Writing Abstracts

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LX9

1. About

An abstract is a short, objective description of an intellectual resource, usually a written document. Professors often assign students to write abstracts to accompany their papers.

When writing an abstract, it is important to keep in mind the purposes of an abstract. One main purpose is to provide readers with useful information about a document. Another main purpose of an abstract is to help readers to evaluate and select a document that they would find useful in their own research. An abstract should allow a reader to get the bare-bones information about a document without requiring them to read the actual document.

An abstract is NOT, however, a simple summary of a document; neither is it a critique of a document.

2. Writing the Abstract

Because an abstract is a description of an entire document, you can write an abstract only for a document that is complete. If you are writing an abstract as part of a class paper, you need to finish your paper before you start working on your abstract.

Keep in mind **the ABCs of a good abstract**:

- **Accuracy** – a good abstract includes only information included in the original document
- **Brevity** – a good abstract gets straight to the point, contains precise language, and does not include superfluous adjectives
- **Clarity** – a good abstract does not contain jargon or colloquialisms and always explains any acronyms

Several **writing guidelines** can make writing a good abstract easier:

- Do not refer to the author (e.g. "Dr. Seuss argues")
- Do not refer to what type of document you are abstracting (e.g. "This book describes")
- Use complete sentences
- Use active verbs whenever possible
- Use familiar terminology whenever you can (and always explain terms that may be unfamiliar to the average reader)

3. The Informative Abstract

One common type of abstract is an informative abstract. If you are writing an abstract for a strictly-structured document like an **experiment**, **investigation**, or **survey**, you will write an informative abstract.

An informative abstract is made up of four parts:

- Purpose
- Methodology
- Results
- Conclusions

The **purpose** section of an informative abstract should state either the reason for or the primary objectives of the experiment or investigation. The purpose section of an informative abstract might also contain the hypothesis of the experiment.

The **methodology** section of an informative abstract should describe the techniques used in conducting the experiment. This section should give only as much detail as is necessary to understand the experiment; the abstract should not focus entirely on research methods unless that is the primary focus of the original document.

The **results** section of an informative abstract should relate the observations and/or data collected during the experiment. This section should be concise and informative, and only the most important results need be included.

The **conclusion** section of an informative abstract should state the evaluation or analysis of the experiment results. It should also briefly state the implications of these results. This conclusion section might also state whether the driving hypothesis of the experiment was correct.

A Sample Informative Abstract:

> *Subjects' car clocks were set ten minutes fast in order to determine if deliberately setting a clock ahead will reduce lateness. One group of subjects knew their clocks had been set ahead, while a second group of subjects was not informed of the change. Over a four-week period, the subjects who were aware of the clock change regularly arrived on time or late for their scheduled appointments. Over the same period of time, the subjects who were unaware of the clock change tended to arrive early or on time for their appointments. Data suggest that intentionally setting a clock to run fast does not reduce lateness because one accounts for that extra time in his or her schedule.*

4. The Indicative Abstract

A second type of abstract is an indicative abstract. If you are writing an abstract for a less-structured document like an essay, editorial, or book, you will write an indicative abstract.

An indicative abstract is generally made up of three parts:

- Scope
- Arguments Used
- Conclusions

The **scope** section of an indicative abstract should state the range of the material dealt with in the original document as well as the starting premise of the document. An abstract for an essay on Shakespeare's comedies, for example, would state that the Bard's comedies make up the focus of the essay.

The **arguments used** section of an indicative abstract should state the main arguments and counterarguments employed in the original document. These arguments should be stated in the same progression in which they appear in the document. Not all documents contain a progression of arguments; in some cases this section may outline analysis or plot progression instead.

The **conclusions** section of an indicative abstract should state the document's main closing argument and its implications as suggested by the original author. This conclusion section might also state plot resolution when the original document is a work of fiction.

A Sample Indicative Abstract:

> *Types of female power in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice are discussed. Mrs. Bennet and Charlotte Lucas represent the lack of power possessed by married women of the middle class. Lady Catherine and Caroline Bingley demonstrate the power of wealthy, single women to occasionally flaunt rules of etiquette. Lydia Bennet represents the risks of female power when bestowed upon too immature a woman, but Elizabeth and Jane Bennet characterize the positive personal and social effects of women who recognize their own power over self.*

5. A Few More Tips

If you are writing an abstract about a document not written by you, make sure to include the document's bibliographic information before your abstract.

Also, because you could write an abstract for documents of any size, there are general guidelines about how long your abstract should be:

- For an editorial or letter to the editor, 30 words or less
- For a short note or short communication, 100 words or less
- For a shorter paper or article, 150-200 words or less
- For a longer paper, article, or book chapter, 250 words or less
- For long documents like a thesis or book, 300 words or less

While these length guidelines can help you as you learn how to write abstracts, with practice you will develop a sense about what length–and how much description–is sufficient for each individual abstract.

6. Polishing the Abstract

After you've completed your abstract, go back over the ABCs of a good abstract and ask yourself a few questions:

- How **accurate** is my abstract? Is it consistent with the information in the original document?
- How **brief** is my abstract? Did I substantially reduce the amount of text necessary to convey the main ideas?
- How **clear** is my abstract? Can a non-specialized reader easily understand all the information?

Also, be sure to proofread your abstract carefully for errors and typos. If you have a bibliographic heading, double-check it for accuracy and correct spelling as well.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LY9
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LYh

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Using Evidence

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LX7

1. About

Like a lawyer in a jury trial, a writer must convince her audience of the validity of her argument by using evidence effectively. As a writer, you must also use evidence to persuade your readers to accept your claims. But how do you use evidence to your advantage? By leading your reader through your reasoning.

The types of evidence you use change from discipline to discipline—you might use quotations from a poem or a literary critic, for example, in a literature paper; you might use data from an experiment in a lab report.

The process of putting together your argument is called analysis—it interprets evidence in order to support, test, and/or refine a claim. The chief claim in an analytical essay is called the thesis. A thesis provides the controlling idea for a paper and should be original (that is, not completely obvious), assertive, and arguable. A strong thesis also requires solid evidence to support and develop it because without evidence, a claim is merely an unsubstantiated idea or opinion.

This pamphlet will cover these basic issues:

- Incorporating evidence effectively.
- Integrating quotations smoothly.
- Citing your sources.

2. Incorporating Evidence Into Your Essay

When Should You Incorporate Evidence?

Once you have formulated your claim, your thesis (see the WTS pamphlet, "How to Write a Thesis Statement," for ideas and tips), you should use evidence to help strengthen your thesis and any assertion you make that relates to your thesis. Here are some ways to work evidence into your writing:

- Offer evidence that agrees with your stance up to a point, then add to it with ideas of your own.
- Present evidence that contradicts your stance, and then argue against (refute) that evidence and therefore strengthen your position.
- Use sources against each other, as if they were experts on a panel discussing your proposition.
- Use quotations to support your assertion, not merely to state or restate your claim.

Weak and Strong Uses of Evidence

In order to use evidence effectively, you need to integrate it smoothly into your essay by following this pattern:

- State your claim.
- Give your evidence, remembering to relate it to the claim.
- Comment on the evidence to show how it supports the claim.

To see the differences between strong and weak uses of evidence, here are two paragraphs.

Weak use of evidence

> *Today, we are too self-centered. Most families no longer sit down to eat together, preferring instead to eat on the go while rushing to the next appointment (Gleick 148). Everything is about what we want.*

This is a **weak** example of evidence because the evidence is not related to the claim. What does the claim about self-centeredness have to do with families eating together? The writer doesn't explain the connection.

The same evidence can be used to support the same claim, but only with the addition of a clear connection between claim and evidence, and some analysis of the evidence cited.

Stronger use of evidence

> *Today, Americans are too self-centered. Even our families don't matter as much anymore as they once did. Other people and activities take precedence. In fact, the evidence shows that most American families no longer eat together, preferring instead to eat on the go while rushing to the next appointment (Gleick 148). Sit-down meals are a time to share and connect with others; however, that connection has become less valued, as families begin to prize individual activities over shared time, promoting self-centeredness over group identity.*

This is a far better example, as the evidence is more smoothly integrated into the text, the link between the claim and the evidence is strengthened, and the evidence itself is analyzed to provide support for the claim.

3. Using Quotations: A Special Type of Evidence

One effective way to support your claim is to use quotations. However, because quotations involve someone else's words, you need to take special care to integrate this kind of evidence into your essay. Here are two examples using quotations, one less effective and one more so.

Ineffective Use of Quotation

> *Today, we are too self-centered. "We are consumers-on-the-run . . . the very notion of the family meal as a sit-down occasion is vanishing. Adults and children alike eat . . . on the way to their next activity" (Gleick 148). Everything is about what we want.*

This example is ineffective because the quotation is not integrated with the writer's ideas. Notice how the writer has dropped the quotation into the paragraph without making any connection between it and the claim. Furthermore, she has not discussed the quotation's significance, which makes it difficult for the reader to see the relationship between the evidence and the writer's point.

More Effective Use of Quotation

> *Today, Americans are too self-centered. Even our families don't matter as much anymore as they once did. Other people and activities take precedence, as James Gleick says in his book, Faster. "We are consumers-on-the-run . . . the very notion of the family meal as a sit-down occasion is vanishing. Adults and children alike eat . . . on the way to their next activity" (148). Sit-down meals are a time to share and connect with others; however, that connection has become less valued, as families begin to prize individual activities over shared time, promoting self-centeredness over group identity.*

The second example is more effective because it follows the guidelines for incorporating evidence into an essay. Notice, too, that it uses a lead-in phrase ("... as James Gleick says in his book, Faster") to introduce the direct quotation. This lead-in phrase helps to integrate the quotation with the writer's ideas. Also notice that the writer discusses and comments upon the quotation immediately afterwards, which allows the reader to see the quotation's connection to the writer's point.

