

# Academic Writing at WFU

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Writing is our supreme means of understanding, of discovering our thoughts, of learning, of grasping things in the mind, of intellectual maturity. Reading a book is following a stream of understanding. Writing one is a whole Mississippi. The simplest page of freshman writing demonstrates this process. Writing is discovery of thought. Writing is learning.<sup>[1]</sup>

## I. General Expectations

### A. The Assignment

In English 105 and 111, your professor will work to teach you how to write compelling, coherent expository essays, essays in which you explore new ideas, interpret and analyze the ideas of others, or argue from a specific point of view. You will be asked to write frequent short essays (a minimum of 5000 words that includes 1000 words to be written in class). Writing assignments are usually highly specific and vary a great deal depending upon your topic and purpose and the length of your essay. For example, throughout the semester, you may be asked to write a reflective or exploratory essay, a comparison/contrast essay, a report, a process analysis, an argument, a critical analysis, and a literary interpretation; you will also learn how to evaluate the ideas of others and incorporate them into your own work. In writing seminars, it is most important for you to consider your professor's expectations and listen for specific directions. Instead of thinking about only length and topic, consider the purpose, audience, and the kind of essay you are asked to write.

In our core courses, English 150, 165, 175, 185, and 190, the range of assignments is usually more narrow; generally, you will be asked to respond to the readings and discussion and write critical analyses or interpretations of works of literature. Students in these courses will be afforded the opportunity to write frequent short critical essays. In addition to these requirements, you may be asked to keep a journal.

### B. Responding to the Assignment, or “What Does a college Professor Really Want?”

More than anything, college professors want you to find something to say by thinking seriously about a topic; they also expect you to consider, just as seriously, how to explore your topic fully, to think critically and creatively, and convey your ideas in clear and precise terms. In Writing Seminars, English 111, professors often design their courses

around specific topics of investigation that allow students to become familiar with the process of writing as they practice writing different kinds of essays. Assignments vary and different strategies are used to teach students how to write for a variety of rhetorical purposes and audiences. Students should always consider the wording of assignments carefully. Does your professor expect you to recount, explain, argue, interpret, or analyze a text, an experience, or an idea? As you plan your essay, reflect upon the purpose of the assignment and ask for clarification when necessary.

At times, professors plan workshop exercises that are designed to provide help for students during specific stages of the writing process. A frequently used format is peer review, which enables students to gain insight into their writing through a classmate's analysis or reaction. Peer review not only benefits the writer; it allows student reviewers to exercise their authority over a text as they are called upon to respond to the significance and development of a writer's thoughts and the clarity of expression. The creative and analytic skills practiced during these sessions often make students better writers and readers of texts.

In our core literature courses, you will write critical analyses of works of literature. The purpose of these essays is not to summarize plot or offer a general overview of themes or images, but to demonstrate your ability to read critically, to establish a point of view, to make a claim about the text or texts, and to argue for the validity of your claim. The claim, your thesis, should focus on a particular aspect of the text, and you should use textual evidence, logic, and reasoning to substantiate your claim.

Once again, assignments vary; most often, you will be given a specific topic or list of topics to choose from, but you also may be asked to construct your own topic based upon your readings. If you are given a broad or an open assignment, focus your topic so that you will be able to write a detailed and intensive analysis. Students who ask a specific question about the text and construct an in-depth and detailed response to that question prove not only their command of a particular text, but their ability to approach texts critically; they demonstrate their intellectual ability to pose significant questions, to describe, to interpret, and to analyze language. If the paper is successful, they also prove their ability to argue rationally and compellingly. This is what college professors expect when they assign a critical analysis.

For example, if you are asked to write a 5-8 page paper about Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, and you choose as your topic Cather's use of natural imagery or the five-part structure of the book, you have positioned yourself to write a very broad summary, not a critical analysis. You have a great many pages of text to consider and a very limited number of pages for your analysis. If instead you ask yourself more specific questions, such as how Cather uses the imagery of the sun in two very different scenes, one toward the end of Book Two, the other at the end of Book Four, or why the last, very short book is titled "Cuzak's Boys," you have narrowed your focus and can begin to ask the kinds of critical questions that will lend themselves to a strong thesis and a detailed analysis.

