ONE

Stuff You Should Know before You Start

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Literacy

Reading is not exhausted merely by decoding the written word or written language, but rather anticipated by and extending into knowledge of the world.

—Paulo Freire, "The Importance of the Act of Reading"

You Are Already Good at Reading and Writing

Sometimes when we talk about reading and writing, we use the word *literacy.* Even though they have the same root word, literacy has nothing to do with literature. Literacy just means reading and writing – and not just poetry or novels or whatever, but grocery lists and emails and text messages and road signs.

Since the 1990s or so, the meaning of literacy has expanded to include other things like visual design, sound, video, and so on.

My own fancy academic definition of literacy is "any symbolic meaning-making activity."

This sounds complicated, but we all do it all the time. If you're like most undergraduates, you have been super into literacy for most of your life. Using social media and

texting are all literacy activities. You are probably good at using some of them because you've had a lot of practice.

Maybe a better definition is "being able to understand or make sense of something."

Communicating using social media or your phone or computer is one kind of literacy, and the reading and writing you have done in school for most of your life is another kind. So is being able to read a poster advertising a concert or knowing what the traffic signals at a stoplight mean. All of these things are different, but it's all symbolic meaning-making activity. It's all making sense of or understanding things by using language and other symbols. 👍

TL;DR: Literacy just means knowing how to do things, usually with words.

There Are Different Kinds of Literacy

The language we use in school is not better or more special than other kinds of language; it's just different. This is over-simplified, but some people would break it down like this:

Out of school	In school
Informal	Formal
Simple words	Complicated words
Short and simple sentences	Long and complicated sentences
Connected to real life	Connected to abstract ideas
More oral or speech-like	More written or book-like

Out of school	In school
Playful, fun, sometimes rude	Serious and proper (no swear words!)
Progressive; new words and slang	Conservative; traditional
Grammar and spelling don't matter	Grammar and spelling matter a lot
Your family's language or dialect	English only

It isn't always this black and white. The reality of literacy is always more complicated. Depending on what you want to say, you might mix some stuff from the out-of-school side with the in-school side when you write in one class or another. That's often OK, and it will usually be clear if your prof is OK with it. For example, some assignments might call for "personal reflection," which would probably be less formal than a paper written using information you found in academic journal articles.

It's important to know that some of your professors will feel very strongly that only the stuff on the right side of the chart is OK. They're probably remembering what they were taught, but the truth is, there are a lot of different ways to write successfully, depending on who you're writing for and what they expect. The important thing – and this is the first of many times I will repeat this – is to learn about what your reader (in this case, usually your prof or TA) wants or expects.

I had a student a few years ago who would repeat variations on the same phrase whenever we met to discuss

her papers: “What are you looking for here?” “I’m not sure what you’re looking for here.” “I didn’t know what you were looking for there.” I’ll be honest: at first, I found this a bit annoying. But she was right to be so persistent. I really had to explain *what* I thought was important for the assignment, and I had to explain *why.* It was as hard for me as it was for her, but it made her paper better, and made me a better teacher.

It’s important to find out if your instructor feels strongly that your writing needs to stay on the in-school side of this oversimplified chart. If you disagree with them, you have a couple of choices. You can try to write that way, or you can try to get them to change their minds by writing things that are good but break their rules. (A warning: you do this at your own risk. Not every instructor is interested in reading groundbreaking, experimental writing, which is why it’s important that you get to know them and their expectations.)

It’s true that what most people call “academic writing” looks more like the in-school side of the chart, but some of the stuff on the right side is less important than it seems.

For example, complicated words and long sentences don’t often make academic writing better. Usually, it’s better to be simple and direct. Don’t go out of your way to use “fancy” words just because you think it will make you sound smart. Sometimes the simplicity and directness of the out-of-school side are perfectly OK for

a university writing assignment. As I said, it depends on the situation.

TL;DR: You can write however you want, but many profs will prefer formal language. However, you may be able to break the "rules" if and when you want.

Reading and Writing in University Is Different Than in High School

In most high schools, there is a class called English (or Language Arts) that includes all kinds of things having to do with language – things like spelling, grammar, vocabulary, poetry, creative writing, and literature.

However, unless you're taking an English literature class in university, things like literature and poetry *don't* have much of a relationship to academic writing at all. You don't need to write in a "poetic" style to be a good academic writer.

In high school English, you might have learned about figurative language – metaphors, similes, and things like that. You might have learned that you need to use this kind of language to make your writing interesting or beautiful. You might have also learned that you need a fun "hook" to get readers interested in your introduction.

In university, you don't usually need any of those things. It depends on what you're studying, but in university, the following things are usually more important in writing:

- understanding the expectations of your audience (usually your professor)
- being direct about what you intend to communicate
- carefully and clearly explaining how you're using other texts
- having a clear main purpose or thesis for a piece of writing
- writing paragraphs that have one main focus
- writing with words and sentence patterns that fit the purpose
- producing a text that is relatively free of grammar errors.

You might try thinking of writing as a tool for doing things rather than as an art form.