Remember: Discussing the significance of your evidence develops and expands your paper!

4. Citing your sources

Evidence appears in essays in the form of quotations and paraphrasing. Both forms of evidence must be cited in your text. Citing evidence means distinguishing other writers' information from your own ideas and giving credit to your sources. There are plenty of general ways to do citations. Note both the lead-in phrases and the punctuation (except the brackets) in the following examples:

- **Quoting**: *According to Source X, "[direct quotation]" ([date or page #]).*
- **Paraphrasing**: *Although Source Z argues that [his/her point in your own words], a better way to view the issue is [your own point] ([citation]).*
- **Summarizing**: *In her book, Source P's main points are Q, R, and S [citation].*

Your job during the course of your essay is to persuade your readers that your claims are feasible and are the most effective way of interpreting the evidence.

5. Questions to Ask Yourself When Revising Your Paper

- Have I offered my reader evidence to substantiate each assertion I make in my paper?
- Do I thoroughly explain why/how my evidence backs up my ideas?
- Do I avoid generalizing in my paper by specifically explaining how my evidence is representative?
- Do I provide evidence that not only confirms but also qualifies my paper's main claims?
- Do I use evidence to test and evolve my ideas, rather than to just confirm them?
- Do I cite my sources thoroughly and correctly?

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LYc
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LYd

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Using Outlines

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LX8

1. About

Many writers use outlines to help them think through the various stages of the writing process. An outline is a kind of graphic scheme of the organization of your paper. It indicates the main arguments for your thesis as well as the subtopics under each main point. Outlines range from the informal, using indenting and graphics (such as –, *, •), to the formal, which often uses Roman numerals and letters. Regardless of the degree of formality, however, the function of most outlines is to help you consider the most effective way to say what you want to say.

Outlines usually grow out of working plans for papers. For shorter, less complex papers, a few informal notes jotted down may be enough. But longer papers are too big to organize mentally; you generally need a written plan to help you organize the various parts of the paper. Preparing an outline will enable you to think over your notes, consider them from several perspectives, and devise an organizational plan appropriate to your topic, audience and assignment. An outline that accompanies the final draft of a paper can also function as a table of contents for the reader.

When you think of outlines, you probably think of an organizational plan to help you draft a paper, but you can outline at any stage of the writing process. At each stage, the outline serves a different function and helps you answer different writing questions.

2. Research Outlines

While you are researching a topic, you can make a tentative outline—a plan for your paper based on what you are learning from your research. This kind of outline helps you answer two questions: What do I already know? What do I need to research more? Here is an example of a tentative outline a student used to begin doing research for an essay comparing three different political theories: neo-Marxism, pluralism and elitism. The writer already knew about two of the theories, but needed more information about the third.

Neo-Marxism
- *power to minority*
- *emphasizes economics*

Pluralism
- *power to interest groups*
- *shifting coalitions of groups*

Elitism
- *definition*
- *description*

Analysis: United States
- *neo-Marxist*
- *pluralist*
- *elitist*

3. Working Outlines

During pre-writing, you can make a working outline—an outline that guides you in your drafting. It helps you answer the question: How am I going to present my information given my thesis, my assignment and my audience?

The student who wrote the tentative outline above also wrote the one below before beginning her essay. She wanted to describe the three political theories and then compare them by using each to analyze the government of a particular country, arguing that neo-Marxism is the most useful theory. Her working outline isn't very formal, but it fulfills the functions of a good outline:

- It supports the thesis.
- It establishes the order and relationship of the main points.
- It clarifies the relationship of the major and minor points.

Introduction
- *theories are simpler than real life*
- *theories are tools*

Three Political Theories

1. *Neo-Marxism*
- *power to minority*
- *importance of economic control*

2. *Pluralism*
- *power to interest groups*
- *interest groups form coalitions*

3. *Elitism*
- *power to elite*
- *how elite is defined*

Compare analysis of United States
- Neo-Marxist
- Pluralist
- Elitist

Your job as a writer is to think through the relationships between your ideas. For example, is one idea similar to or different from another? Is one a cause of another? An effect? An example? Is one idea the solution to another? Do two points represent different categories of a larger idea? In other words, do your ideas fall into one of the conventional approaches to thinking about an issue:

cause-effect, problem-solution, comparison-contrast, definition, classification? You can use these standard approaches to help you think through your ideas and come up with a logical plan. This plan then becomes your outline.

4. Draft Outlines

After you have written a first draft of your paper, you can make a draft or descriptive outline--an outline that is based on your draft. It describes each paragraph in your draft so that you can critique your organization. It helps you answer these questions: Does my draft flow logically from point to point? Have I discussed similar ideas in the same section or do I jump around?

This is a draft outline the student mentioned above made after writing the first draft of her paper. She summarized the draft, paragraph by paragraph, and then took a look at what the outline revealed.

1. *General introduction to political theories*
2. *Thesis: neo-Marxism most useful*
3. *Description of neo-Marxism*
4. *Description of pluralism*
5. *Coalitions of interest groups*
6. *Description of elitism*
7. *Pluralist analysis of U.S.*
8. *Neo-Marxist analysis of U.S.*
9. *Strengths of neo-Marxist analysis*
10. *Weaknesses of neo-Marxism*
11. *Weaknesses of elitism*
12. *Conclusion*

She noticed that the descriptions of neo-Marxism and elitism were each in a single paragraph, but the description of pluralism took two paragraphs. She decided to be consistent by combining 3 and 4. She also noticed that the second half of the paper seemed to jump around from theory to theory, presenting each theory's analysis and then each theory's weaknesses. She decided to put the pluralist analysis of the U.S. and the weaknesses of the analysis together in 6, the elitist analysis and its weaknesses into a paragraph together, and then devote two paragraphs to the neo-Marxist analysis and its strengths and weaknesses.

5. Questions to Ask Yourself When Revising Your Paper

Finally, you may be required to write a formal outline—an outline that serves as a guide to your paper for your reader. If you haven't already been making formal outlines, this outline will be a formal version of your previous notes; it lays out your main points and subpoints for your reader. Generally, this kind of outline uses conventions of formal outlining: Roman numerals, letters and indentations. Sometimes this type of outline can be produced after you have written your essay.

Formal outlines can be written in two ways. In topic outlines, the ideas are expressed in parallel phrases (that is, in the same grammatical form--noun phrases, verb phrases, etc.). Topic outlines have the advantage of being brief. In sentence outlines, on the other hand, the ideas are expressed in complete, though not necessarily parallel, sentences. Sentence outlines give the reader a clearer idea of what you will argue than topic outlines.

Regardless of the kind of formal outline you choose, convention states that you begin with a statement of your thesis and indicate increasing levels of support in this order: I., A., 1., a., (1), (a). In scientific papers, however, a decimal system is also commonly used. A topic outline follows.

Thesis: Among the pluralist, elitist and neo-Marxist political theories, neo-Marxism provides the most powerful analysis of the current political scene.

1. *Functions of political theories*
   - *A. Tools to help understand governments*
     1. *Categorization*
     2. *Comparison*
   - *B. Limitation: Over-simplification*

2. *Three political theories*
   - *A. Neo-Marxism*
     - *Definition*
     - *Description*
   - *B. Pluralism*
     - *Definition*
     - *Description*
   - *C. Elitism*
     - *Definition*
     - *Description*

3. *Comparative analysis of U.S. government*
   - *A. Pluralism*
     - *Analysis*
     - *Weaknesses*
   - *B. Elitism*
     - *Analysis*
     - *Weaknesses*
   - *C. Neo-Marxism*
     - *Analysis*
     - *Critique*
       a. *Strengths*
       b. *Weaknesses*

4. *Conclusion*

Notice that in a formal outline, whenever a point is subdivided, there are at least two subpoints. Logic and convention state that when you divide a point, you can divide it into no fewer than two subpoints.Remember, depending on how your research or writing is going, you may need to make use of any or all of the outlines described in this pamphlet.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LYe
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LYf

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Proofreading for common surface errors: Spelling and Punctuation

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LWL

1. About

In most college courses, instructors expect that your writing will be free of surface errors, but you may be uncertain of the rules for spelling, punctuation, grammar, and word choice. The following rules and examples, taken primarily from The St. Martin's Handbook, 3rd ed., by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors, may help you find and correct some of the most common surface errors in your writing. If you have questions about these rules, consult any good grammar book.

2. Spelling

Spelling errors are the most common surface errors as well as the most easily corrected. To correct spelling errors, use a spell-checker, regardless of your spelling skill, along with a dictionary to help you find the right alternative for a misspelled word. Remember that the spell-checker won't help with homonyms, words that sound alike but have different spellings and meanings. Some words that can cause trouble are listed below.

their	(possessive form of *they*)
there	(in that place)
they're	(contraction of *they are*)
accept	(a verb, meaning to *receive* or *to admit to a group*)
except	(usually a preposition, meaning *but* or *only*)
who's	(contraction of who is or who has)
whose	(possessive form of *who*)
its	(possessive form of *it*)
it's	(contraction of *it is* or *it has*)
your	(possessive form of *you*)
you're	(contraction of *you are*)
affect	(usually a verb, meaning to *influence*)
effect	(usually a noun, meaning *result*)
than	(used in comparison)
then	(refers to a time in the past)
were	(form of the verb *to be*)
we're	(contraction of *we are*)
where	(related to location or place)
weather	(climatic conditions)
whether	(conjunction, meaning *if*)

2. Punctuation

Commas:

1. Use a comma to signal a pause between the *introductory element* of a sentence and the main part of the sentence.
   - **Frankly**, the committee's decision baffled us.
   - **Though I gave him detailed advice for revising**, his draft only became worse.