## **C. Revisions and Editing**

Most professors at Wake Forest University see student writing not only as a product, through which students exhibit their mastery of the texts and their skills in communication, but also as a process for discovery and exploration. As you write and discover meaning, it is important to build in sufficient time to revise your drafts and polish your prose. In English 105 and 111, you will probably be asked to revise essays that have been evaluated by your professor or your peers. In literature courses, such as English 160, 170, 165, or 175, revision is just as important, but it must occur **before** you submit your essay. By finishing a draft early, by returning to your work and posing questions about your own assumptions, by, perhaps, taking your questions to your professor or your draft to the Writing Center, you begin the process of revision. The following checklist, taken from Sylvan Barnet's *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*,<sup>[2]</sup> should help you to revise and edit your manuscript before submission:

1. **Is the title of my essay at least moderately informative?**
2. **Do I identify the subject of my essay (author and title) early?**
3. **What is my thesis? Do I state it soon enough and keep it in view?**
4. **Is the organization reasonable? Does each point lead to the next without irrelevancies and without anticlimaxes?**
5. **Is each paragraph unified by a topic sentence or central idea? Are there adequate transitions from one paragraph to the next?**
6. **Are generalizations supported by appropriate concrete details, especially by brief quotations from the text?**
7. **Is the opening paragraph interesting and, by its end, focused on a topic? Is the final paragraph conclusive without being repetitive?**
8. **Is the tone appropriate? No sarcasm, no apologies, no condescension?**
9. **If there is a summary, is it as brief as possible, given its purpose?**
10. **Are the quotations accurate? Do they serve a purpose other than to add words to the essay?**
11. **Is documentation provided where necessary?**
12. **Are the spelling and punctuation correct? Are other mechanical matters (such as margins, spacing, and citations) in correct form? Have I proofread carefully?**

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## II. General Format

- Unless you are instructed to submit your essays electronically, **essays should be typed or written on a word processor**. They should be submitted on white paper, 8½ by 11 inches. Use only one side of the paper, number pages

- consecutively in the upper right-corner, and secure your pages with a paper clip. Always keep an electronic copy of your paper until you receive the graded original.
- Leave **margins** of approximately 1½ inches on the top, bottom, and sides of the paper. This allows your professor room to respond to your text.
  - Make sure you have an appropriate and informative **title** and capitalize the first, last, and all major words in your title. Unless your professor requests a title page, the title should appear on the first page. Also include your **name and course number** in the upper-left corner of the first page.
  - If you write in **corrections or insertions**, do so neatly and clearly in ink above the typed line.  
**Double-space** your text. Long quotations that are indented and separated from your text and notes may be single-spaced.
  - Double check for accuracy and consistency when **quoting** the words of others.

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## III. Research

As you join the academic community, you are joining a community of scholars who rely upon, build upon, and often critique the ideas of others. When you write about a topic, you will need to learn how to locate ideas appropriate to your field of study that are published in books, journals, pamphlets, and on-line sources, how to evaluate their reliability, and how to incorporate these ideas into your own work. Wake Forest's library, the Z. Smith Reynolds Library, is an extensive research library; generally, the texts you will find on the shelves have been published by reputable presses, amassed and evaluated by scholars in the field, and carefully catalogued by research librarians who will help you locate and evaluate the appropriateness of these materials.

You will also want to research your topic online and use electronic databases. As you use the Internet and become aware of its vast possibilities, consider the ways it differs from traditional research sources. To help you evaluate online sources, click on <http://zsr.wfu.edu/research/guides/web/>.

1. Because online information is published, often quite quickly, by individuals (rather than publishing companies that rely on expert readers to evaluate texts), the information may be biased, superficial, even incorrect. You must always question the reliability of your source by considering the point of view of the author, the depth of his/her knowledge of the topic, his/her reputation and purpose in writing. Also check to see when the source was last updated; do you have the most recent information? Check the links (if available) to original sources.

2. While various search engines help you navigate through the World Wide Web, it can be difficult, even frustrating, to locate good sources of information. Thus far, we do not have the kind of cataloguing system on line that we do in our research libraries.

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## IV. DOCUMENTATION

When you use the words and ideas of others, you are taking part in an ongoing scholarly conversation. It is always necessary to identify the other speakers in the conversation. Therefore you must cite the source of any material, quoted or paraphrased, you have used. Different disciplines and various journals use different citation methods. To learn more about the different styles of citation and help you document your research properly, click on <http://zsr.wfu.edu/research/guides/citation.html>.