It can be (and is) both, of course. But if you learned that writing is poetry in high school, try thinking of writing as more like a screwdriver in university. Writing can be Shakespeare, yes, but it can also be a user manual for your wireless headphones – a tool to accomplish a purpose.

TL;DR: Unlike other kinds of writing, academic writing doesn't have to be beautiful or fancy; it should be clear and direct.

Language

Academic writing is a second language for everyone.

—Ling Shi, during a class I took from her

You Don't Have to Write Like a "Native Speaker"

If you grew up speaking a language other than English at home, and you learned English in school, you might think you're at a disadvantage at an "English-speaking" university. This isn't true! If you studied English as a second or additional language, you probably have *more* knowledge of English grammar than your classmates who grew up only speaking English, because you probably had to learn all the rules.

It's true that there are certain patterns or variations that are more common to so-called ESL writers, but it doesn't make them wrong.

In fact, "standard" English is mostly an imaginary language hardly anyone uses.

Your writing teacher will definitely point out serious errors in grammar or word choice or sentence structure if you make them, but not all variations from so-called standard English are actually wrong. They're just different.

So-called native speakers do this all the time too. Being a native speaker doesn't make you automatically better at writing in English in school. It just means English is the language you grew up with. Nobody grows up writing ten-page academic papers with APA-style reference lists, though. (And if you did, that's weird. I'm sorry.)

If you're worried about making errors, consider keeping track of all the errors that your professors mark. I know that sounds like a lot of work, and it probably will be. You can write them all down in a notebook or on a spreadsheet or something. You can note what the error was, and what the correct version of it would be. Go back to it every few weeks and look for patterns. Is there something that comes up over and over? Try to focus on that.

If you find English grammar confusing, or find it very hard to write English sentences: first, you're not alone, and second, unfortunately, there's no magical way to suddenly improve in a few days or weeks. You're probably going to have to do a lot of reading and writing in English for a long time. It's hard, but if you keep at it, you'll find yourself getting more comfortable and eventually notice real improvement.

TL;DR: Not being a "native speaker" doesn't mean you're a bad writer.

Racism, Prejudice, and Judgments about Language

Another thing to be aware of: it's OK to break rules sometimes, even the rules of so-called standard English. Some people call this writing with an "accent," but the fact is we all have ways of using language that feel more right and true and useful to us and that might not always match the grammar or vocabulary of standard English.

The way I'm writing this book is a good example of breaking the rules. When I sat down to write this, I decided I was going to ignore what many people have been telling me my whole life: that my sentences are sometimes too "wordy," or that I overuse *I,* or that I should stop using so many adverbs like *basically* or *totally* or *entirely.* But I like writing that way, and even though I try to change those things when I write more formal academic articles, I feel like it will make this book more readable and personable. (I hope I'm right.)

"But Joel," you might say, even though we don't really know each other, "you're a middle-aged white guy. When you break the rules, people seem to be OK with it, but what about me, who is not a middle-aged white guy?"

And I would say, "You're right to bring this up, and also, I feel like you should've said 'who *am* not a middle-aged white guy,' but now that I think about it, that doesn't sound right either. English grammar is weird."

Grammar aside, this question is absolutely a relevant and important one. What happens when, say, a young

South Asian woman or Black man breaks "the rules" of writing? There are linguistic judgments made that are not actually based on language but on what some linguists call "raciolinguistics." To give one brief disturbing example: There are research studies in which people are asked to rate a speaker's English after listening to a recording and seeing a picture of the person who is (supposedly) speaking. Sometimes their rating of how good the speaker's English is changes depending on the race of the person whose picture is shown – even when the recordings are actually of the same person, but the pictures are different. That is, people may rate a racialized person's English as "worse" than a white person's even when they sound identical.

There are convincing arguments to be made that an insistence on strictly following certain norms of so-called standard English (which, to be totally honest, doesn't really exist except as an imagined concept people use to complain about language they don't like) is part of upholding systemic racism and contributes to the marginalization of already marginalized peoples' ways of using language. Not everyone agrees with this perspective, and I'm in no position to tell you how to think about this issue, because I don't have the same life experience as you. But it's worth knowing and being aware that people often use words like *correctness, norms,* and *standards* when they're really making judgments based on race.

TL;DR: Many people make judgments about students' writing based not on the quality of language but on racial stereotypes and prejudices.

Audience

The writer's audience is always a fiction.

—Walter J. Ong

You Are Writing for Your Professor, Mostly

It's important to think of your audience and purpose in writing. The most obvious audience for university writing is your professor or TA, the person who gave you the assignment or who will grade it. And the "purpose" is that that person told you to write the paper.

I realize that this can make the whole thing feel kind of fake.

Some writing has an obvious real-world purpose. The purpose of a research article is to communicate knowledge. The purpose of a news article on a sports website is to tell you who won the game. The purpose of an Instagram caption is to tell you about Kim Kardashian's new perfume, or whatever. These are real-world things that those writers and their texts are *doing.*

So what is the purpose of, say, your lab report? It does have some connection to the real world. You need to

explain what you did during your lab experiment, which is, indeed, a real thing that happened in the real world. (I'm not a scientist, so I don't really know what you're doing in the lab, but I'm sure it was cool!)

