

Prof. Shaya's Keys to Good Writing

What follows are some oft-ignored guidelines to writing success. These are especially oriented to the short analytic essay in history, literature, or the humanities.

1. Remember that **writing is a process**. Sitting down to write your paper is only one step in this process. It may be unpleasant and will likely be unsuccessful if you attempt it without some preparation. Assuming that you have already read your sources and taken some notes on them once, the steps of the writing process are as follows:

- a) Brainstorm examples and ideas on paper to develop your topic.
- b) Skim through your sources with these ideas in mind, adding examples to your notes.
- c) Develop an argument and formulate a thesis. Write down your thesis in a prominent place, lining up examples that help you make your argument.
- d) Outline your paper as a set of paragraphs that will deliver your argument.
- e) Draft your paper.
- f) Read, rethink, revise your paper.
- g) Proofread for clarity and mechanical errors.

2. Define your **thesis** carefully. Be sure you have one. A good thesis is precise, interesting, and novel. It is—this is the most important part—not obvious. It is the point of your paper. It sets out the argument of your paper in a nutshell. Generally, it stands in opposition to some other view; that is, it should be arguable. The reader should know what your thesis is early on in the paper, usually by the end of the introduction. Your thesis does not have to say everything about your argument; it only needs to set out your point of view and launch your paper.

3. Make the **first paragraph count**. Get to the point quickly. Don't fool around with long paragraphs of very general background or vague introductions. Remember the funnel introduction? Forget about it. Avoid introductory blather about things being true throughout history. "Since the beginning of time..." sends historians into epileptic fits. Beware the vague generalization. "There are many similarities and differences between George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* and Mussolini's *My Rise and Fall*." Yuck. If you are at a loss for how to start your paper, you might try one of the following strategies: outline the argument that your thesis refutes, describe a problem of interpretation that you are going to shed some light upon, present a vivid example that leads to your topic.

4. **Organize your paper**. Give your paper a suitable design, so that each paragraph follows logically from the previous one and leads logically to the next. Include signposts in the text to make your design clear. Guide your reader through your argument with clear transition sentences.

5. **Organize your paragraphs**. A paragraph should be unified, coherent, and developed. It should center upon one particular question, idea, or example. The sentences should follow in some clear sequence. The central idea of the paragraph should be well supported. Generally, the first sentence of the paragraph is a topic sentence that points to the main idea of the paragraph.

6. **Argue from evidence**. Keep your unsubstantiated opinions and your feelings in the background—or save them for the conclusion. Instead, show your reader that the words of your sources support your thesis. For many assignments in history and literature courses, your evidence will generally consist of quotations from primary sources. Explain to the reader what the evidence you cite means and how it proves your thesis. An oft-repeated formula for writing

fiction is: “Show, don’t tell.” That is because good fiction lets readers figure things out for themselves. It doesn’t constantly hit them over the head, telling them what to think. Well, the formula for the analytic essay should be: “Tell, show, then explain.” Tell your reader what it is you are trying to say, demonstrate your point with examples, then explain how your examples fit your argument.

7. **Make your conclusion count.** Don't merely summarize your paper. That is not a proper conclusion! Instead, tell your readers what difference your argument makes. This is the place to answer the “so what?” question. Tell your readers how they should think about the topic after your argument. The conclusion can be thought of as a mini-essay that takes your paper as its starting point.

8. **Write for an educated audience.** Imagine that you are writing your paper for your fellow students in this class.

9. **Get your facts straight.** Use a textbook or an encyclopedia to get a handle on facts, events, or developments that are important to your paper.

10. **Write as clearly and as forcefully as you can.** Choose your words carefully. Be sure you know precisely what they mean, especially when they have a prominent place in your paper. Avoid the passive voice. Avoid clichés, faddish expressions, and meaningless, outworn words and phrases. Avoid filler phrases that obscure your main point. Avoid vague phrases. Some words and phrases you should never use: “throughout history,” “since the beginning of time,” “basically.” Good writing—at the sentence level—is clear, direct, and precise.

Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style* make the point forcefully: “If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on one point it is on this: The surest way to arouse and hold the reader is to be specific, definite, and concrete.”

11. **Use the past tense when describing the past.** We often use the “literary present” in writing about literature. But you should use the past tense when describing events in the past. Thus: “Orwell traveled to Barcelona in December 1936. In his memoir, *Homage to Catalonia*, he described the strange world he discovered there.”

12. **Give your essay a title** that captures the principal idea you want to convey to your reader. A bad title: "The Industrial Revolution." A better one: "Is this Progress?: One Worker's Experience of the Industrial Revolution."

13. **Read your paper aloud.** As you are writing and again when you have written all the way through your paper and again when you have finished revising your paper—read it aloud. Mark the phrases that are not clear or that sound strange to your ear. Mark the places in your paragraphs where further development is needed. Mark the places in your paper where your argument jumps from one idea to another without transition. Go back, revise again. Then read your paper aloud one more time.