The absence of such documentation constitutes plagiarism, perhaps the most serious academic offense. See below for a statement clarifying Wake Forest's policy on plagiarism.

Proper documentation requires a bibliography of any outside texts you have consulted (both traditional sources and on-line sources) **as well as** individual notes that demonstrate your debts to outside sources.

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## V. PLAGIARISM

To put your name on a piece of work is to say that it is yours, that the praise or criticism due to it is due to you. To put your name on a piece of work any part of which is not yours is plagiarism, unless that piece is clearly marked and the work from which you have borrowed is fully identified. Plagiarism is a form of theft. Taking words, phrasing, sentence structure, or any other element of the expression of another person's ideas, and using them as if they were yours, is like taking from that person a material possession, something he or she has worked for and earned. Even worse is the appropriation of someone else's ideas. By "ideas" is meant everything from the definition or interpretation of a single word, to the overall approach or argument. If you paraphrase, you merely translate from his or her language to yours; another person's ideas in your language are still not your ideas. Paraphrase, therefore, without proper documentation, is theft, perhaps of the worst kind. Here, a person loses not a material possession, but something of what characterized him or her as an individual.

If students wish to do one project for two courses, or to draw on work previously done in order to complete an assignment for a current course, they must get the expressed permission of all affected faculty in advance of turning in the assignment. The faculty

suggests that approved combined projects should represent significantly more effort than the individual projects they supplanted.

Plagiarism is a serious violation of another person's rights, whether the material stolen is great or small; it is not a matter of degree or intent. You know how much you would have had to say without someone else's help; and you know how much you have added on your own. Your responsibility, when you put your name on a piece of work, is simply to distinguish between what is yours and what is not, and to credit those who have in any way contributed.

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## VI. Grading Criteria for Effective Writing

**The following criteria for grading are used in many colleges and universities. They are included here to help Wake Forest students understand the standards that Wake Forest professors generally use as they evaluate student writing.**

### **The "A" Paper:**

The first and most noticeable quality of the "A" paper is the depth of specific **information** and observations—facts; textual evidence; concrete reasoning; quotations; stories; images—all the *substantial* details that make the reader feel *significantly* taught by the writer. This information *consistently* contributes to explaining a clear **focus**, an *idea*—not a topic but a complete statement about a topic that requires an explanation—that answers the questions, *So what? Why is all this important?* This idea reveals a degree of *insight* that goes far beyond the first or most obvious things one could say about the topic. Not all ideas are equal; some are demonstrably more sophisticated and more compelling to a community of readers, and ultimately it is this level of sophisticated intellect that distinguishes the excellent writer from the superior or average writer. These sophisticated ideas often result from the writer drawing complex conceptual **connections** among related details and themes, instead of simply listing them in an arbitrary manner. Each sentence and paragraph builds on the previous one, using old information to prepare for new information so that the reader never has to ask, *Why is this here? What does this have to do with what I just read or with the big picture?* The **language** and **style** of the "A" paper gracefully moves readers forward with varied and rhythmical sentences, contributing to their understanding of the idea, not impeding it. Word choice is *precise* and *appropriate* in tone to the purpose of the paper. The writer uses language with energy and flair, creating a distinct voice. **Grammatical errors** are unacceptable in the "A" paper. They distract readers from following the writer's ideas and undermine the writer's credibility as someone whose ideas matter. The "A" paper demonstrates *excellent* ability in all of these criteria: information/observations; focus; connections; language and style; and grammar.

### The “B” Paper:

The “B” paper demonstrates *superior* ability in all of the previously mentioned criteria. Two main areas usually separate the “B” paper from the “A.” Although the writer establishes a clear and intellectually sophisticated **focus**, he or she does not support it with the same level of substantial **information**. The writer tends to *summarize* key sections of the paper quickly instead of developing them in authoritative detail, leaving the reader *generally* well informed, but not with the same confident degree of expertise as in the “A” paper. In other cases, the “B” paper tends to fall short in creating a sophisticated **focus** because while the writer raised insightful **connections** or insightful observations, he or she did not pursue and develop them with the intellectual depth of the “A” paper. In sum, the *So what? How? Why?* questions have not been fully or explicitly answered. The writer does not always draw explicit conceptual connections. Therefore, the connections within and between paragraphs, though adequate in moving the reader forward smoothly, do not create the same level of intellectual progression. The **language** and **style** of the “B” paper is clear, even fluent and imaginative at times, but not with the same level of polish as the “A” paper. The occasional **grammatical error** is present, but not enough to distract the reader beyond a momentary annoyance.

