YSDN 2107 WINTER TERM 2020
York/Sheridan program in design

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DESIGN WRITING GUIDE: STRUCTURE; BUILDING ARGUMENTS; STYLE; FORMAL VOICE;

The following document is intended to provide you with a guide towards structuring your writing within an academic context for the different projects associated with our course. Inside you will find examples of methodologies that are useful for planning your writing, structuring your arguments and supporting them, formal writing tones of voice, and notes of proper typographic style.

In an academic setting, writing for design topics do not differ greatly from writing for other faculties of study. The same conventions of good structure and tone of voice should apply, as well as proper methodologies for citation and supporting one's arguments. Where discourse on design differs from other forms of academic writing is in the need to elucidate to the reader concepts that require visual stimulus in order for them to be accurately perceived and digested. This requires a process of cultivating carefully chosen images and diagrams, and utilizing them in an appropriate way where they are able to support one's claims within the text. Additionally, writing for design requires clarity towards terminologies that may be unclear to readers outside the field of study, and therefore specific terms may require clarification through the use of notes or a section defining them (glossary).

The below sections provide you with examples and suggestions on the different aspects pertaining to academic writing for design, and can be used as a reference point throughout the course as you engage with the writing for your projects.

In our course, we will use the MLA citation format. For examples of how to list different types of sources in this format – as well as methods for implementing citations as footnotes within your text layout – please consult the bibliography guide for the course.

WRITING TONE OF VOICE

Within any field of academic writing, it is important to use a clear and formal tone of voice. We should keep explanations of concepts and ideas relatively simple and as direct as possible, and reduce linguistic complexity as much as possible. This is critical as it removes potential ambiguities for the reader that can impact their understanding of the text. Additionally, design today is ever more interdisciplinary and global in reach, meaning many of our readers may access our texts with English as a second language. We can maintain clarity in this context by using formal language and avoiding colloquial terms.

It should be noted that our main goal in design writing is to ensure the accurate comprehension of the concepts and arguments that we are making within our text. This is the purpose of why we engage in a written discourse on any subject.

The tone of voice that we use matters as well in allowing for accurate and unbiased descriptions of our content and subject matter. In our course, you may choose to write in the first person or third person formal voice, and blend the two. It is quite common in design writing for authors to use these two points of view throughout a text, depending on when one is most useful over the other. It is best to establish an overall primary tone of voice, and then to interject the other when needed.

As a general tip: you may find that using a primary first person voice, with some uses of the third person, as being the most practical to work with. As you will see in the following examples, it can be awkward to the rhythm of the text to mix in first person statements within a text that is primarily using a third person voice.

First person formal

The first person formal is used to describe events or concepts directly from the perspective the writer by referring to themselves and their experience. Pronouns such as "I", "me", and "we" are used in this voice to describe an event:

… The subsequent research that I conducted on Myklós Kis's punch-cutting activities elucidated the fact that his matrices were distributed widely to various centres of European printing during the 17th century. This leads me to believe that his skills were in high demand during the period, given the frequency in which his typefaces appear …

Third person formal

The third person formal voice identifies people, places, and objects by a proper noun (such as a given name) or noun (writers, athletes, artists). Pronouns such as "he", "she", and "they" are used to refer to nouns in the text. This could be likened to the perspective of "an outsider looking in", or from the perspective of an unnamed narrator. The below text sample describes models that were created for gathering typeface data for research in the third person voice. Notice how, even though the text describes diagrams that the author created themselves, they do not directly state that *they* made them:

… In order to conduct an investigation and analysis of the four case studies, strategies and tools had to be created first. As each document depicts a unique typographic design space, consistency in representation across all four models was of primary concern. Therefore, the following models represent typographic variables that are generally found across typefaces (regular, medium, bold weights; condensed and extended widths; text and display optical styles), rather than specific stylistic appearances of each documents' particular typeface families …

Be direct Notice in this example that the language used is direct and clear, and states the necessary concepts without any ambiguities. This is achieved by avoiding complex words that are not commonly found in the English language, and avoids using colloquial terms that readers – especially those in which English is a second language – may not understand, and therefore presents a barrier to all readers accessing the text.

Colloquial terms are informal words, phrases, slang or jargon that tend to be localized to specific societies. Some colloquial terms are shared across societies, such as those that come to us from Hollywood movies, however, it is best to avoid them and use formal terms instead. Examples of colloquial terms would be:

'When you're dead, they really fix you up. I hope to hell when I do die somebody has sense enough to just dump me in the river or something.'
From *The catcher in the rye* by J. D. Salinger.