2. Use a comma when you join two independent sentences with a conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).
   - Meredith wore jeans to the hotel, **but** she changed before the wedding.

3. If the two clauses in your sentence are both short, however, you may be able to omit the comma before *and* or *or*. You may also be able to omit the comma after an introductory element if the element is short.
   - She saw her chance and she took it.
   - At the racetrack Henry lost nearly his entire paycheck.

4. Use a comma to signal the presence of a nonrestrictive element, that is, a word, phrase, or clause that gives additional information about the preceding part of the sentence, but which can be deleted without changing the basic meaning of the sentence. If the element is in the middle of the sentence, use a comma before and after the element.
   - Marina, **who was the president of the club**, was the first to speak.
   - Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony until 1898, **when it was ceded to the U.S.**

5. Do **not** use a comma with a restrictive element, that is, a word, phrase, or clause that is essential to the meaning of the word or phrase it modifies. A restrictive element cannot be deleted without changing the sentence's basic meaning.
   - Wrong: I'll return the sweater, **that I borrowed**, after I wear it tonight.
   - Right: I'll return the sweater **that I borrowed** after I wear it tonight.
   - Wrong: The people, **who vandalized the school**, were never caught.
   - Right: The people **who vandalized the school** were never caught.

6. Traditionally, commas separate all the items in a series (three or more words, phrases, or clauses that appear consecutively in a sentence). Some instructors don't require a comma before the and or or between the last two items. Check your teacher's preference, and be consistent in either using or omitting this last comma.

- Sharks eat squid, shrimp, crabs, and fish

Apostrophes:

1. To show that one thing belongs to another, either an apostrophe and an s or an apostrophe alone is added to the word representing the thing that possesses the other. An apostrophe and an s are used for *singular nouns, indefinite pronouns* (*anybody, everyone, nobody, somebody*), and for plural nouns that do not end in s. When plural nouns end in s only the apostrophe is used.

- Overambitious parents can be harmful to a **child's** well-being.
- The accident was **nobody's** fault.
- Both **drivers'** cars were damaged in the accident.

2. The word its, spelled without an apostrophe, is the possessive form of it, meaning of it or belonging to it. The word it's, spelled with an apostrophe, is a contraction of it is or it has. Even though with nouns an apostrophe usually indicates a possessive form, the possessive in this case is the one without the apostrophe.

- The car is lying on **its** side in the ditch. **It's a** white 1986 Buick.

Periods:

1. A *comma splice* occurs when two or more clauses that could each stand alone as a sentence are written with only a comma between them. To correct this error, **separate the clauses with a period or semicolon, connect the clauses with a word like** *and, for, because,* or *although,* **or combine them into one clause.**

- Wrong: The ship was huge, its mast stood thirty feet high.
- Right: The ship was huge; **its** mast stood thirty feet high.
- Wrong: The ship was huge, **and its** mast stood thirty feet high.
- Right: The mast of the huge ship stood thirty feet high.

2. Fused sentences are created when two or more groups of words that could each be written as an independent sentence are written without any punctuation between them. To eliminate a fused sentence, **divide the groups of words into separate sentences, or join them in a way that shows their relationship.**

- Wrong: Our fiscal policy is not well defined it confuses many people.
- Right: Our fiscal policy is not well defined. **It** confuses many people.
- Our fiscal policy is not well defined, **and it** confuses many people.

Quotation Marks:

1. Use quotation marks to signal direct quotations, titles, definitions, and words used ironically.

- George Bush called for a "kinder, gentler" America.
- My dictionary defines isolation as "the quality or state of being alone."
- The "fun" of surgery begins before the operation even takes place.

2. Periods and commas go inside closing quotation marks; colons and semicolons go outside them.

- I would use one word to describe the duke in Browning's poem "My Last Duchesse": arrogant.
- One of the Beatles' first popular songs was "Love Me Do"; it catapulted the band to stardom.

General Proofreading Suggestions

- Familiarize yourself with the errors you commonly make by looking over writing that has already been marked. Make a list of your errors, and check your writing for each of them.
- **Carefully** and **slowly** read your writing out loud. Often your ear will hear what your eye did not see.
- Read your writing backwards, sentence by sentence, from the last sentence to the first sentence. This technique interrupts the logical flow of the prose and neutralizes any impression of correctness arising from your knowledge of what you meant to say.
- Use your dictionary to check any words you're unsure about, and to check for correct prepositions, verb tenses, and irregular forms.
- Commas, periods, and apostrophes are sometimes more complicated than the examples illustrated in this text. Consult a handbook for any other questions.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LY8
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LY9

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Grammar: Proofreading for common surface errors

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LWI

1. Verbs

Verbs can be in either active or passive voice. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb; in passive voice, the subject receives the action of the verb. Readers typically find active voice sentences more vigorous and clearer; for these reasons, writers usually prefer active voice.

- Passive: **The ball** was kicked by the boy.
- Active: **The boy** kicked the ball.
- Passive: **A decision** was reached by the committee.
- Active: **The committee** reached a decision.
- Passive: **Many arguments** are offered against abortion.
- Active: **Religious leaders** offer many arguments against abortion.

Notice that in the passive voice examples, the doer of the action is either at the end of the sentence in a prepositional phrase or, in the third example, is missing entirely from the sentence. In each active voice example, however, the doer of the action is in the subject position at the beginning of the sentence.

On some occasions, however, you might have a good reason for choosing a passive construction; for example, you might choose the passive if you want to emphasize the receiver of the action or minimize the importance of the actor.

- Appropriate passive: The medical records were destroyed in the fire.
- Appropriate passive: The experiment was performed successfully.

Passive voice verbs always include a form of the verb *to be*, such as *am, are, was, is being*, and so on. To check for active versus passive voice, look for sentences that contain a form of this verb, and see whether in these sentences the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb.

If you shift verb tense (for example, from past to present tense) in a sentence or passage without a good reason, you may confuse your reader.

- Wrong:After he **joined** the union, Sam **appears** at a rally and **makes** a speech.

- Right: After he joined the union, Sam **appeared** at a rally and **made** a speech.

To proofread for verb tense errors, circle all verbs in your writing. Look at the verbs in sequence and check that you haven't changed tense unintentionally.

2. Subject-Verb Agreement

Make sure that the subject and verb of each clause or sentence agree—that is, that a singular subject has singular verb, and a plural subject a plural verb. When other words come between subject and verb, you may mistake the noun nearest to the verb—before and after—for the verb's real subject.

- Wrong: A central **part** of my life goals **have been** to go to law school.
- Right: A central **part** of my life goals **has been** to go to law school.
- Wrong: The **profits** earned by the cosmetic industry **is** not high.
- Right: The **profits** earned by the cosmetic industry **are** not high.

Be particularly careful that your subject and verb agree when your subject is made up of two or more parts joined by *and* or *or*; when your subject is a word like committee or jury, which can take either a singular or a plural verb depending on whether it is treated as a unit or as a group of individuals; or when your subject is a word like mathematics or measles, which looks plural but is singular in meaning.

- Wrong: **My brother** and his **friend** *commutes* every day from Louisville.
- Right: My **brother** and his **friend** *commute* every day from Louisville.
- Wrong: The **committee** *was taking* all the responsibility themselves.
- Right: The **committee** *were taking* all the responsibility themselves.
- Wrong: **Measles** *have become* less common in the United States.
- Right: **Measles** *has become* less common in the United States.

To proofread for subject-verb agreement, circle the subject and verb in each sentence and be sure they agree.

3. Pronouns

A pronoun (*like I, it, you, him, her, this, themselves, someone, who, which*) is used to replace another word—its antecedent—so that the antecedent does not have to be repeated. Check each pronoun to make sure that it agrees with its antecedent in gender and number. Remember that words like *each, either, neither, and one* are singular; when they are used as antecedents, they take singular pronouns. Antecedents made up of two or more parts joined by *or* or *nor* take pronouns that agree with the nearest antecedents.

Collective noun antecedents (audience, team) can be singular or plural depending on whether they refer to a single unit or a group of individuals.

- Wrong: Every **one** of the puppies thrived in **their** new home
- Right: Every **one** of the puppies thrived in **its** new home.
- Wrong: **Neither Jane nor Susan** felt that **they** had been treated fairly.
- Right: **Neither Jane nor Susan** felt that **she** had been treated fairly.
- Wrong: The **team** frequently changed **its** positions to get varied experience.
- Right: The **team** frequently changed **their** positions to get varied experience.

To proofread for agreement of pronouns and antecedents, circle each pronoun, identify its antecedent, and make sure that they agree in gender and number.

As noted above, most *indefinite pronouns* (like *each, either, neither, or one*) are singular; therefore, they take singular verbs. A *relative pronoun*, like *who, which, or that*, takes a verb that agrees with the pronoun's antecedent.