But there's another purpose that isn't talked about as much, and it's not related to the "real world" so much as its "meta"-purpose, a purpose beyond the stated aim of the assignment. It's for you to show your instructor that you understood the assignment, that you know the proper names for the things you're learning about, and that you can write about them in a way that other people familiar with that subject can understand and make sense of.

In a way, then, the hidden purpose of every writing assignment in university is to "prove you can write this kind of assignment." That does feel a bit artificial, but it isn't all bad. This is actually an important part of the thing you're learning to do in university: to develop your knowledge and skills – your literacy, really – in the subject(s) you're studying.

Even though this audience (your prof) and purpose (prove you understood the assignment) can feel artificial, you should still take it seriously and recognize that it's important. You need to know your professor's preferences and what they think good writing is. "Understanding the assignment" will turn out to be a pretty crucial skill throughout university, in your career, and even in your relationships with other people throughout your life.

To "understand the assignment" *is* the assignment. Learning different ways of doing things (in this case, writing) that are called for (or useful, or helpful) in different situations is one of the most important things about being human.

Sometimes professors will be clear about the purposes they have in mind, and they will give you clear directions for how to complete assignments and explain their expectations. Sometimes they won't do this at all, and you'll have to push a bit, like my student did with me ("What are you looking for here?") or you'll need to look elsewhere for help and advice, like a friend or a writing centre.

If you don't like this more artificial purpose ("prove you understand the assignment") – and I don't blame you! – it can also help to have in mind an imaginary third party as your audience rather than just the person grading your paper. It could be your classmates, or people who also study the subject you're studying, or someone else. Your professor might even directly tell you who your imaginary audience should be.

This imaginary audience is actually kind of real, because you make it real. If you write with that audience in mind, it will change what you write. If you imagine you're writing for an audience of doctors, you may find you naturally choose different language than if you imagine you're writing for your uncle who posts outdated memes on Facebook. The better you know your audience – real or

imagined – the better chance you have to tell them what you want to tell them.

TL;DR: Write for your professor or an imaginary audience you think would be interested in what you're writing about.

Genre

We don't write writing, we write *something*.

—Anthony Paré, "What We Know about Writing, and Why It Matters"

There's No Such Thing as "Just Writing"

Genre is a French word that means "kind" or "type." It's sort of like a category for art or language or other things humans produce.

Punk is a genre of music; horror is a genre of movies; romance is a genre of novels.

Genres are collections of features that we have come to expect in a given situation; they are ways of organizing human activity. How do we know what the features of a genre are? Usually, we know a genre from being a part of our larger culture and being exposed to it and told what it is by other people. We may know punk rock has distorted guitars and fast drums and loud shouted vocals. But if you don't know the culture, you might not know the genres. I know nothing about music like EDM or IDM (I think they both mean a kind of dance music?) or chillwave (I couldn't

even tell you one feature of this genre, or even if people still listen to it, but I've heard people talk about it). And if you're new to university, you probably aren't too familiar with the common genres of texts in academia.

Academic writing has many different genres. This is one of the reasons it can be hard to get a handle on "how to write" in university, because you're probably being asked to write many different types of things.

A researcher called Michael Carter came up with a useful set of categories that he calls "metagenres," or types of writing that might include many other types. In his article "Ways of Knowing, Doing, and Writing in the Disciplines," he shows that four metagenres are usually called for in university, depending on the purpose you're writing for:

1. *problem-solving or system-generating texts* (business, nursing, social work, engineering). This could be a response to a business case study or an explanation of how something works to accompany a diagram in an engineering text.
2. *empirical inquiry texts* (science, medicine, social sciences). This could be a paper about a chemistry experiment, the results of survey research, or a write-up of a clinical trial.
3. *research from written sources* (humanities). This is a pretty common one to encounter early in your undergrad career: often it's a paper making an argument

about a literary text, but it could be about almost anything. See Chapter 3, "Writing 'The Paper.'"

4 *performance or critique of a performance* (arts). This could be a spoken-word performance or a review of a film or a play or a concert.

There might be different names for specific versions of these genres; you might write a lab report (no. 2) or conduct a survey and write up the results in a research article (also no. 2). You might write an analysis of a poem (no. 3) or a description of a historical event (also no. 3).

The stuff that you learn to write in your "writing class" doesn't always match the stuff you go on to write in your "real classes." Again, this might feel a little artificial, but the hope is that it will be useful later on. For example, in a class I teach, we have a stand-alone summary assignment, where students have to write short summaries of a variety of types of texts. You might not have another professor tell you to "write a summary" in, say, a third-year psychology course, but you might find that *part* of the paper calls for doing just that.

No matter what the class, your job is to try to figure out what you're being asked to write. If you're not sure *how* to write a certain assignment, or what genre it's supposed to be, read the assignment or syllabus carefully, or ask your professor or writing centre for examples of other

pieces of writing in that genre. If you can, try to start a discussion about what they consider to be features of a good assignment of this type, or try to find models of successful papers while gently asking, "What is it, exactly, you're looking for here?"

TL;DR: Different classes and assignments call for different genres; genres are ways of putting texts together that different cultures (or fields or disciplines, etc.) have developed expectations for.