WRITING AT THE COLLEGE OF GENERAL STUDIES

Committee on Student Writing and Research

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Revised Academic Year 2006-2007
Why Does Good Writing Matter at CGS?

Since its founding in 1952, the College of General Studies has stressed academic writing in the curriculum. CGS’s program is writing intensive, and the many writing projects required here establish and cultivate critical thinking skills you will use as you complete your degree work at the University.

The College’s unique team-taught and interdisciplinary core curriculum means that you will write in a range of forms during your two years of study. The Divisions of Social Science, Humanities, Rhetoric, and Natural Science aim to develop your expertise with writing analytic, argumentative, persuasive, expository, and research papers. Lucid and mature prose reflects your ability to assess and investigate issues and problems in all areas – whether economics and politics, ethics and philosophy, literature and music theory, biology and physics. Consequently, the College encourages your deep appreciation for how precise writing shows your comprehension of relevant issues in the many debates all disciplines encourage.

While you are completing your courses at CGS, you will study complicated and challenging texts in all your classes to develop the inquisitive and sophisticated reading approach crucial to strong academic writing. The four Divisions encourage a fluency in the critical vocabularies of the different fields to emphasize writing as both communication and expertise in a specific discipline (science, the arts, history, and so forth) and for that particular audience. The Divisions concur that mastery in any topic requires mastery in prose. Writing in a sophisticated and clear style, supporting a thesis with accurate and persuasive evidence, and responsibly using research methods and scholarly documentation are all skills that go beyond your two years of study at CGS.

Clean, polished, and rigorous writing lays the groundwork for the connections you will make between CGS and the other colleges at the University, building bridges first to your academic majors and then to the careers and professions to which you aspire. As future writers of business letters, medical reports, advertising proposals, and grant requests you know that you can only create mutual understanding, thoughtful discussion, and productive communication if you have learned to write ambitious, finely wrought prose.
Good Writers and Smart Readers

At Boston University in general, and at CGS in particular, you will mostly write expository essays, which vary in form from one subject to another. Your professors will generally expect you to write with insight and precision as a participant in an ongoing intellectual conversation. The writing process involves a wide range of activities—uniting critical reading and writing with critical thinking—that often require more time and effort than you might anticipate.

To participate in such a conversation, you need a sufficient background in the topic, and to have thought enough about it, so that you can make a significant contribution. In an academic setting this contribution is primarily expressed through writing. An expository essay clearly states the writer’s position and offers argument and evidence in support of it. Unlike many types of writing, nearly all of the evidence used to support academic arguments comes from books and other texts.

The basis for academic expository writing is reading. At CGS much of your writing will be in response to some kind of “text,” be it an essay, a movie, a poem, a Petri dish. Academic writing also will require you to incorporate these texts into your papers. Moreover, you will encounter readings that not only challenge your views of the world but can be extremely difficult to understand. Without a doubt, sophisticated reading is the foundation of sophisticated thinking, and, therefore, of sophisticated writing. At CGS you will learn that reading demands much more energy and time than you had previously thought. You will not only have to understand the basic claims of a text but begin to develop a critical understanding of those claims. And you will develop this understanding in the essays you write for each course.

But the best students learn that developing and refining their ideas occur neither quickly nor in isolation. They use class discussion to help them understand the intricacies of their texts and what is needed to enter an intellectual conversation about them. Most importantly, the classroom offers an opportunity to test and develop your ideas while working on your assignment. Although you may discuss ideas in class, the audience for an academic essay is usually not your peers. In fact, most of your writing will address a broader, more experienced audience, one with some specialized knowledge of your topic. Classroom discussion, conferences with your professors, appointments in the Writing Center, and out-of-class discussion with your fellow students will clarify the expectations of an academic audience.
You will be given writing assignments in all four Divisions at CGS. Your instructors will help you to adapt your writing to the different kinds of assignments that you will encounter in each of your courses.

In your Rhetoric class, you may write papers in which you construct an argument about a controversial subject and support your point of view with evidence. Regular short written responses to your readings are common, as are research papers. Depending on the instructor, these papers might be about public policy, art history, popular culture, or some other interesting topic that can be researched and explored. Other types of writing assignments might include, for instance, writing a proposal to persuade an audience to share your point of view on some important issue. Rhetoric classes also concentrate on grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure, the nuts and bolts of any clearly written communication.

Your Natural Science professor may ask you to write prelabs each week, in which you answer several questions, or you may write more extensive lab reports after doing experiments in class. Many science professors assign investigative papers, and exams in Natural Science are often essay-based: for instance, a test may give you ten short-answer questions and one question that requires an answer in essay form.

In your Humanities class you will learn about literature, art history, film, philosophy, and music. Writing assignments can include a review of a trip to an art museum; a critical analysis of a poem, artwork, play, novel, or movie; creative writing, such as a satire or a poem; a research paper; or short response papers. Humanities exams often involve a lot of writing such as short answers or brief essays.

Social Science professors may assign analytical papers in which you discuss scholarly articles or writings and speeches by famous historical figures. You may do a research paper dealing with important events, ideas, or trends in history or politics. As with the other Divisions' assignments, your ability to read documents closely, correctly use punctuation and grammar, and express your opinions in writing clearly and convincingly will be very important.