- Wrong: **Each** of the items in these designs **coordinate** with the others.
- Right: **Each** of the items in these designs **coordinates** with the others.
- Wrong: He is one of the **employees** who **works** overtime regularly
- Right: He is one of the **employees** who **work** overtime regularly.

(In this example, the antecedent of who is employees, and therefore the verb should be plural.)

A vague pronoun reference occurs when readers cannot be sure of a pronoun's antecedent. If a pronoun could refer to more than one antecedent, or if the antecedent is implied but not explicitly stated, revise the sentence to make the antecedent clear.

- Wrong: Before Mary assaulted Mrs. Turpin, **she** was a judgmental woman.
- Right: Before Mary assaulted Mrs. Turpin, **the latter** was a judgmental woman.
- Wrong: They believe that an egg is as important as a human being, but **it** can't be proved.
- Right: They believe that the egg is as important as a human being, but **such an assertion** can't be proved.

4. Other Grammatical Errors

The sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence punctuated as a sentence. To make it a complete sentence, **join it to the main clause or rewrite it**.

- Wrong: She is a good friend. A person whom I trust and admire.
- Right: She is a good friend, **a** person whom I trust and admire.
- Wrong: In the workshop, we learned the value of discipline. Also how to take good notes.
- Right: In the workshop, we learned the value of discipline. **We also learned** how to take good notes.
- Wrong: The old aluminum bat sitting on its trailer.
- Right: The old aluminum boat **was** sitting on its trailer.

To proofread for sentence fragments, check all sentences for a subject, a verb, and at least one clause that does not begin with a subordinating word like as, although, if, when, that, since, or who.

Misplaced or dangling modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses not clearly connected to the word they modify. Move a misplaced modifier closer to the word it describes, or revise a sentence to give a dangling modifier a word to modify.

- Wrong: **They** could see the eagles swooping and diving **with binoculars**.
- Right: **With binoculars, they** could see the eagles swooping and diving.
- Wrong: **Nixon** told reporters that he planned to get out of politics **after he lost the 1962 gubernational race**.
- Right: After he lost the 1962 gubernational race, Nixon told reporters that he planned to get out of politics.
- Wrong: A rabbit's teeth are never used for defense even **when cornered**.
- Right: Even when cornered, a rabbit never uses its teeth for defense.
- Wrong: **As a young boy**, his grandmother told stories of her years as a country schoolteacher.
- Right: **As a young boy, he** heard his grandmother tell stories of her years as a country schoolteacher.

To proofread for misplaced or dangling modifiers, circle all modifiers and draw a line to the word they describe; be sure they can't mistakenly modify some other word.

5. General Proofreading Suggestions

- Familiarize yourself with the errors you commonly make by looking over writing that has already been marked. Make a list of your errors, and check your writing for each of them.

- **Carefully** and **slowly** read your writing out loud. Often your ear will hear what your eye did not see.
- Read your writing, sentence by sentence, from the last sentence to the first sentence. This technique interrupts the logical flow of the prose and neutralizes any impression of correctness arising from your knowledge of what you meant to say.
- Use your dictionary to check any words you are unsure about, and to check for correct prepositions, verb tenses, and irregular forms.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LY6
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LY7

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Plagarism: What it is and How to Avoid it

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LWx

1. About

In college courses, we are continually engaging with other people's ideas: we read them in texts, hear them in lecture, discuss them in class, and incorporate them into our own writing. As a result, it is very important that we give credit where it is due. Plagiarism is using others' ideas and words without clearly acknowledging the source of that information. To avoid plagiarizing, you must give credit whenever you use:

- another person's idea, opinion, or theory
- any facts, statistics, graphs, drawings—any pieces of information—that are not common knowledge
- quotations of another person's actual spoken or written words
- paraphrase of another person's spoken or written words

These guidelines are from the IU Code of Student Rights,Responsibilities, and Conduct; all students are required to follow them.

2. Examples of Plagiarism, and of Appropriate Use of Others' Words and Ideas

Here's the original text, from page 1 of Lizzie Borden: A Case Book of Family and Crime in the 1890s by Joyce Williams et al.:

> *The rise of industry, the growth of cities, and the expansion of the population were the three great developments of late nineteenth century American history. As new, larger, steam-powered factories became a feature of the American landscape in the East, they transformed farm hands into industrial laborers, and provided jobs for a rising tide of immigrants. With industry came urbanization—the growth of large cities (like Fall River, Massachusetts, where the Bordens lived) which became the centers of production as well as of commerce and trade.*

Here's an **unacceptable** paraphrase that is **plagiarism**:

> *The increase of industry, the growth of cities, and the explosion of the population were three large factors of nineteenth century America. As steam-driven companies became more visible in the eastern part of the country, they changed farm hands into factory workers and provided jobs for the large wave of immigrants. With industry came the growth of large cities like Fall River where the Bordens lived which turned into centers of commerce and trade as well as production.*

The preceding passage is considered plagiarism for two reasons:

- The writer has only changed around a few words and phrases, or changed the order of the original's sentences.
- The writer has failed to cite a source for any of the ideas or facts.

If you do either or both of these things, you are plagiarizing.

Note that this paragraph is also problematic because it changes the sense of several sentences (for example, "steam-driven companies" in sentence two misses the original's emphasis on factories).

Here's an **acceptable** paraphrase:

> *Fall River, where the Borden family lived, was typical of northeastern industrial cities of the nineteenth century. Steam-powered production had shifted labor from agriculture to manufacturing, and as immigrants arrived in the US, they found work in these new factories. As a result, populations grew, and large urban areas arose. Fall River was one of these manufacturing and commercial centers (Williams 1).*

This is acceptable paraphrasing because the writer:

- accurately relays the information in the original
- uses her own words
- lets her reader know the source of her information

Here's an example of quotation and paraphrase used together, which is also **acceptable**:

> *Fall River, where the Borden family lived, was typical of northeastern industrial cities of the nineteenth century. As steam-powered production shifted labor from agriculture to manufacturing, the demand for workers "transformed farm hands into industrial laborers," and created jobs for immigrants. In turn, growing populations increased the size of urban areas. Fall River was one of these hubs "which became the centers of production as well as of commerce and trade" (Williams 1).*

This is acceptable paraphrasing because the writer:

- accurately relays the information in the original
- uses her own words
- lets her reader know the source of her information

Here's an example of quotation and paraphrase used together, which is also acceptable:

Fall River, where the Borden family lived, was typical of northeastern industrial cities of the nineteenth century. As steam-powered production shifted labor from agriculture to manufacturing, the demand for workers "transformed farm hands into industrial laborers," and created jobs for immigrants. In turn, growing populations increased the size of urban areas. Fall River was one of these hubs "which became the centers of production as well as of commerce and trade" (Williams 1).

This is acceptable paraphrasing because the writer:

- records the information in the original passage accurately
- gives credit for the ideas in this passage
- indicated which parts are taken directly from her source by putting those passages in quotation marks and citing the page number.

Note that if the writer had used those phrases or sentences in her own paper without putting quotation marks around them, she would be **plagiarizing**. Using another person's phrases or sentences without quotation marks is considered plagiarism **even if the writer cites in her own text the source of the phraases or sentences she has 'borrowed'.**

3. Plagiarism and the World Wide Web

The World Wide Web has become a popular source of information for students' papers, and many questions have arisen about how to avoid plagiarizing these sources. In most cases, the same rules apply as for a printed source: when you refer to ideas or quote from a WWW site, you must cite that source.

If you want to use visual information from a WWW site, many of the same rules apply. Copying visual information or graphics from a WWW site (or from a printed source) into a paper is very similar to quoting information, and the source of the visual information or graphic must be cited. These rules also apply to other uses of textual or visual information from WWW sites; for example, if you are constructing a Web page as a class project, and you copy graphics or visual information from other sites, you must also provide information about the source of this information. In this case, it might also be a good idea to obtain permission from the WWW site's owner before using the graphics.

4. Strategies for Avoiding Plagiarism

- Put in quotations everything that comes directly from the text—especially when taking notes.
- Paraphrase, but be sure you are not just rearranging or replacing a few words. Instead, read over what you want to paraphrase carefully; cover up the text with your hand, or close the text so you can't see any of it (and so aren't tempted to use the text as a "guide"). Write out the idea in your own words without peeking.
- Check your paraphrase against the original text to be sure you have not accidentally used the same phrases or words, and that the information is accurate

5. Terms you need to know

Common knowledge: facts that can be found in numerous places and are likely to be known by a lot of people.

***Example**: John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States in 1960.*

This is generally known information. You do not need to document this fact. However, you must document facts that are not generally known and ideas that interpret facts.

***Example**: According to the American Family Leave Coalition's new book, **Family Issues and Congress**, President Bush's relationship with Congress has hindered family leave legislation (6).*

The idea that "Bush's relationship with Congress has hindered family leave legislation" is not a fact but an interpretation; consequently, you need to cite your source.

Quotation: using someone's words. When you quote, place the passage you are using in quotation marks, and document the source according to a standard documentation style.

The following example uses the Modern Language Association's style:

***Example**: According to Peter S. Pritchard in USA Today, "Public schools need reform but they're irreplaceable in teaching all the nation's young" (14).*

Paraphrase: using someone's ideas, but putting them in your own words. This is probably the skill you will use most when incorporating sources into your writing. Although you use your own words to paraphrase, you must still acknowledge the source of the information.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LYo
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LY3

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Paragraphs and Topic Sentences

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LWj

1. About

A paragraph is a series of sentences that are organized and coherent, and are all related to a single topic. Almost every piece of writing you do that is longer than a few sentences should be organized into paragraphs. This is because paragraphs show a reader where the subdivisions of an essay begin and end, and thus help the reader see the organization of the essay and grasp its main points.

