is also notorious for having a lot of bad information. Evaluate the quality of sources before using them.
- Don't rely on the Internet for everything. Get at least a few print sources.
- In most cases, what you already know about a topic is right, but you still need to prove that knowledge by finding sources that backup your knowledge. A portion of research isn't about finding new information, but about finding a source to support what you already know.
- Make sure to provide **in-text citations and a full bibliography** (for example, Works Cited or References page) for all the sources you use, regardless of whether you paraphrase them or quote them verbatim.

Bibliographies and In-text Citations

Whenever you write something based on research, you will need to include a bibliography and in-text citations. A bibliography is a comprehensive list of all the sources you have used in writing the paper, alphabetized by each author's last name and organized according to a standardized format. In-text citations are short references within the body of your writing that tell the reader where a particular piece of information comes from:

People who design and play violent video games do not necessarily condone violence in real life (Juul 21).*

In this example, the information is from page 21 of a book written by Juul. After looking at an in-text citation, a reader can go to the bibliography and find the full citation:

Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2005. Print.*

When you are creating in-text citations or a bibliography, keep the following essential points in mind:

- In-text citations and bibliographies are not used only for direct quotations, but must be used for all information taken from another source, even if it has been paraphrased, condensed, or rearranged.
- The information necessary for a complete bibliography entry is not always immediately obvious. If that is the case, look carefully; the information is often in small print somewhere in the text. If it is Internet source, the entry will also need a URL and the date that you downloaded the page. For more information on citing internet sources, visit our MLA and APA citation resources.
- Different courses use different in-text citation and bibliography standards. Make sure to follow the correct format completely. The most common formats are MLA and APA, but there are others. If you are not sure which one is appropriate for a particular class, ask the instructor or look at the books and articles you are reading for the class.
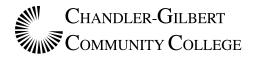
Plagiarism

Put simply, plagiarism is the copying of another person's work and/or ideas without giving that person credit. Plagiarism is considered a serious offense in all North American colleges and universities. Some instructors will not penalize a student for their first offense, but will instead use the occurrence as an opportunity to teach the student about plagiarism. Most instructors, however, will punish any suspected plagiarism, with a loss of points on a project, a failing grade for the course, or even suspension from the college/university.

- Plagiarism can be intentional, but it can also be accidental. Before submitting your work, read it carefully to make sure you have cited every source you have used by providing in-text citations. Also, make sure that you have thoroughly paraphrased material that you have not quoted directly.
- Follow this basic rule: if it isn't your idea, make sure you have a citation.

This handout was taken and adapted from https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/683/1/, https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/683/02/, and https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/683/03/. *Format will vary based upon the discipline.

- Remember that instructors can detect plagiarism easily. Besides following their instinct based on their familiarity with your writing style, instructor can also use plagiarism software that could help them find the source(s) from which the information was taken.

Directness

Academic writing in North America has often been described as "direct." This can mean two things: 1) dealing immediately with the topic at hand without extra information; 2) using clear and precise language to describe even the most uncomfortable and taboo subjects. Direct writing will be seen by professors and other readers as lean and efficient. Follow these strategies to make your writing more direct:

- Create an outline of your text before writing, and compare your early drafts with the outline. If a word or a sentence does not contribute to any of the points in your outline, remove it.
- If you are not used to writing an outline before you start writing, use reverse outlining. There is where you write an outline for your paper after you have already written a draft. Reverse outlining will help you stay focused on your topic.
- When you review your early drafts, look for ways to make your sentences shorter, but without removing any important meanings from them. If you can do this, then make them shorter.
- Look for euphemisms (mild or vague expressions for something that is uncomfortable to talk about). If you find any euphemisms, change them to clearer language.

Using "I," "We," and "You"

Although you may have been told that "I" is never used in academic writing, that is not true. It is okay to use it, but only if the "I" is a vital part of the thing that is being discussed. For example, a student conducted a chemistry experiment and is reporting on the procedure. If the student is writing a paper for a chemistry class, the people reading it are probably not interested in who did it; they are interested only in the chemical phenomenon. She would remove the "I" by writing in the passive voice:
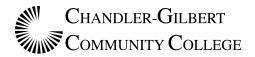
The pH level of the acid was raised by adding water.

However, if her readers were more interested in the writer and her experiences than in the chemical phenomenon, then it would be okay to use "I":

I raised the pH level of the acid by adding water.

The first-person plural pronoun "we" (and "us" and "our") is used even less frequently. The problem lies in the fact that it often is not clear who the pronoun, "we" represents. Take the following example, written by one student working by himself:

We have become accustomed to commercialization in sports.

If this had been written by a group of people working together, then "we" could refer to all the writers together. But this is only one writer, working alone. So who is "we"? Maybe the writer was referring to himself and his readers together—but he cannot know who is reading the paper, and it might be that one of the readers disagrees with him. Since there is no clearly defined group here, it would be best to change it so that it is more accurate:

Many people have become accustomed to commercialization in sports.

"You" is almost entirely non-existent in academic writing, again because it is not clear who will be reading a text, so the writer cannot accurately account for each and every reader.

It seems to be the easiest way to meet people in your own community.

It is common to use "you" this way while speaking, but it since it is so imprecise, academic readers generally do not like it. A common strategy is to replace "you" with "one":
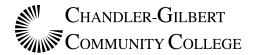
It seems to be the easiest way to meet people in one's own community.

If a writing situation calls for direct instructions on how to do something, rather than describing or arguing for something (as is the case in this handout), it is okay to use "you."

Tips for Using Microsoft Word and Other Word Processing Programs

Standards for formatting your documents may vary, so check with your instructors. These standards, however, are the most common:

- Times New Roman font, 12 point
- double spaced
- make sure the paper size is set to letter size (8 ½ x 11 inches)—NOT A4
- have 1 inch margins on all sides

If you are using an East Asian (Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan) version of Microsoft Word, however, there are additional things you will need to do:

Instead of double spaced, **set your line spacing to Exactly 28 pt**. East Asian versions of Word create more space between lines of text than North American versions, and just setting Word to double space will leave too little text on the page.

Click Format, then Paragraph, then Asian Typography, and make sure there is **NO CHECK** next to the sentence, "**Allow Latin text to wrap in the middle of a word**."

Without doing this, East Asian versions of Word will inappropriately cut English words at the end of a line:

The majority of freshman writing assignments are expressive in nature, writing based on your own memories, impressions, and emotions—what's "in your head," essentially. As you advance to higher-level classes, however . . .

MARICOPA
COMMUNITY COLLEGES