

Writing for University: The Basics

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Transcript of Voicethread "Writing for University: The Basics"

1. Welcome to this Voicethread, titled Writing for University: The Basics. We hope you enjoyed the summer, and are eager to get started in your courses. In many of your courses, you will be asked to use writing tasks to think about your discipline, to read key texts, to display your knowledge, to sharpen your critical thinking abilities, and to deepen your engagement with the course materials. In other words, you will be asked to write in order to learn. This means, then, that you have to learn to write for university. Academic writing is different in some ways from any other kind of writing. To do it well, you will need to develop, practice, and display a range of very specific skills. This Voicethread gives you a quick overview of the kinds of expectations your instructors will want you to meet as you submit written work in their courses. It was created by The Write Place, the writing support centre at King's, which will be offering online text-based or video-based tutoring throughout this year. You can pause the Voicethread and review the contents of a slide at any point. Happy listening!
2. Any group of people with shared beliefs, ideas, and values, and a common way of communicating them, is a discourse community. For instance, all business owners on Dundas Street may form a discourse community, if they frequently meet and discuss their plans, interests, and vision for their street. Elementary school teachers are a discourse community; they communicate in the language of pedagogy in journals related to teaching. Within that group, TESOL teachers who teach non-native speakers of English are a distinct sub-group, and discourse community. The university is a gateway to a discourse community: that of academic professionals. Within the university, however, each discipline and sub-discipline represents more specialized discourse communities
3. Your university professors, experts in their disciplines, live and breathe academics. They read articles for breakfast, consume calls for papers instead of coffee, and sleep on theoretical frameworks instead of beds. They hope to develop in you the skills that they use as they navigate information, apply critical thought, generate ideas, exercise judgement, and find solutions. The skills you will acquire, the theories you will be exposed to, and the value you will attach to critical thought will be transferable to your career and to your life as a citizen. This is why they invite you to join their academic discourse community.
4. To enter the disciplinary conversation, you have to do some homework. Just as you would try to learn unfamiliar social rules if you were travelling or visiting a friend from another culture, so also must you try to master the rules that govern academic discourse. For example, scholars in most subjects will only be taken seriously if they can use a formal academic tone, if they do substantial research, if they acknowledge their sources through citation, and present their work without annoying grammar and spelling errors. Since you are writing academic papers for an exacting audience of professionals, you must gradually learn to use the right terminology for

your discipline, and align your ideas with the ideas of other scholars while saying something new. All this will be rewarded with higher grades.

5. How do you learn the rules of the discourse community? Gradually, through exposure to examples and models. You are asked to do research towards your own projects precisely so that you have opportunities to read widely and deeply in your discipline. Learn to distinguish between texts you can skim through, looking for specific information, and texts and resources that will be solid models of good writing in the discipline. Sit down and make notes on at least one or two such resources every time you do an assignment--unpack it to see how the author has approached their topic, how the abstract has been structured, what has gone into the introduction, and so on.
6. The university paper that earns approval and a high grade reflects the student's understanding of the conventions of academic writing at a professional level, rather than at an apprentice level. This kind of expertise is not expected of you in first year, but is something you will build up over a couple of years. The "academic literacies" approach to Writing instruction suggests that, to be successful in their university courses, students need to acquire knowledge of a number of characteristics of academic writing, including genre, topic, research expectations, typical contents and structure of the paper's introduction, body and conclusion, citation or documentation of sources, and professional presentation.
7. In academic writing, you are not usually free to organize and present your research or ideas in any way you please. You may have explored genres like literary analysis or research essays already; be prepared when writing for university courses, to investigate the requirements of the genre you have been asked to write in. A lab report, a reflection essay, an essay proposal, a case study or a marketing report will have its own guidelines for what you can and cannot include, and for tone, formality, word choices, sentence length, how to address the audience, and so on. Here's a useful tip: if you know what genre you have to write in, and are looking for advice on what it contains, do a search with its name and the phrase "writing center" in the search box. The search will bring up sites where you can get academically rigorous information on what the genre's requirements are.
8. In high school, you may have been asked to write an essay on, say, "Recycling and the Environment," or "The Importance of Civic Engagement." For university assignments, your topic is seldom as generic as this. You will be asked to write on a research topic that is important in the specific discipline, using lenses (theories and interpretive frameworks) that the discipline typically uses. You can't "write off the top of your head." If your assignment sheet does not specify a focused topic, but asks you to find one, the assumption is that you will do some preliminary research and reading to find out what topics are viable, current, and researchable in that discourse community.