Paragraphs can contain many different kinds of information. A paragraph could contain a series of brief examples or a single long illustration of a general point, or it might describe a place, character, or process, narrate a series of events, compare or contrast two or more things, classify items into categories, or describe causes and effects. Regardless of the kind of information they contain, all paragraphs share certain characteristics. One of the most important of these is a topic sentence.

2. Topic Sentences

A well-organized paragraph supports or develops a single controlling idea, which is expressed in a sentence called the topic sentence. A topic sentence has several important functions: it substantiates or supports an essay's thesis statement; it unifies the content of a paragraph and directs the order of the sentences; and it advises the reader of the subject to be discussed and how the paragraph will discuss it.

Readers generally look to the first few sentences in a paragraph to determine the subject and perspective of the paragraph. That's why it's often best to put the topic sentence at the very beginning of the paragraph. In some cases, however, it's more effective to place another sentence before the topic sentence—for example, a sentence linking the current paragraph to the previous one, or one providing background information.

Although most paragraphs should have a topic sentence, there are a few situations when a paragraph might not need a topic sentence. For example, you might be able to omit a topic sentence in a paragraph that narrates a series of events, if a paragraph continues developing an idea that you introduced (with a topic sentence) in the previous paragraph, or if all the sentences and details in a paragraph clearly refer--perhaps indirectly--to a main point. The vast majority of your paragraphs, however, should have a topic sentence.

3. Paragraph Structure

Most paragraphs in an essay have a three-part structure--introduction, body, and conclusion. You can see this structure in paragraphs whether they are narrating, describing, comparing, contrasting, or analyzing information. Each part of the paragraph plays an important role in communicating your meaning to your reader.

- *Introduction*: the first section of a paragraph; should include the topic sentence and any other sentences at the beginning of the paragraph that give background information or provide a transition.
- *Body*: follows the introduction; discusses the controlling idea, using facts, arguments, analysis, examples, or other information.
- *Conclusion*: the final section; summarizes the connections between the information discussed in the body of the paragraphs and the paragraph's controlling idea.

The following paragraph illustrates this pattern of organization. In this paragraph both the topic sentence and the concluding sentence (printed in boldface) help the reader keep the paragraph's main point in mind.

> ***Scientists have learned to supplement the sense of sight in numerous ways.*** *In front of the tiny pupil of the eye they put, on Mount Palomar, a great monocle 200 inches in diameter, and with it see 2000 times farther into the depths of space. Or they look through a small pair of lenses arranged as a microscope into a drop of water or blood, and magnify by as much as 2000 diameters the living creatures there, many of which are among man's most dangerous enemies. Or, if we want to see distant happenings on earth, they use some of the previously wasted electromagnetic waves to carry television images which they re-create as light by whipping tiny crystals on a screen with electrons in a vacuum. Or they can bring happenings of long ago and far away as colored motion pictures, by arranging silver atoms and color-absorbing molecules to force light waves into the patterns of the original reality. Or if we want to see into the center of a steel casting or the chest of an injured child, they send the information on a beam of penetrating short-wave X rays, and then convert it back into images we can see on a screen or photograph.* ***Thus almost every type of electromagnetic radiation yet discovered has been used to extend our sense of sight in some way.***
>
> *George Harrison, "Faith and the Scientist"*

4. Coherence

In a coherent paragraph, each sentence relates clearly to the topic sentence or controlling idea, but there is more to coherence than this. If a paragraph is coherent, each sentence flows smoothly into the next without obvious shifts or jumps. A coherent paragraph also highlights the ties between old and new information to make the structure of ideas or arguments clear to the reader. Along with the smooth flow of sentences, a paragraph's coherence may also be related to its length. If you have written a very long paragraph, one that fills a double-spaced typed page, for example, you should check it carefully to see if it contains more than one controlling idea. If it does, you should start a new paragraph where the original paragraph wanders from its controlling idea. On the other hand, if a paragraph is very short (only one or two sentences, perhaps), you may need to develop its controlling idea more thoroughly, or combine it with another paragraph. A number of other techniques that you can use to establish coherence in paragraphs are described below.

Repeat key words or phrases

Particularly in paragraphs in which you define or identify an important idea or theory, be consistent in how you refer to it. This consistency and repetition will bind the paragraph together and help the reader understand your definition or description.

Create parallel structures.

Parallel structures are created by constructing two or more phrases or sentences that have the same grammatical structure and use the same parts of speech. By creating parallel structures, you make your sentences clearer and easier to read. In addition, repeating a pattern in a series of consecutive sentences helps your reader see the connections between ideas. In the paragraph above about scientists and the sense of sight, several sentences in the body of the paragraph have been constructed in a parallel way. The parallel structures (which have been underlined) help the reader see that the paragraph is organized as a set of examples of a general statement.

Be consistent in point of view, verb tense, and number.

Consistency in point of view, verb tense, and number are subtle but important aspects of coherence. If you shift from the more personal you to the impersonal one, from past to present tense, or from a man to they, for example, you make your paragraph less coherent. Such inconsistencies can also confuse your reader and make your argument more difficult to follow.

Use transition words or phrases between sentences and between paragraphs.

Transitional expressions emphasize the relationships between ideas, so they help readers follow your train of thought or see connections that they might otherwise miss or misunderstand. The following paragraph shows how carefully chosen transitions (underlined) lead the reader smoothly from the introduction to the conclusion of the paragraph.

> *I don't wish to deny that the flattened, minuscule head of the large-bodied "Stegosaurus" houses little brain from our subjective, top-heavy perspective, but I do wish to assert that we should not expect more of the beast. First of all, large animals have relatively smaller brains than related, small animals. The correlation of brain size with body size among kindred animals (all reptiles, all mammals, for example) is remarkably regular. As we move from small to large animals, from mice to elephants or small lizards to Komodo dragons, brain size increases, but not so fast as body size. In other words, bodies grow faster than brains, and large animals have low ratios of brain weight to body weight. In fact, brains grow only about two-thirds as fast as bodies. Since we have no reason to believe that large animals are consistently stupider than their smaller relatives, we must conclude that large animals require relatively less brain to do as well as smaller animals. If we do not recognize this relationship, we are likely to underestimate the mental power of very large animals, dinosaurs in particular.*
>
> *Stephen Jay Gould, "Were Dinosaurs Dumb?"*

5. Some Useful Transitions

(Modified from Diana Hacker, A Writer's Reference, 3rd ed.)

To show addition: again, and, also, besides, equally important, first (second, etc.), further, furthermore, in addition, in the first place, moreover, next, too

To give examples: for example, for instance, in fact, specifically, that is, to illustrate

To compare: although, and yet, at the same time, but, despite, even though, however, in contrast, in spite of, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, still, though, yet

To summarize or conclude: all in all, in conclusion, in other words, in short, in summary, on the whole, that is, therefore, to sum up

To show time:

after, afterward, as long as, as soon as, at last, before, during, earlier, finally, formerly, immediately, later, meanwhile, next, since, shortly, subsequently, then, thereafter, until, when, while

To show place or direction:
above, below, beyond, close, elsewhere, farther on, here, nearby, opposite, to the left (north, etc.)

To indicate logical relationship:
accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, for this reason, hence, if, otherwise, since, so, then, therefore, thus

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LXO
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LXN

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Writing Conclusions

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LXg

1. About

Though expectations vary from one discipline to the next, the conclusion of your paper is generally a place to explore the implications of your topic or argument. In other words, the end of your paper is a place to look outward or ahead in order to explain why you made the points you did.

2. Writing the Conclusion

In the past, you may have been told that your conclusion should summarize what you have already said by restating your thesis and main points. It is often helpful to restate your argument in the conclusion, particularly in a longer paper, but most professors and instructors want students to go beyond simply repeating what they have already said. Restating your thesis is just a short first part of your conclusion. Make sure that you are not simply repeating yourself; your restated thesis should use new and interesting language.

After you have restated your thesis, you should not just summarize the key points of your argument. Your conclusion should offer the reader something new to think about—or, at the very least, it should offer the reader a new way of thinking about what you have said in your paper.

You can employ one of several strategies for taking your conclusion that important step further:

- Answer the question, "So what?"
- Connect to a larger theme from the course
- Complicate your claim with an outside source
- Pose a new research question as a result of your paper's findings
- Address the limitations of your argument

The strategy you employ in writing a conclusion for your paper may depend upon a number of factors:

- The conventions of the discipline in which you are writing
- The tone of your paper (whether your paper is analytical, argumentative, explanatory, etc.)
- Whether your paper is meant to be formal or informal

Choose a strategy that best maintains the flow and tone of your paper while allowing you to adequately tie together all aspects of your paper.

3. The Final "So what?" Strategy

Part of generating a thesis statement sometimes requires answering the "so what?" question—that is, explaining the significance of your basic assertion. When you use the "so what?" strategy to write your conclusion, you are considering what some of the implications of your argument might be beyond the points already made in your paper. This strategy allows you to leave readers with an understanding of why your argument is important in a broader context or how it can apply to a larger concept.

For example, consider a paper about alcohol abuse in universities. If the paper argues that alcohol abuse among students depends more on psychological factors than simply the availability of alcohol on campus, a "so what?" conclusion might tie together threads from the body of the paper to suggest that universities are not approaching alcohol education from the most effective perspective when they focus exclusively on limiting students' access to alcohol.

