

Yale Department of English



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English 114 Guide
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What You Should Know About Writing

This guide addresses misconceptions about writing and provides strategies for success in English 114 and other courses.



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Writing is a process

Good ideas and good writing take time. Academic writing at the college level is demanding intellectual work because you are not simply reproducing the ideas of others. Instead, the expectation is that you will offer your own insights based on your knowledge and research. This means that you will need to give yourself adequate time to prepare, plan, draft, and revise your work.¹ Do not wait until you have it all figured out to begin writing. Writing is not just about recording your ideas; it is also a process of learning, of figuring out what you want to say and why. Writing is thinking. The earlier you start, the closer you will get to developing an interesting and complex claim by the deadline.



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Writing is collaborative

Asking for help or for someone to review your work is not an admission of failure. Expert writers do this all the time. They talk to their colleagues when their ideas are at the beginning stages and when they have early drafts. Even after submitting their work for publication, they undergo a rigorous review process that often requires changes to the argument.

¹ See Louise De Salvo, “Stages of the Process, Stages of Growth I-III” in *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Stories Transforms our Lives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) 132-150.

You will not always get it right

You have gotten this far in your academic career because you care about doing your best work. But academic excellence does not mean that you will have all the answers or that you will always get everything right. We learn by taking on risks and challenges, and sometimes the choices we make in our writing will not yield the results we might have expected. When you do not get the outcome you hoped for, it is an opportunity to re-evaluate your goals and the strategies you used to accomplish them. The ability to readjust your thinking and strategies will not only help you to improve your performance but being open to revision will also make you better at learning.



Be guided by principles rather than rules

As you identify complex questions and develop nuanced responses to the problems that motivate your writing and research, you will find that some rules that served you well in the past are no longer sufficient to the thinking and writing you will do in college. For example, though the five-paragraph model might have offered a helpful organizing **principle** for your thoughts in high school, the essays in Writing Seminars and other courses at Yale will require you to think more dynamically about the structure of your argument. What you can take away from the five-paragraph essay is the importance of structure to your argument; readers need to understand the logical progression of your ideas. The same is true for other rules about writing such as the idea that your thesis or claim should be stated in a single sentence or that you should not use the first-person pronoun *I* in formal academic writing. Rather than fitting all you need to say into five paragraphs and your claim into a single sentence, you will need to think about what principle of organization will best serve your argument. You will also discover that scholars use the pronoun *I* in their writing, especially when they need to distinguish their own ideas from the rest of the conversation. Rather than relying on hard and fast rules then, think about the **underlying principles** and how you can **adapt them to new situations**.

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Successful writers seek out feedback and offer feedback to others

Giving and receiving feedback is a critical part of the writing process. It helps us to write and think better, and it is part of what makes writing a social practice. We write not only for ourselves; hearing what others have to say will help us better reach broad audiences and learn to anticipate readers' responses to our writing. Sometimes the feedback we receive from others can even help us identify our main points.² When you receive feedback from others, you want to be open to the possibility of change and revision. This does not mean, though, that you must incorporate every change suggested. Writing is about making choices, and so too is this part of the process.

If your paper is being reviewed in a workshop, you might pose a few questions for your readers.³ Ask for feedback that will help you generate new ideas, link different parts of the argument together, or clarify key concepts. Asking specific questions about what seems most urgent about your writing will help you to get what you need out of the process. This way, you are helping to establish your own goals and focus for the conversation about your draft, and you improve the chances of getting feedback that will be most helpful in steering you towards your goals.

When you give feedback to others, be generous, clear, and specific. General statements such as "I like your argument" are not as helpful as identifying what aspects of the writer's argument are convincing to you and why. If you have trouble following the writer's ideas, provide a specific example to help the writer understand what needs to be clarified. You may offer suggestions for improvement, but always bear in mind that it is up to the writer to accept or reject whatever suggestions you offer. You also want to honor the writer's agenda or goals for their project. In other words, it might help to ask, what are your goals for your essay? What were you trying to accomplish here? This way, you can offer feedback that helps the writer meet their individual goals.

² See Nancy Sommers, "Responding to Student Writing," *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 33. 2 (1982): 148-156.

³ This section of the guide that centers the writer's agenda in class workshops is informed by Felicia Rose Chavez, "Teaching Writers to Workshop" in *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom* (Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2021)127-150.

Strategies for the Classroom

Prepare for class discussions; listen and learn from your classmates

In Writing Seminars, instructors encourage students to discuss their ideas because it supports good writing. Class discussions emphasize asking and wrestling with questions rather than demonstrating how much you know. This should reassure you about the expectations for your own participation. Just like your essay assignments will ask you to tackle moments of tension, seminar discussions are fruitful when they engage with intellectual problems. Think of class discussions then, as the space for you to bravely explore new ideas, to work through troublesome concepts, and to raise new questions.

As you prepare for each class, you might consider writing down a couple questions you have about your assigned text: questions about what the text is doing, issues you think the essay or writer is trying to address, and/or moments of puzzlement in your reading. Being prepared ahead of class meetings can help to reduce some pressure on yourself.

Good participation also requires that you **listen actively to others in the room**. Respecting the speakers in the room means that you consider their views seriously, especially if their opinions challenge your own. It also means that you hear out your classmates rather than rush to respond. Frequent participation alone does not make you a good interlocutor. Instead, look for opportunities to supplement each other's ideas, complicate one another's thinking, and deepen your analyses. Try to be aware of who is in the room with you and to make space for everyone to be included in the discussions. This means being aware of how much you speak and trusting that your peers have valuable insights that will expand your thinking.

Know that your ideas matter, even if no one else voices your perspective

Being the only one who holds particular view(s)—especially views informed by your specific life experience or identity—does not discount the validity of your perspectives. The class benefits from a variety of knowledges, skills, and experiences, and you each have something valuable to teach the rest of the class. At the same time, you are not under any obligation to defend a marginalized view or identity especially if it is your own. In Writing Seminars, instructors work hard to incorporate a variety of ideas and approaches into class discussions and to make everyone feel included.



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Meet with your professors

The terms *meeting*, *conference*, or *office hours* all refer to opportunities to meet individually with your professors. In these meetings, your professor will try to learn more about you and your individual needs as writers. Learning is not limited to the classroom. Do not be afraid to ask questions and to meet with your professors. Meeting with professors or taking advantage of writing resources at Yale is not a sign that you do not belong. Quite the contrary, taking advantage of these resources early on will improve your chances of doing your best work.

Please read the section “Academic Support and Community” for resources to support your academic work and well-being.

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