Some teams also assign interdisciplinary papers in which you synthesize concepts you have learned in all of your classes and produce a major paper involving at least two of the disciplines. The Capstone Project at the end of your sophomore year includes an extremely long research paper that integrates all the disciplines in its scope and level of inquiry.

Although the number and variety of writing assignments may seem slightly overwhelming at first, you will quickly find that the close attention you will receive from your CGS instructors will be a great help and an invaluable resource.
Characteristics of a Well Written Paper

The following guidelines should give you an indication of general standards for written assignments (essays, reports, journals, response papers, and so on). Individual professors always provide further information about their respective expectations for specific writing assignments.

An excellent paper always has a clear purpose. An excellent paper satisfies all of the criteria for a good paper (see below) but, in addition, demonstrates an outstanding degree of original reflection and critical thinking. The paper shows that you have analyzed the central issues and evaluated the relevant evidence in a manner that shows your nuanced insight into the assigned material as well as your careful consideration of the goals of the assignment. Excellence is also evident in your paper’s provision of a sustained argument with a distinctive, unified voice. In sum, an excellent paper enlightens and engages – not merely informs – its audience.

A good paper displays a clear purpose that responds to a question of interest to the audience. You may have developed a thesis with specific support through appropriate evidence, and if you used outside sources, you correctly documented them. The organization of your paper is strong because of a logical progression of ideas, unified paragraph structure, and clear transitions between ideas and paragraphs. A good paper contains few (if any) grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors. On the whole you have demonstrated a clear sense of your audience, a careful process of revision, and a sufficient consideration of the particular requirements of the assignment.

A satisfactory paper fulfills the requirements of the assignment but does not rise above the occasion. You have a focused main point, but it lacks the originality, clarity, and depth of the thesis in a good or excellent paper. Your development of the relevant ideas could be more logically and fluidly organized. While you may have written complete paragraphs throughout, you have written them without a consistent and distinctive voice. Your ideas, while often adequate or even insightful at times, require more evidence and argument. Finally, a satisfactory paper addresses the assignment but might contain more than a few word- and sentence-level errors and lacks a sense of audience. It would thereby benefit from further revision.

A paper may be deemed unsatisfactory for several reasons. It may not adequately fulfill the requirements of a specific assignment. The purpose is often too vague, or its “thesis” is unfocused or too obvious to serve as the basis for an argument. Usually the writer fails to support the ideas with specific evidence or examples, or resorts to logically flawed reasoning. Likewise, the organization may not reflect any clear logical pattern, or the paragraphs may lack unity. The style may be so elementary and the grammar so incorrect that it impedes a proper understanding of the relevant ideas. The sense of audience may be poor, and the paper reflects little (if any) attempt at revision or editing.

A paper fails the assignment for several reasons. For instance, it does not meet the assignment’s requirements. The writing is so sloppy or incoherent that it cannot communicate its ideas in any clear fashion. In some cases, the paper may be adequate, but you have submitted it far past the deadline. Finally, if a paper contains clear evidence of plagiarism it automatically fails the assignment.
Mastering and Adapting to the Assignment

At CGS, you will encounter a variety of writing situations. In one class you may be asked to analyze Alfred Hitchcock’s use of camera angles or Voltaire’s assumptions about human imperfectability; in another you may be asked to determine whether the war in Iraq really is, in fact, like the Vietnam War.

The first thing to remember is that each assignment is different. So if you want to master your writing assignments, always ask yourself, “What is this assignment asking me to do? Am I reporting? Arguing? Reflecting? Analyzing? Comparing and Contrasting?” You also need to identify, right away, particular requirements of the assignment. Are you required to use outside sources? How many sources are you required to use, and what kinds of sources are you expected to use? Are you meant to rely only on your own analysis and avoid others’ views? Many of your writing assignments at CGS will involve supporting an argument, but not all writing assignments will be thesis-driven arguments. In any case, read your assignment carefully, and determine your writing task from the very beginning.

You should also remember that instructors may choose to emphasize different goals with each writing assignment and that writing conventions may differ a bit from one academic discipline to another. Some of your writing choices will depend on the preferences of your instructor or the conventions of the academic discipline. For example, you may write a nature essay in one class that encourages you to use “I,” whereas you may write a lab report or a historical analysis in which using first person is explicitly prohibited by your instructor. Likewise, you may be asked to document sources using MLA guidelines in Rhetoric or Humanities, APA in Natural Science, and Chicago rules in Social Science.