To use this strategy, ask yourself, "How does my argument affect how I approach the text or issue?"

4. The "Connecting to a Course Theme" Strategy

When you use the "connecting to a course theme" strategy to write your conclusion, you are establishing a connection between your paper's thesis and a larger theme or idea from the course for which you are writing your paper.

For example, consider a paper about mothers and daughters in Eudora Welty's Delta Wedding for a class called "The Inescapable South." This paper argues that a strong dependence on the mother is analogous to a strong dependence on the South. A "connecting to a course theme" conclusion for this paper might propose that Welty's daughter characters demonstrate what type of people can and cannot escape the South.

To use this strategy, ask yourself, "What is an overall theme of this course? How does my paper's thesis connect?"

5. The "Complicating Your Claim" Strategy

When you use the "complicating your claim" strategy to write your conclusion, you are using one or more additional resources to develop a more nuanced final thesis. Such additional resources could include a new outside source or textual evidence that seemingly contradicts your argument.

For example, consider a paper about Ireland's neutrality during World War II. This paper argues that Ireland refused to enter the war because it wanted to assert its sovereignty, not because it had no opinion about the conflict. A "complicating your claim" conclusion for this paper might provide historical evidence that Ireland did aid the Allies, suggesting that the Irish were more influenced by international diplomacy than their formal neutrality might suggest.

To use this strategy, ask yourself, "Is there any evidence against my thesis?" or "What does an outside source have to say about my thesis?"

6. The "Posing a New Question" Strategy

When you use the "posing a new question" strategy to write your conclusion, you are inviting the reader to consider a new idea or question that has appeared as a result of your argument.

For example, consider a paper about three versions of the folktale "Rapunzel." This paper argues that German, Italian, and Filipino versions of "Rapunzel" all vary in terms of characterization, plot development, and moral, and as a result have different themes. A "posing a new question" conclusion for this paper might ask the historical and cultural reasons for how three separate cultures developed such similar stories with such different themes.

To use this strategy, ask yourself, "What new question has developed out of my argument?"

7. The "Addressing Limitations" Strategy

When you use the "addressing limitations" strategy to write your conclusion, you are discussing the possible weaknesses of your argument and, thus, the fallibility of your overall conclusion. This strategy is often useful in concluding papers on scientific studies and experiments.

For example, consider a paper about an apparent correlation between religious belief and support for terrorism. An "addressing limitations" conclusion for this paper might suggest that the apparent correlation relies on the paper's definition of "terrorism" and, since the definition is not objective, the apparent correlation might have been wrongly identified.

To use this strategy, ask yourself, "In what aspects is my argument lacking? Are there circumstances in which my conclusions might be wrong?"

8. Polishing Your Conclusion—and Your Paper

After you've completed your conclusion, look over what you have written and consider making some small changes to promote clarity and originality:

- Unless your discipline requires them, remove obvious transitions like "in conclusion," "in summary," and "in result" from your conclusion; they get in the way of the actual substance of your conclusion.
- Consider taking a strong phrase from your conclusion and using it as the title or subtitle of your paper.

Also, be sure to proofread your conclusion carefully for errors and typos. You should double-check your entire paper for accuracy and correct spelling as well.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LYk
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LYl

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Write a thesis statement

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LW6

1. About

Almost all of us—even if we don't do it consciously—look early in an essay for a one- or two-sentence condensation of the argument or analysis that is to follow. We refer to that condensation as a thesis statement.

2. Why Should Your Essay Contain a Thesis Statement?

- to test your ideas by distilling them into a sentence or two
- to better organize and develop your argument
- to provide your reader with a "guide" to your argument

In general, your thesis statement will accomplish these goals if you think of the thesis as the answer to the question your paper explores.

3. Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is Assigned

Almost all assignments, no matter how complicated, can be reduced to a single question. Your first step, then, is to distill the assignment into that specific question. For example, if your assignment is, "Write a report to the local school board explaining the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class," turn the request into a question like, "What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class?" After you've chosen the one question your essay will answer, compose one or two complete sentences answering that question.

Q: What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth- grade class?

A The potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class are . . .

or

A: Using computers in a fourth-grade class promises to improve . . .

The answer to the question is the thesis statement for the essay.

4. Develop a Thesis Statement if the Topic is not Assigned

Even if your assignment doesn't ask a specific question, your thesis statement still needs to answer a question about the issue you'd like to explore. In this situation, your job is to figure out what question you'd like to write about.

A good thesis statement will usually include the following four attributes:

- Take on a subject on which reasonable people could disagree
- Deal with a subject that can be adequately treated given the nature of the assignment
- Express one main idea
- Assert your conclusions about a subject

Let's see how to generate a thesis statement for a social policy paper.

Brainstorm the topic.
Let's say that your class focuses upon the problems posed by changes in the dietary habits of Americans. You find that you are interested in the amount of sugar Americans consume. You start out with a thesis statement like this:

> *Sugar consumption.*

This fragment isn't a thesis statement. Instead, it simply indicates a general subject. Furthermore, your reader doesn't know what you want to say about sugar consumption

Narrow the topic.
Your readings on the topic, however, have led you to the conclusion that elementary school children are consuming far more sugar than is healthy. You change your thesis statement to look like this:

> *Reducing sugar consumption by elementary school children.*

This fragment not only announces your subject, but it focuses on one segment of the population: elementary school children. Furthermore, it raises a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree, because while most people might agree that children consume more sugar than they used to, not everyone would agree on what should be done or who should do it. You should note that this fragment is not a thesis statement because your reader doesn't know your conclusions on the topic.

Take a position on the topic.
After reflecting on the topic a little while longer, you decide that what you really want to say about this topic is that something should be done to reduce the amount of sugar these children consume. You revise your thesis statement to look like this:

> *More attention should be paid to the food and beverage choices available to elementary school children.*

This statement asserts your position, but the terms "*more attention*" and "*food and beverage choices*" are vague.

Use specific language.
You decide to explain what you mean about *food and beverage choices*, so you write:

> *Experts estimate that half of elementary school children consume nine times the recommended daily allowance of sugar.*

This statement is specific, but it isn't a thesis. It merely reports a statistic instead of making an assertion.

Make an assertion based on clearly stated support.
You finally revise your thesis statement one more time to look like this:

> *Because half of all American elementary school children consume nine times the recommended daily allowance of sugar, schools should be required to replace the beverages in soda machines with healthy alternatives.*

Notice that this thesis answers the question, "What should be done to reduce sugar consumption by children and who should do it?" When you started thinking about the paper, you may not have had a specific question in mind, but as you became more involved in the topic, your ideas became more specific. Your thesis changed to reflect your new insights.

5. Tell a Strong Thesis Statement from a Weak One

A strong thesis statement takes some sort of stand.
Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements for such a paper:

> *There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.*

This is a **weak** thesis statement. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase negative and positive aspects is vague.

> *Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.*

This is a **strong** thesis statement because it takes a stand, and because it's specific.

A strong thesis statement justifies discussion.
Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

> *My family is an extended family.*

This is a **weak** thesis statement because it merely states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

> *While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.*

This is a **strong** thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

A strong thesis statement justifies discussion.
Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis statement expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

> *Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and Web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.*

This is a **weak** thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or Web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become more clear. One way to revise the thesis statement would be to write:

> *Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using Web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.*

This is a **strong** thesis statement because it shows that the two ideas are related.

A strong thesis statement is specific.
A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you're writing a 7-to-10 page paper on hunger, you might say:

> *World hunger has many causes and effects.*

This is a **weak** thesis statement for two major reasons. First, world hunger can't be discussed thoroughly in 7 to 10 pages. Second, many causes and effects is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

> *Hunger persists in Glandelinia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.*

This is a **strong** thesis statement because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic, and it also identifies some specific causes for the existence of hunger.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LXL
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LXM

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Doctoral Dissertations & Proposals: Social Sciences & Humanities

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LVb

1. About

A doctoral dissertation or thesis is a professional necessity; in order to finish your graduate degree and begin your professional career, it is necessary to write and defend one.

Your dissertation is a document that demonstrates your professional proficiency in a discipline or subject.

For many beginning writers, the word dissertation conjures unrealistic visions of an industrious year spent in the university library before miraculously emerging with five polished chapters. Since this is certainly not the case for most students, this pamphlet will offer advice about the dissertation writing and revising process, suggest ways that Writing Tutorial Services can help dissertation writers, and highlight other useful resources.

2. Choosing a Topic

Most disciplines require that students write and defend a dissertation or thesis proposal before they begin research and writing. The **dissertation proposal** is a document that presents the main questions or ideas your project will investigate, reviews relevant literature on the topic, explains the necessity of further research, and, finally, discusses expected hypotheses and their significance to the topic and in the larger discipline.

Choosing your topic can be frightening: you will probably be working on this project for several years. Talking with faculty in your department can help you begin to focus your thinking.

In your field of study, you will come to be identified by your project and may revise your finished dissertation to publish in article or book form. But just because a dissertation hasn't been written doesn't mean it should be written. You need to justify why your proposed project is both personally meaningful and professionally important. It can be helpful to ask yourself several questions in order to choose a topic:

- What scholarly ideas, concepts, or debates do I find most interesting? What issues am I most drawn to and why?
- Are there distinct gaps or problems in my field that need further study?
- What research methodologies and writing styles do I find most compelling?