### “C” Paper:

The “C” paper demonstrates *average* ability. The writer displays some understanding of the text and how it works or of the topic under consideration, but the argument or point of view is too broad or vague to establish a compelling **focus**. It does not go much beyond the most obvious or general thing one could say about the topic. The writer tends to *identify* themes and topics instead of *explaining* their significance. The **information**, although fairly specific in places, is more often presented in the form of vague generalities that prompt the confused reader to ask questions such as *How? Why? Why is this important?* The writer does not pursue the kind of insightful conceptual **connections** prevalent in the “A” and “B” papers. Therefore, **connections** within and between paragraphs are unclear. The writer simply lists points as they come to mind, leaving the reader to wonder, *Ok, why is this here? What exactly does this have to do with the main idea?* There is no compelling or apparent progression of ideas. The reader is forced to fill in gaps for the writer, to read between the lines, because the writer assumes the reader is already familiar with the material. The writer may have something to say, but it is not very interesting or intellectually compelling. In some cases, the writer may be attempting to present a *potentially* insightful idea, but he or she has not yet clarified that idea completely in his or her own mind. Therefore, though the paper may offer evidence of an interested and well-intentioned intellect at work, it requires the reader to infer what the writer *might* or *seems* to be saying. The **language** and **style** is readable, for the most part, but without the insightful connections the superior or excellent writer creates. The “C” writer often uses choppy, simple, and predictable sentences, imprecise words and/or inappropriate diction. There may be a number of **grammatical errors**, rather than the occasional slip found on the “B” paper, which indicates either the writer’s questionable mastery of Standard English or his/her carelessness in proofreading.

### “D” Paper:

This paper resembles a rough draft. It may reveal a germ of a **focus** with some relevant or potentially relevant **information**, but the idea is unclear, and the **connections** are haphazard or, at best, loosely arranged in an arbitrary list. No clear argument or point of

view is offered. The paper may be a mere summary of the text or a general overview of the topic under consideration. Whatever ideas the writer intended appear to have moved directly from the writer's brain to the page; the writer does not seem to have thought about how to develop ideas effectively. The **language** and **style** is awkward, ambiguous, and marred by pervasive **grammatical errors**. The reader has to fight his or her way through the sentences just to figure out what the writer is trying to say.

#### **The "F" Paper:**

It fails to meet the assignment in a variety of ways. Its treatment of the subject is superficial or inappropriate. The **language** and **style** is garbled or stylistically primitive. "F" papers are filled with **grammatical errors**. In short, the **information**, **focus**, and **connections** are far below the level of acceptable college level writing.

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## **VII. The Writing Center**

The Writing Center is located in Room 426 of Z. Smith Reynolds Library. The Center offers students a relaxed and welcoming place where they can discuss writing and the writing process with trained tutors. The Center is staffed by friendly and knowledgeable Wake Forest undergraduate and graduate students who act as an audience for students' writing; they work by asking questions to help students discover *what they want to say* and if they have effectively communicated *what they intended to say*. Because everyone writes differently, we tailor our help to meet each student's needs. Tutors do not evaluate, correct, proofread, or edit student assignments; our main goal is to help students become confident critical readers of their own writing. We provide consultation during every stage of the writing process, including: **generating ideas and settling on a topic; organizing ideas in a paper; developing support for arguments; composing more effectively; learning to revise drafts; and learning to identify and correct errors in grammar and punctuation**. For more information, including hours of operation and directions for appointment scheduling, visit [The Writing Center's homepage](#).

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## **Endnotes:**

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[1].. Sheridan Baker, "Writing as Learning," in *FForum: Essays on Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing*, Ed. Patricia L. Stock (New Jersey: Boynton/Cook, 1983) 227.

[2].. Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, 6th Ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) inside front cover.