"The hydro bill is enormous!"

The term "hydro" is a Canadian colloquialism for electricity and gas energy. You should write it as:

"The electricity bill is enormous!"

'She's gunna be able to help you in about two hours.'

This should be written as:
'She is going to be able to help you in within two hours.'

The example below shows a way of using the third person voice to refer to your own experiences within the paper, without using first person pronouns. The author states their attendance at the conference, without directly referring to one's self:

… The 2018 TYPO Labs conference's theme was "how far can we go?" [3] Two years after OpenType font variations were announced, industry experts gathered to present ideas regarding the extent of possibilities for designing variable fonts. The author's attendance at this conference allowed for many opinions and experimentations towards the development of variable fonts to be observed and considered …

Notice how the writer refers to their personal perspective in a passive way by using the term "The author's attendance" at the conference.

Mixing both voices

As stated in the opening text for this section, you can mix these two voices together within your text, which can be an effective way of describing your research observations, and further rationalizing your statements. Be careful to maintain a formal tone voice, regardless of which tone you are writing in:

… The parameters that I have chosen to encode into the variable font tool were developed to compose the design space models for each case study after careful study of each documents' requirements. Therefore, the axes value ranges (0–300: weight, width, and optical size) are consistent across all four model sets. In all four case study variable models, the instance coordinate points are the same for weight and width variables (condensed = 55; regular = 150; bold = 258, etc). Considering this, I paid special attention to the optical axis, where the specification for "text" may vary from document to document, depending on the text type point sizes found in each respective document …

Here, a mixture is achieved of both voices to help explain the methodology used for data gathering and analysis. Mixing the two voices in situations such as these are useful to explain one's intentions and decisions towards processes.

BUILDING AN ARGUMENT

An argument, which is usually referred to as a central argument in academic papers, is the main response that you have developed through your hypothesis towards the area of research that you have conducted, and are conducting. Your central argument can be based off of your interpretation of an idea or concept related to your chosen area of research, and will act as the impetus for your statements and talking points throughout the text. You will then use various supporting sources to support your central argument as you move through your text.

Stating your central argument

It is important to state in your introduction (and in your abstract, if your paper requires one) your central argument. This establishes your hypothesis towards your research subject, and frames the content and how it will be discussed in the preceding sections.

An example is given below from the introduction of a dissertation on typeface design of how the central argument is established. Note how the first sentence provides a rationalization for why the argument has grounds. This central argument will then be supported with sources and examples throughout the text:

Notice here how justification is built in the top half of the paragraph before the central argument is stated directly in the latter half.

… By reflecting on previous font technologies and analyzing the way in which contemporary typographers implement variation with static type families into their document layouts, the need for typeface developers to look outward at their users' practices, rather than inward to their own craft's toolmaking technologies, is revealed. By understanding the limitations of variability in specific design spaces, the type designer can establish methodologies towards developing variable fonts with a direct benefit to type users in their work …

Note that the main argument in this section is in the last sentence:

… By understanding the limitations of variability in specific design spaces, the type designer can establish methodologies towards developing variable fonts with a direct benefit to type users in their work …

Supporting your central argument

After you have stated and defined your central argument and overall position towards your research, you must then support your claims throughout the paper to defend your position.

Always remember this rule: every claim you make within your paper needs to be supported by reliable primary sources. The only exception would be general knowledge that any reader can be expected to know.

Your primary sources can be in the form of a text citation from another author, implemented as a footnote or a pull quote (which would also receive a footnote to the source), or via image and diagram figures. To see how to properly implement citations into your text and figures, please refer to the course bibliography guide.

Below are examples of how to support your argument in different ways in your text:

Source origins Your sources do not have to be from literary or online origins alone. You can also use statements from other credible individuals by quoting what they may have said to you in an email or physical conversation, or statements that they made from a lecture. For example, you can quote your professors in your paper to help support your position.

Remember that primary sources must constitute original accounts and ideas from an author.

Secondary sources are other individual's observations or criticisms towards someone else's original research. These are legitimate, but you should also have good primary sources to support the secondary source's validity.