When you are considering possible topics, it's also important to think about who will advise your dissertation. Meeting with your prospective advisor will be important for narrowing and refining the central questions of your project. Since he or she has most likely advised previous dissertations, it's also a good idea to ask your advisor to suggest a model dissertation that you can use to help realistically frame your own topic

3. Researching and Writing your Dissertation

The dissertation research and writing process varies by discipline. For students in the sciences, the research process and experimental findings can sometimes be more important than the final written document produced. Students in the social sciences often have to conduct intensive field or archival research before focusing on writing in a concentrated way.

Below are some general strategies to help you through the dissertation process.

Write every day

As the saying goes, even if you wrote just a page every day, you would have over 365 pages after a year—that's almost a finished dissertation!

Although this timetable is slightly unrealistic, habitual writing is important for completing your dissertation. Writing can help you generate complex ideas and process information. Don't put off writing until you have what you consider to be fully formed ideas and chapters—writing even while you're conducting research, for example, will allow you to refine your research questions and begin envisioning how your data will fit together.

Daily writing, no matter how short, will ensure consistent engagement with your dissertation ideas. Nothing is more difficult—or frustrating—than returning to your project after having spent weeks or months completely away from it.

Set realistic short-term and long-term deadlines and construct a timetable. In order to make your project more manageable, break down your dissertation into workable chunks that could be shared with your writing group or brought to Writing Tutorial Services for feedback. Set realistic chapter deadlines and meetings with your advisor and establish a policy for dealing with missed deadlines. Feeling stuck and missing multiple deadlines is an important reason to seek out your advisor, not a reason to avoid him or her.

Form a dissertation writing group

Having a group of other dissertating students in your field can create a supportive environment in which to discuss ideas, present writing, and get feedback before submitting chapters to advisors or committees.

Group meetings can also help motivate you to write regularly. It's a good idea to form a writing group early in the process, establish clear expectations concerning what members hope to get out of the group, and set a realistic writing and meeting schedule..

Set regular deadlines
Services for feedback. Set realistic chapter deadlines and meetings with your advisor and establish a policy for dealing with missed deadlines. Feeling stuck and missing multiple deadlines is an important reason to seek out your advisor, not a reason to avoid him or her.

Own your writing.
Remember that your doctoral dissertation belongs to you. It demonstrates your disciplinary proficiency, defines your professional identity, and will likely be published. Therefore, now is the time to develop the professional skills necessary for success in your discipline, including having your work read and reviewed by peers (for example, in your writing group), learning to self-diagnose and get advice for your writing weaknesses, and, if necessary, contacting a professional editor to help with language or grammatical difficulties.

Decide whether you need revising or proofreading
When you are thinking about the revision process, be clear about the differences between revising and proofreading.

Revising a dissertation means much more than editing for grammar, clarifying word choices, or cutting and pasting. The goal when revising your dissertation should be to make your ideas as developed and as clear as possible. Revising allows you to think in a concentrated and holistic way about your topic, to trace out larger connections and realize further implications of your ideas, and to organize your material in the most logical fashion. Things like word-level editing, transitions between paragraphs, and grammar issues are all part of the proofreading process that you may want to save until the very final stages of your project.

Seek help if you get stuck
Everyone gets stuck. When this happens, ask yourself why you're getting stuck. Are you giving yourself enough quality writing time every day? Do you have a quiet and conducive writing environment? Can you create a revised timeline to break up what seems like an unwieldy chapter into manageable sections? Can you meet with your advisor to discuss your dissertation-writing block?

4. Using Writing Tutorial Services Successfully

Writing Tutorial Services is available to help with all stages of the dissertation writing process. When making an appointment, mention your dissertation topic and department so that you can be matched with a tutor familiar with your discipline if possible. Below are some helpful suggestions for making the most out of your tutoring session.

Know that you are your best critic
You know your project better than anyone else; it is therefore your responsibility to make the most out of your appointment by establishing clear and reasonable goals to focus on in the tutorial. What do you think are the main analytical weaknesses of this section of your dissertation? Why? Anticipate and locate potential problems in your analysis and discuss these with your tutor at the beginning of your appointment.

Identify your stage in the revision process.
Are you in the early stages of revision or have you already revised this section and submitted it to your committee for acceptance? Have you shown this section of your dissertation to anyone else or your advisor? If so, what comments or feedback did they provide?

Bring previous feedback to your appointment
If you have feedback from your advisor, writing group, or previous tutoring appointment and are trying to incorporate suggested changes, it's a good idea to bring this feedback with you.

Be ready to explain how the section of writing fits into your chapter and the larger project
Since your tutor will most likely be unfamiliar with your work, it's a good idea to be ready to explain exactly how the section of writing you bring to your appointment fits into the larger project. Often it can be helpful to write a short paragraph or abstract explaining your dissertation's main questions and arguments so that your tutor can provide careful feedback.

Doing this extra work before you come to Writing Tutorial Services will help you make the most out of your tutoring session.

Be aware that tutors can read only about ten pages of a dissertation in a 50-minute tutoring session
Trying to include more pages will leave too little time for careful feedback and productive discussion. Remember, the goal of the appointment is not to go over every aspect of the section you bring in, but rather to develop strategies that you can apply to other sections of your dissertation as well.

Revise your work between appointments
Feedback from WTS is most helpful when you incorporate it into your writing immediately following the appointment. Working between appointments will help you to focus your questions for the tutor and foster a sense of ownership over your own work.

5. Other Helpful Resource

University Resources
Indiana University's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offers a dissertation support group that helps students finish their dissertations by focusing on issues like time management, writer's block, and stress reduction. Contact CAPS to make an appointment.

The IU GradGrants Center offers free grant proposal assistance, including help with fellowship proposal writing. Visit their website at **go.iu.edu/3LYm** to make an appointment or browse online resources.

Bibliography
Bolker, Joan. Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis. New York: Henry Holt, 1998.

Peters, Robert L. Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or Ph.D. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.

Semenza, Gregory. Graduate Study for the Twenty-first Century: How to Build an Academic Career in the Humanities. New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2010.

Silva, Paul J. How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LXG
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LXI

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Personal Statements & Application Letters

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LWn

1. About

The process of applying for jobs, internships and graduate/professional programs often requires a personal statement or application letter. This type of writing asks writers to outline their strengths confidently and concisely, which can be challenging.

Though the requirements differ from application to application, the purpose of a personal statement is to represent your goals, experiences and qualifications in the best possible light, and to demonstrate your writing ability. Since your statement or application letter introduces you to your potential employer or program director, it is essential that you allow yourself enough time to craft a polished piece of writing.

2. Prepare Your Materials

Before you sit down to write, do some preparation in order to avoid frustration during the actual writing process. Obtain copies of documents such as transcripts, resumes and the application form itself; keeping them in front of you will make your job of writing much easier. Make a list of important information, in particular names and exact titles of former employers and supervisors, titles of jobs you have held, companies you have worked for, dates of appropriate work or volunteer experiences, and the duties involved. In this way, you will be able to refer to these materials while writing in order to include as much specific detail as possible.

3. Write a First Draft

After you have collected and reviewed these materials, it is time to start writing. The following is a list of concerns that writers should keep in mind when writing a personal statement or application letter.

Answer the Question

A major problem for all writers can be the issue of actually answering the question asked. For example, an application might want you to discuss the reason you are applying to a particular program or company. If you spend your entire essay or letter detailing your qualifications without mentioning what attracted you to the company or department, your statement probably will not be successful. To avoid this problem, read the question or assignment carefully both as you prepare and again just prior to writing. Keep the question in front of you as you write, and refer to it often. With application letters, the question is implicit: "Who are you, and why should you be considered for this job?".

Consider the "I" Problem

This is a personal statement; using the first person pronoun I is acceptable. Writers often feel rather self-conscious about using the first person excessively, either because they are modest or because they have learned to avoid first and second person (I and you) in any kind of formal writing. Yet in this type of writing using first person is essential because it makes your prose more lively. Using third person can result in a vague, wordy essay. Don't start every sentence with I, but remember that you and your experiences are the subject of the essay.

Avoid Unnecessary Duplication

Some writers repeat information in their personal statements that is already included in other parts of the application packet (resume, transcript, application form, etc.). However, it isn't necessary to include specific information such as your exact GPA in your personal statement. It is more efficient and effective to simply mention academic progress briefly ("I was on the Dean's List" or "I have taken numerous courses in the field of nutrition") and then discuss appropriate work or volunteer experiences in more detail.

Make Your Statement Distinctive

Many writers want to make their personal statements unique or distinctive in some way as a means of distinguishing their application from the many others received by the company or program. One way to do this is to include at least one detailed example or anecdote that is specific to your own experience—perhaps a description of an important family member or personal moment that influenced your decision to pursue a particular career or degree. This strategy makes your statement distinctive and memorable.

Keep it Brief

Personal statements are usually limited to 250–500 words or one typed page, so write concisely while still being detailed. Make sure that each paragraph is tightly focused on a single idea (one paragraph on the strengths of the program, one on your research experience, for example) to help keep the essay from becoming too long. Also, spend a little time working on word choice using a dictionary and a thesaurus, and include adjectives for more vivid and precise writing.

Organize Your Statement

As mentioned before, the requirements for personal statements differ, but generally a personal statement includes certain information and can follow this format (see sample below).

Introduction:

Many personal statements begin with a catchy opening, often the distinctive personal anecdote mentioned earlier, as a way of gaining the reader's attention.