9. While journal entries and response papers or forum posts may be short, academic research papers need to showcase knowledge acquired and critical thinking done over a whole term. If the paper is in a genre that asks you to display analytical abilities, complexity of argument, breadth of reading, and research or data-gathering skills, it can be between ten and fifteen pages long. The more advanced the course, the longer the paper.
10. While you may have got away with foraging on Google or Bing for material for a high school essay, your university paper must usually reference scholarly sources. Research using texts produced by experts is called secondary research, while research done in the field, with human subjects, for example, is called primary research. When you do secondary research for an academic paper, you are expected to use peer-reviewed sources: materials produced by scholars whose work has been vetted by their peers in the discipline. You must therefore acquire skills in doing library and database searches, in judging which sources are useful and credible and which ones are not, in taking notes from them without mixing up your words and the words of the authors, and in keeping track of your sources, down to the page numbers of small quotations. These skills are collectively termed "information literacy," and our library has excellent videos and chat sites that help you develop these.
11. The academic paper has a well-defined structure, though this structure changes slightly from discipline to discipline. Most papers begin with a carefully written introduction that establishes context, gives background information or data (rather than the "hook" you may have been taught to use), announces the topic, and lays out a thesis or claim about the topic. The body paragraphs are organized to develop this thesis; they may discuss methodology or research findings, or conduct textual analysis, or make a point-by-point persuasive argument. In every instance, what is important is that they will contain evidence from research. This evidence must be integrated smoothly into your own writing through paraphrase, summary, and quotation. Paraphrase, in particular, is a key academic skill: you need to learn how to do this without using too many of the exact words in the original source. The conclusion of an academic paper must rephrase the original thesis effectively, without looking like a copy and paste job, and discuss applications of the thesis or limitations of the study, or directions for future research.
12. All the research sources from which evidence has been drawn must be duly acknowledged in the university paper. While you may have been told that mentioning the name of the author and the title of the resource was enough, be aware that university instructors are concerned about intellectual property, and are likely to see sloppy citation as a deal-breaker. Most professors specify the style guide you need to follow--MLA, APA, ASA, Chicago, and so on--and they expect you to refer to the guide as you format your in-text citation (within the body of your essay) as well as an end-of-essay bibliography. The OWL Purdue essay help site has reliable online citation help, if you cannot get hold of the original style manuals. Details of font and layout (indents, bolding, italics) as well as of punctuation are important markers of your citation professionalism, and you will be rewarded for getting them right.

13. Finally, the university paper is formatted neatly, typically double spaced, with a 12-point font, and default margins. Make sure that it looks professional--proofread to remove errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation and sentence structure. Surface errors are distracting to the reader, and can affect your grade. Unless you are asked for creative packaging or design, submit it on or before the deadline as a Word or PDF document (pay attention to the assignment instructions you have been given) and don't place it in a duotang or plastic cover. Follow the style guide or your assignment instructions when you put in your personal information.
14. You may feel you have a good deal to learn about the process of writing for university. One very effective way to make quick progress is to book a tutoring appointment at The Write Place, and meet a friendly tutor online. You can contact us for assistance at any stage of the writing process, in any subject. All the best with your writing!
15. Tutors will work online with you one-on-one, either using text/chat or in a video call. Book your appointment online by going to www.kings.uwo.ca/writeplace.



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