



WRITING STRATEGIES FOR MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS

If you are a student whose first language is not English, you may face extra challenges when you write course papers here at Princeton. Even with years of experience speaking and writing English, you may feel uncertain about what your professors and preceptors expect regarding your written work, or you may feel insecure about your ability to express your ideas accurately and without grammatical errors. Many of your native-English-speaking classmates at Princeton have these same concerns; beginning to write course papers can be intimidating, as well as exciting. But there are a few strategies you can use to make the process of writing an essay easier and more successful.

Become Familiar with American Conventions

Although you may not be fully aware of the conventions that govern academic writing in your native country, the way you state the main point of a paper, how you set forth an argument, even the way you shape an introduction, a paragraph, or a conclusion, may be quite different from the conventions of American academic writing. Last year, for instance, a Writing Center tutor met with a student who used highly descriptive language and many literary allusions in the introductions and conclusions of her history papers. This approach to crafting an academic paper was fully appropriate in her native country. Her Princeton professor, who was working with a different set of writerly conventions, misunderstood the student's intent; he thought that she was trying to make a short paper longer by adding what he saw as unnecessary material. The professor had expected to find a straightforward presentation of her central point in her introduction and an explanation of the further implications of her argument in her conclusion. This student was not doing as well as she wanted because she and her professor had different understandings of what norms define a well-written essay. Once the student understood how to make her writing more concise and direct, she was able to produce more successful papers.

Although conventions are slightly different among academic disciplines, in general, most scholarly papers state and then defend an *original* claim or thesis. Unless the assignment specifically requests that you restate ideas presented in lectures or readings, your professor or preceptor will expect you to set forth a thesis and argument based on your own interpretation of the course material. Read the assignment carefully for indications of the type of essay expected. Ask questions if you do not understand how to respond to the assignment.

The structure of a scholarly argument normally follows a “linear” pattern: the writer moves directly from asserting the central point to setting forth evidence to support that claim. American academic readers expect writers to explain their arguments fully and to connect paragraphs and sections of a paper logically. Indirection (expecting your reader to infer your argument or the

connections between different ideas) and digression (discussing topics related but not central to the main idea of a paper) are considered a weakness in most scholarly writing.

The best way for you to become familiar with the conventions of American academic writing is to pay careful attention to the form and style of the texts you read for your classes. If you are not required to read secondary research articles, you should make time

to do some extra reading. Ask your professor or preceptor for essays related to your course work that you can read as models for your writing assignments. You can also ask other students in your class, particularly those who are doing well, if you can read their papers.

Getting Started

Because you may not have a clear sense of how to produce the type of writing expected of you, it will help to break the writing process into distinct steps and to use different strategies for approaching each step. For detailed advice on different steps, read the Writing Center's handouts on subjects such as getting started, developing a topic, forming a central idea or thesis, developing an argument, revision, and other writing issues.

If you feel you can think more sophisticated thoughts in your native language, then by all means generate your ideas and plan your paper in that language. Many students have been warned away from writing drafts in their native language because doing so means that at some point in the writing process they will need to translate a draft. Translation presents its own writing problems, such as using incorrect sentence structures and idioms. As long as you are aware of this risk, you should be able to watch for it. Doing the preliminary work in your native language may enable you to write an essay with more complex and interesting ideas.

Use Visual “Maps” and Outlines to Plan Your Essay

As you develop your ideas for your paper, use visual planning strategies such as mapping and flowcharts. (See the Writing Center handout on “Getting Started” for an example of a map.) New methods of putting ideas on paper may free you from your usual pattern of composition. It will also give you a chance to do some writing where you do not have to worry about using grammatically perfect sentences. After you have a sense of how you want to organize your argument, consider making a formal outline. An outline will encourage you to organize your ideas in a *linear* manner, according to the traditional American style of argument.

Show Your Drafts to Reliable Readers

If you're unsure whether you are headed in the right direction, meet with your professor or preceptor. If your ideas or thesis don't match her expectations, she will let you know, and you may get some ideas about how you can revise them. You can also show a complete draft to other reliable readers. Ask them to point out places where your ideas, argument, or language seem awkward or confusing. Princeton students, native and non-native, seek advice on writing from professors, preceptors, advisors, friends, and tutors at the Writing Center. In fact, virtually all writers, even the best, discuss their work with other writers. That's how they learn to write better.

Writing Center tutors can discuss specific writing issues that are troubling you, such as how to write an introduction or how to use quotations to support a point, but they will not fix or rewrite any part of your paper for you. Tutors can also instruct you on grammar and help you learn to spot and correct your own errors. If you seek advice on grammar, however, do not expect to learn how to fix all your errors in a single conference. You will learn more if you concentrate on one or two grammatical issues per paper.

After you get your paper back, use the professor's or preceptor's comments to identify what you need to work on so that your next paper is even better. Ask yourself whether your argument met the reader's expectations, where your writing seems to have confused your reader, and what sorts of mechanical or grammatical errors recurred in your paper. Consider whether any of the Writing Center's many handouts may be relevant to your specific needs. You should also discuss any comments you do not understand with your professor or preceptor.

Related Writing Center Handouts

Getting Started

Finding a Topic

Developing a Central Idea or "Thesis"

Developing an Argument

Outlines

Abstracts

Using Quotations

Revision

Plagiarism

When to Cite Sources

Documenting Sources

Writing Anxiety

On Using the Passive Voice

Colons and Semicolons

Commas: Some Common Problems

Avoiding Common Errors in Logic and Reasoning

Parallelism

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