From there you can connect the example to the actual program or position for which you are applying. Mention the specific name of the program or company, as well as the title of the position or degree you are seeking, in the first paragraph.

Detailed supporting paragraphs:
Subsequent paragraphs should address any specific questions from the application, which might deal with the strengths of the program or position, your own qualifications, your compatibility with the program or position, your long-term goals, or some combination thereof. Each paragraph should be focused and should have a topic sentence that informs the reader of the paragraph's emphasis. You need to remember, however, that the examples from your experience must be relevant and should support your argument about your qualifications.

Conclusion:
Tie together the various issues that you have raised in the essay, and reiterate your interest in this specific program or position. You might also mention in a closing paragraph how this job or degree is a step toward a long-term goal.

An *application letter* may contain many of the same elements as a personal statement, but it is presented in a business letter format and can sometimes be even shorter and more specific than a personal statement. An application letter may not contain the catchy opening of the personal statement but instead includes detailed information about the program or position and how you found out about it. Your application letter usually refers to your resume at some point. Another difference between a personal statement and an application letter is in the conclusion, which in an application letter asks for an interview.

4. Allow Time for Revision

Because this piece of writing is designed to get you either an interview or a place in a graduate school program, it is vital that you allow yourself enough time to revise it thoroughly. This revision needs to occur on both the content level (did you address the question? is there enough detail?) and the sentence level (is the writing clear? are the mechanics and punctuation correct?). While tools such as spell-checkers and grammar-checkers are helpful during revision, they should not be used exclusively; you should read over your draft yourself. Have others do so as well.

5. Sample

The following sample is a personal statement like one that might be included in an application for admission to a graduate MBA program.

The writer is responding to instructions which state, "Describe your background, work experiences, and career goals. How will admission to IU's MBA program help you fulfill those goals?"
Note the specific details she includes about her work experiences, and how she relates her background to her career goal.

As a child I often accompanied my father to his small coin shop and spent hours watching him work. When I was older, I sometimes set up displays, waited on customers, and even balanced the books. This experience instilled in me the desire to own and manage my own business someday, yet I understand that the business world today is complex. This complexity requires more education, and with that in mind, I am applying to the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB).

In addition to helping out in my father's business, I have had numerous other work experiences that further enhance my qualifications for this program. My resume enumerates the various positions I have held at Kerasotes Theaters, Chili's restaurants, and IU's new Student Recreational Sports Center (SRSC), all of which have emphasized serving the public effectively. As an assistant manager at the movie theater and a staff coordinator at the SRSC, I have valuable expertise in managing employees and creating work schedules. Both of these positions have allowed me to develop my sales and people skills, which are extremely important in an increasingly service-driven marketplace.

Not all of my work experience has been as a paid employee. Part of my experience as a volunteer at Middle Way House, the local battered women's shelter, involved extensive work on computers, including word processing, organizing databases, and creating spreadsheets. Also, I recently participated in an internship program for academic credit with the Eli Lilly Corporation in its personnel division. As a management intern, I was able to watch the workings of a major corporation up close. I would like the opportunity to combine my practical experiences with the theoretical background available in the MBA program at IUB, with its emphasis on computers, marketing, and human resources.

My successful internship is one element of my overall academic success as an undergraduate here at IUB, yet I have also made time for a variety of extracurricular activities, including working for my sorority and competing in intramural basketball. My positive experiences here have resulted in my desire to stay in Bloomington to continue my academic endeavors; furthermore, continuing my education here would allow me to make important business contacts as I move toward my career goal of opening a computer consulting firm in the Midwest.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LXQ
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LXZ

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.

Writing Book Reviews

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LXd

1. About

A book review tells not only what a book is about, but also how successfully the book explains itself. Professors often assign book reviews as practice in careful, analytical reading.

As a reviewer, you bring together the two strands of accurate, analytical reading and strong, personal response when you indicate what the book is about and what it might mean to a reader (by explaining what it meant to you). In other words, reviewers answer not only the what but the so what question about a book. Thus, in writing a review, you combine the skills of describing what is on the page, analyzing how the book tried to achieve its purpose, and expressing your own reactions.

2. Reading the Book

As you are reading or preparing to write the review, ask yourself these questions:

What are the author's viewpoint and purpose?
Are they appropriate? The viewpoint or purpose may be implied rather than stated, but often a good place to look for what the author says about his or her purpose and viewpoint is the introduction or preface.

What are the author's main points?
Again, these will often be stated in the introduction.

What kind of evidence does the author use to prove his or her points?
Is the evidence convincing? Why or why not? Does the author support his or her points adequately?

How does this book relate to other books on the same topic?
Is the book unique? Does it add new information? What group of readers, if any, would find this book most useful?

Does the author have the necessary expertise to write the book?
What credentials or background does the author have that qualify him or her to write the book? Has the author written other books or papers on this topic? Do others in this field consider this author to be an expert?

What are the most appropriate criteria by which to judge the book? How successful do you think the author was in carrying out the overall purposes of the book?

Depending on your book's purpose, you should select appropriate criteria by which to judge its success. Use any criteria your instructor has given you in lecture or on your assignment sheet. Otherwise, here are some criteria to consider.

For example, if an author says his or her purpose is to argue for a particular solution to a public problem, then the review should judge whether the author has defined the problem, identified causes, planned points of attack, provided necessary background information, and offered specific solutions. A review should also indicate the author's professional expertise.

In other books, however, the authors may argue for their theory about a particular phenomenon. Reviews of these books should evaluate what kind of theory the book is arguing for, how much and what kind of evidence the author uses to support his or her scholarly claims, how valid the evidence seems, how expert the author is, and how much the book contributes to the knowledge of the field.

3. Writing the Book Review

Book reviews generally include the following kinds of information; keep in mind, though, that you may need to include other information to explain your assessment of a book.

Most reviews start off with a heading that includes all the bibliographic information about the book. If your assignment sheet does not indicate which form you should use, you can use the following:

> Title. Author. Place of publication: publisher, date of publication. Number of pages.

Like most pieces of writing, the review itself usually begins with an introduction that lets your readers know what the review will say. The first paragraph usually includes the author and title again, so your readers don't have to look up to find this information. You should also include a very brief overview of the contents of the book, the purpose or audience for the book, and your reaction and evaluation.

You should then move into a section of background information that helps place the book in context and discusses criteria for judging the book.

Next, you should give a summary of the main points of the book, quoting and paraphrasing key phrases from the author.

Finally, you get to the heart of your review—your evaluation of the book. In this section, you might discuss some of the following issues:

- how well the book has achieved its goal
- what possibilities are suggested by the book
- what the book has left out
- how the book compares to others on the subject
- what specific points are not convincing
- what personal experiences you've had related to the subject.

It is important to use labels to carefully distinguish your views from the author's, so that you don't confuse your reader.

Then, like other essays, you can end with a direct comment on the book, and tie together issues raised in the review in a conclusion.

There is, of course, no set formula, but **a general rule of thumb is that the first one-half to two-thirds of the review should summarize the author's main ideas and at least one-third should evaluate the book.** Check with your instructor.

4. Example

Below is a review of Taking Soaps Seriously by Michael Intintoli, written by Ruth Rosen in the *Journal of Communication*. Note that Rosen begins with a context for Intintoli's book, showing how it is different from other books about soap operas. She finds a strength in the kind of details that his methodology enables him to see. However, she disagrees with his choice of case study. All in all, Rosen finds Intintoli's book most useful for novices, but not one that advances our ability to critique soap operas very much.

Taking Soaps Seriously: The World of Guiding Light. Michael Intintoli. New York: Praeger, 1984. 248 pp.

Ever since the U.S. public began listening to radio soaps in the 1930s, cultural critics have explored the content, form, and popularity of daytime serials. Today, media critics take a variety of approaches. Some explore audience response and find that, depending on sex, race, or even nationality, people "decode" the same story in different ways. Others regard soaps as a kind of subversive form of popular culture that supports women's deepest grievances. Still others view the soap as a "text" and attempt to "deconstruct" it, much as a literary critic dissects a work of literature. Michael Intintoli's project is somewhat different. For him, the soap is a cultural product mediated and created by corporate interests. It is the production of soaps, then, that is at the center of his Taking Soaps Seriously.

To understand the creation of soap operas, Intintoli adopted an ethnographic methodology that required a rather long siege on the set of "Guiding Light." Like a good anthropologist, he picked up a great deal about the concerns and problems that drive the production of a daily soap opera.

For the novice there is much to be learned here . . . .

But the book stops short of where it should ideally begin. In many ways, "Guiding Light" was simply the wrong soap to study. First broadcast in 1937, "Guiding Light" is the oldest soap opera in the United States, owned and produced by Procter and Gamble, which sells it to CBS. It is therefore the perfect soap to study for a history of the changing daytime serial. But that is not Intintoli's project . . . .
Taking Soaps Seriously is a good introduction to the production of the daily soap opera. It analyzes soap conventions, reveals the hierarchy of soap production, and describes a slice of the corporate production of mass culture.
Regrettably, it reads like an unrevised dissertation and misses an important opportunity to probe the changing nature of soap production and the unarticulated ideological framework in which soaps are created.

5. Polishing the Book Review

After you've completed your review, be sure to proofread it carefully for errors and typos. Double-check your bibliographic heading—author, title, publisher—for accuracy and correct spelling as well.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
Indiana University
Phone: (812) 855-6738
Website: go.iu.edu/3LYk
Support WTS: go.iu.edu/3LYl

See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.