… Gerry Leonidas, during his talk at the conference, encouraged type designers to 'interrogate documents and observe how users are actually using fonts.'[4] These experiences raised the question of how to approach the design of variable typefaces in a manner that would be relevant to document designers in their work …

Here, the author uses another individual's ideas that are in line with their own towards the subject area to help support their claim.

… In order to support text output in print and rendering on screen within the PostScript environment, Adobe developed an outline font format, PostScript Type 1. This format worked with the PostScript languages cubic bézier mathematics to represent the lines and curves of a typefaces' letterforms and symbols. *(figures 7 & 8)* These outlines were resolution independent, and could be widely scaled to various sizes without an effect on printing output quality …

The author in the above example uses a reference to two figure images that will help them support the claim they are making regarding the behaviour and functionality of the PostScript format.

… The storage of font data has allowed type manufactures the ability to innovate new ways of processing typeface outputs in both screen and print environments. Developments beginning in the early 1970s to the present day have demonstrated the digital environment's ability to allow typographic composition tools to have a programmed intelligence that facilitate greater flexibility and control for typeface and document design. *(figure 2)* Furthermore, digital smart font tools allow for the accommodation of scripts that under previous technologies could not be easily represented in the typographic process.

Source validity It is important to consider the reputation of the original author of your source, depending on the subject area you are writing on. The status of the author as a practitioner or academic researcher can have an effect on how your reader perceives the validity of your source. In the example to the right, Gerard Unger has been chosen to be quoted as he holds a very high standing as a typeface designer and typography within the field at large, and has a high-level of experience in developing typefaces for various technological output mediums. This makes using Gerard as a secondary source strong in comparison to other authors with less experience and industry reputation.

> As Gerard Unger writes in his foreword for Peter Karow's book Font technology, methods and tools 'the early seventies marked the onset of a revolution having had a direct and far-reaching effect on typography. Still very much in progress, this technological revolution transformed typography (once a craft with tools that could be picked up and handled) into an activity using essentially abstract techniques. Social, cultural and economic factors have also made their mark, altering the entire image of the typographer's craft. The bulk of these changes could not, however, have taken hold as rapidly if new technologies had not enabled designers and typographers to implement their far-reaching ideas. Prior to this revolution, 500 years saw slight change' [5]

The following section explores past digital smart font technologies that have shaped the way in which typefaces are developed and implemented into digital software spaces today …

In this example, the author uses both a figure reference and a pull quote to solidify support for their claim that instructability via digital means have been present in typeface platforms since the early 1970s.

WRITING STRUCTURES

When beginning the writing process, it is best to break your text down into the sections that you will need to write, and write within these sections to build up a whole. Refer to Gerry Leonidas's article 'Writing for design students, part 1: a pattern for structured writing' for examples of questions that you can apply to your writing that will help you structure each section.

Another useful strategy is to layout your sections with rough names, and assign a word count value to them. This would be the rough number of words that you believe are necessary to fully explain each section in a concise and concrete manner. And example of this is shown below:

1 INTRODUCTION 250 words
2 OVERVIEW OF SMART FONT TECHNOLOGIES 150 words
  2.1 Defining smart font technologies 300 words
  2.2 Adobe Multiple Master 250 words
  2.3 Apple GX Variations 300 words
  2.4 PostScript Type 1 200 words
  2.5 TrueType 250 words
3 CONCLUSION 400 words

PROPER TYPOGRAPHIC STYLE

When writing in any context, using proper typographic style conventions for the language and audience you are writing for is essential to creating a coherent and easy to consume text. These conventions can differ from country to country, and even within different institutions within the same country. English, being an official language in many countries, has different conventions of typographic style – not to mention spelling – between societies. In our course, we will use Canadian spelling and conventions of typographic style.

Given Canada's roots as a former British colony, and proximity to the United States, conventions of typographic style can be seen as a kind of hybrid, and retain as a result of these factors flexibility in the forms which may be used. This means that some conventions that might be solid in other English speaking countries, may be flexible in Canada.

For a full reference to proper typographic style rules to follow, please consult the *TypeTips* manual that is on the BDES server. Remember that these are general rules, and apply to most situations. If better clarity can be obtained by breaking them skillfully, then it is ok to do so.

Below are some recommendations and examples of when certain styles should be used:

Dates

It is common in Canada and the United States for dates to be listed as month, day, year. In Canadian English, this is a flexible rule, and either the US or British convention may be used. It is recommended to use the British convention, as it provides much better clarity within text settings, as the day and year figures clearly separate the month, making for easier readability:

A similar event took place on 16 March 1629 in Amsterdam.

