

Strategies for Success: Graduate Academic Writing

Some Common Concerns

- ... "But I don't know what to write!"
- ... "Where do I begin?"
- ... "I feel like I have nothing to say."
- ... "How do I know what I've written is any good?"
- ... "Which sources are good?"
- ... "How should I use sources?"



Getting Started

Freewriting

Try to jot down thoughts as they occur, without paying attention to spelling, grammar, or structure. Allow yourself to follow your train of thought, no matter how jumpy. Re-read your notes later and see what issues emerge as the most important.

Mindmapping/Brainstorming/Outlining

Draw out the concepts or bubbles of ideas, and try to find connections.

Talking Through Ideas

Meet with a faculty member or colleague to discuss the direction of your paper.

Research

Academic research emerges out of scholarly conversations. Familiarizing yourself with the writers who are all talking about the same topic can help you to find an entry point for your own argument.

Library Liaison

Meet with your subject librarian, who can help direct you to resources in your area of interest.

Note Taking

- Double Notebook
- Cornell Method
- Annotated Bibliography

Things I Wish I Had Known...

from a PhD student in Writing and Rhetoric

How To Be Productive...

"The biggest enemy to a deadline is putting it off. I had to learn to take my computer somewhere I could sit for hours, but still not be entirely comfortable, such as the library, a coffee shop, a student room - *anywhere* but my bedroom. If you can manage to get your sources downloaded ahead of time and go somewhere without internet, that's even better. Mason also has graduate student write-ins, which help hold me accountable for my writing far in advance of deadlines."

When You're Stuck Getting Started...

"I tend to write the introduction first, but that doesn't always serve my purposes. When I was down to the wire, I would sometimes write the sections I was most prepared to talk about and would fill in the blanks later. This isn't necessarily a backwards method - sometimes your thesis is better for seeing what you know instead of anticipating that you'll go in a certain direction. What you write might be the worst thing you've written, but bad writing tends to lead to more and ultimately better writing than just staring at the screen and waiting for inspiration."

Searching for Sources...

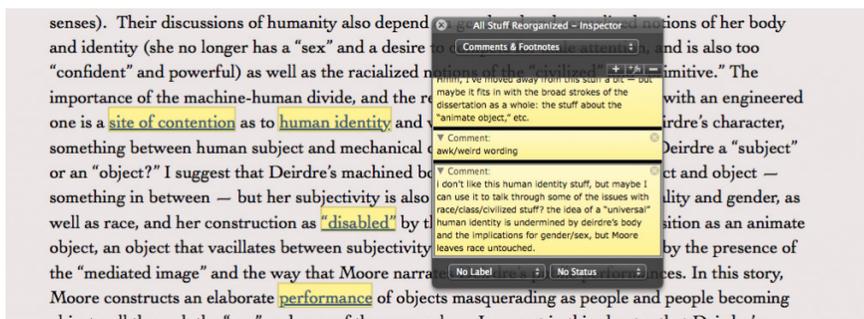
"If you don't find a source directly addressing your topic, it does not mean there is no research on the topic. It took me a while to figure out that I could support my claim by weaving together research from different areas, using unrelated research to support my own topic. Don't stick with one database or journal; try seeing what sources cite one another; experiment with the Google Scholar 'cited by' function to see which sources are relying upon past research to build a case for your argument."

Time-Saving and Revision...

"Not everyone can work in a draft system. It's fine to edit as you go, but you may want to save the changes as separate documents. Having multiple versions (save as Version 1.1, 1.2, 1.3) can help protect you from the moment of deleting a paragraph, only to realize that you needed it. Alternatively, spending lots of time working on just one section can prevent you from putting in an even amount of effort across all parts of your paper."

Seeking Out Feedback...

"Not all faculty are equally timely or thorough in their feedback. If you have asked for help from a faculty member, it is your responsibility to remind them - gently - that you would like some suggestions. If you would prefer not to meet with your professor, consider seeking out another faculty member or trusted peer. The Writing Center is also an excellent resource."



Questions?

Email: wac@gmu.edu
Website: wac.gmu.edu
Phone: 703-993-1187

Argumentative Source Integration

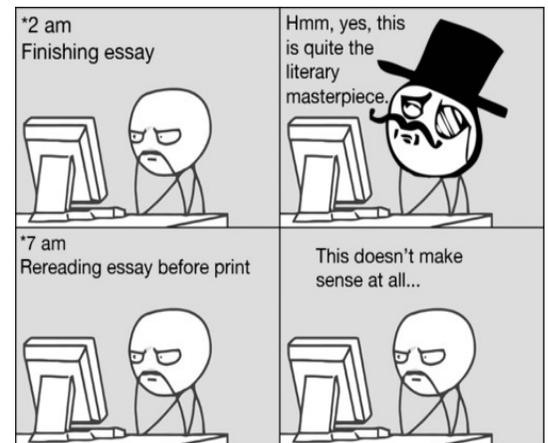
Strong integration of a quotation begins with the topic sentence of the paragraph that will contain a quotation.

1. Introduce the author, the author's credentials and/or expertise;
2. Suggest (via summary) the content of the entire essay (or the author's larger point);
3. Introduce the source of the quote:
 - The title of the article;
 - If applicable, a sense of when it was published;

Note: If you already introduced the author and a used a quotation earlier in the paper, there is no need to restate all this identifying info in the sentence every time you use this article in your paper.
4. Properly format the quotation
 - If a quotation is longer than four sentences, it should be in block form.
5. Emphasize the information, approach, or key point from the quotation that you want your reader to take away.
 - Be sure to follow quotations with sentences that inform a reader about why the particular point in the quotation is important to your own claim/thesis. What does it prove? Why is it relevant to your argument?
6. Connect your point from this paragraph to your broader point from the paper.

Why Revision Matters

Revision is not just about providing final edits to a paper or finding grammatical errors; rather, it is to "re-vision," or "see again," the work that you have written. We often don't write our best work first. Our strongest writing tends to occur when it has been seen and discussed by many people.



Strategies for Revision

Peer Review With Classmates: Form a small writing group and get together to share your work the week prior to the due date. Ask global questions about argument, source use, and content, then go home and revise. Having a small group helps encourage accountability!

Work With A Professor: Some faculty are very open to giving comments via email; others prefer to meet face-to-face. Most faculty do not appreciate being asked for feedback at the last minute, so be sure to ask for help in advance.

Go To The Writing Center: Writing Center tutors have been trained to provide feedback in terms of argument, structure, and source integration. They can help you identify error patterns in your language, as well. The Writing Center fills up quickly, so book early and book often.

Start Early: The best offense is a good defense, and the same goes with writing. Plan ahead, anticipate conflicts with your time, and take advantage of resources far in advance of due dates.