Italics

Always avoid overusing italics to create emphasis within text settings. Overuse of italics diminishes their effect in drawing attention to the subjects they are intended to be used primarily for, such as proper place names and publication titles. You may consider using italics to call out your figure references:

… Geograph was the sans serif typeface developed for headline and display settings. *(figure 41)* Grosvenor was a customized version of Klim Type's pre-existing retail typeface Tiempos, that was tailored specifically for use within *National Geographic's* editorial layouts …

Brackets, and parentheses

Brackets [☺] should be used for references to other works, source materials, or editorial comments. Parentheses (☺) are used for you, the author, to make explanations, insertions, and references. Braces {☺} should not be used as they are mainly for mathematical setting:

In the programs referred to in section 2.6 [Ikarus system], the author …

During the casting of Granjon's italics (and subsequently all italic types) the body size was often reduced to increase the tightness of fit for …

Brackets can also be used for ellipses within quotation settings where you wish to cut out some of the content that the original author wrote:

Reflecting on the practicality of professional type designers using his Metafont software in 1996, Donald Knuth noted that 'asking an artist to become enough of a mathematician to understand how to write a font with 60 parameters is too much. […] Most people like to work from a given set of specifications and then answer that design problem. They don't want to give an answer to all possible design specifications that they might be given and explain how they would vary their solution to each specification.' [65]

Small capitals

As you will be aware of from previous typography courses in the program, abbreviations and acronyms should be set in small capitals to allow them to blend in with the pattern of the lowercase letterforms, which build up the majority of the text. This is important as it also comfortably distinguishes these items from other textual content, and acts as another form of emphasis outside of italics:

In the development of the house typeface for the CBC, it was essential for the typeface to accommodate both the Latin and Indigenous syllabics writing systems …

Dashes in text

Normally, en dashes are used between sets of dates (1568–1603), and em dashes are used for changes in thought within a sentence. A good technique is to replace the em dash with an en dash for this same purpose, with a thin space (found in Adobe InDesign's "insert special character" menu). This reduces the starkness of having a full em dash appear in paragraphs where it can greatly disturb the typographic texture and reading flow of the paragraph:

Additionally, this classification system utilizes the historical narrative of typeface evolutions – as it is understood from current scholarly perspectives – to provide a critical context as to why certain structural qualities in letterforms developed, and what this tells us about typeface designs today.

As opposed to this use of a full em dash:

Additionally, this classification system utilizes the historical narrative of typeface evolutions—as it is understood from current scholarly perspectives—to provide a critical context as to why certain structural qualities in letterforms developed, and what this tells us about typeface designs today.

REFERENCES FOR ACADEMIC DESIGN WRITING

In addition to the information presented in the previous sections, you can refer to the following sources for further examples pertaining to various aspects of academic writing:

Gerry Leonidas's articles on writing for design students

Many of the methodologies that are presented in this guide are learned from my academic design mentor, Gerry Leonidas, Associate Professor and director of the Master's in typeface design (MATD), University of Reading. Gerry's strategies towards writing for design students can be viewed in these three articles that he has prepared:

GERRY LEONIDAS, 'Writing for design students, part 1: A pattern for structured writing'. In *Medium*, 27 January 2016
https://medium.com/@gerryleonidas/writing-for-design-students-part-1-a-pattern-for-structured-writing-687c7a985342

GERRY LEONIDAS, 'Writing for design students, part 2: Describing things'. In *Medium*, 4 November 2016
https://medium.com/@gerryleonidas/writing-for-design-students-part-2-describing-things-c99f48123dac

GERRY LEONIDAS, 'Writing for design students, part 3: three essentials'. In *Medium*, 29 September 2018
https://medium.com/@gerryleonidas/writing-for-design-students-part-3-three-essentials-652dbd886271

Sheridan College's library guides for writing and research

Research and academic skills resources:
https://sheridancollege.libguides.com/researchskills

Writing essays:
http://sheridancollege.libguides.com/writingessays

Writing for annotated bibliographies:
http://sheridancollege.libguides.com/annotatedbibliography

Time management skills for writing:
https://sheridancollege.libguides.com/timemanagementmodule

Research methods:
http://sheridancollege.libguides.com/researchmethods