It is easy to get confused by all of this variety if you forget a basic fact: we write for lots of different reasons and for lots of different audiences, and writing, like life, requires us to adapt to changing circumstances. You do not speak the same way to your grandmother and your best friend. You do not wear a tuxedo to a summer pool party. Likewise, you do not avoid "I" in a personal statement explaining why you should receive a scholarship. Adapt to the various writing situations you encounter with the same keen awareness of your situation, and a sense of how to carry yourself gracefully. Tailor your writing to the demands of the assignment and the expectations of your audience.
How to Manage the Writing Process

At the end of a particularly lengthy letter to a friend, Blaise Pascal, the 17th-century French religious philosopher and scientist, wrote “I have made this longer, because I have not had the time to make it shorter.” Any good writing, even an email to a professor or an employer, is rarely the result of setting down whatever flies off the top of your head. It is the result of a creative process that includes careful thinking, careful planning, and careful revision. The end result should be a work deliberately shaped by the author – you – to say just what you wish it to say. Nothing more, nothing less. In your Rhetoric classes at CGS you will be given the opportunity to learn and practice this creative process in any kind of writing. In this section we will briefly look at some of its more important steps.

A. Developing a Clear Thesis or Purpose

Every paper has a purpose. For instance, you may be writing to argue for your view of a controversial issue, to evaluate opposing sides of such an issue, to consider the history leading up to an important historical event, or to explore the meaning of a poem or a novel. The purpose of the paper gives coherence to the paper as a whole. Every paragraph of the paper should serve to advance that purpose. This purpose is often expressed in the paper in what is called a “thesis statement.” A thesis is a statement of the overall theme and question of your work as a whole. It expresses the purpose of your writing.

The first step in the writing process is to consider the purpose of your work. What is it you wish to say? What would you like your reader to get from reading your work? Clarifying and defining your purpose will help you approach the writing process in a concerted way.

B. Outlining and/or Freewriting

Once you have clarified your purpose, the next step is to consider how to accomplish it. A good paper has a structure designed to lead the reader to and through the ideas you wish to express. What structure will best help you achieve your purpose? What should come first, second, third? Outlining and/or freewriting can help you explore, experiment with, and make decisions about, the overall form your work should take.

C. The First Draft

Once you are clear about the form of your work, you are ready to begin writing. In composing your first draft you should give yourself the freedom to write as much as you like in whatever manner you like. No need to worry about presentation at this point. You will be revising, editing, and honing your work in subsequent drafts, so allow your creative juices to flow. Some very good writers often produce first drafts that contain much material not used in the final version. This is not wasteful. The first draft provides the raw material from which your polished, finished product will emerge. You may find that by writing a long draft, you also “write” your way into a stronger main point, that the drafting stage freed up your thinking, and thus let you express a more energetic organizing idea or, for a thesis-driven argument, an actual thesis itself.
D. Critical Assessment

Having finished the first draft of your paper, you are ready to review it with an eye toward assessing the degree to which it achieves its end. Now is the time to eliminate material that does not advance your purpose and ensure that the paper flows coherently. Each paragraph should follow logically from the previous one, making a point that moves the paper forward toward your conclusion. Sometimes it is helpful to set the paper aside for a few hours before rereading it, so that you can come back to it fresh. Reading your paper aloud to yourself can also help you to hear it more objectively. It might also be helpful to bring your paper to a peer who will read it and give you an honest reaction. You want to assess how readers unfamiliar with the paper will react to it. Will they understand what you are trying to say? Will it have the effect on them you wish it to have? How might it be changed so as to more fully achieve its end?

E. Revision

Once you have critically assessed your work, the next step is to revise it in the light of that assessment. Make sure your diction is accurate, your grammar is sound, and the overall structure of your work achieves the purpose you defined for it. This process of critical assessment and revision should continue until you turn the paper in. Once you have finished your second draft it is time to review and revise again. Keep at it until you have a work that says just what you want it to say, in the way you want to say it. Such a work will be one you will be proud to put your name on. It is your creative achievement.
The Role of the Professor and the Writing Center in the Writing Process

All writers occasionally encounter roadblocks that may temporarily hinder the writing process. Such roadblocks may have to do with research, thesis development, formulation of argument, clarity and coherency, and any number of areas of organization and structure; sometimes writers are simply interested in getting some feedback from more experienced writers. Whatever the reasons, nearly all successful writers seek the advice of other writers, and at the College of General Studies there are several writing resources available to you.

The first resource, not surprisingly, is the course professor, who is a writer, researcher, and expert in the field. CGS professors publish weekly office hours, welcome students who wish to sign up, and offer expertise to students who have questions about their assignments. Faculty office hours are limited, so if you want an appointment, sign up early.

The next resource is the College of General Studies Writing Center, located in the rear of the Katzenberg Center on the third floor of the College. The Writing Center is in Room 330B (across the hall from Room 313), and offers writing assistance specific to the CGS core curriculum. The Center is open the following times

- Monday through Thursday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Friday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- Exam weeks, holidays, and vacations, the Center is closed.

The Center is staffed by CGS professors, a writing specialist, and writing fellows. This professional staff guides you as you focus on the many issues of the writing process from drafting to revising, from paragraph organization to sentence variation. Remember, the Writing Center’s staff is here to assist you with the rhetorical and organizational challenges you face; the staff does not edit or correct your work. In addition, while the Writing Center staff will work with students who “walk in” if a slot happens to be available, the Center is not a “walk-in” resource. Always plan ahead and sign up early for an appointment. Time slots book up quickly, so make your appointment arrangements at the Center at least two days ahead of time. Come prepared with your assignment, any drafting you may have begun, and, always, your specific concerns about your writing. The more you can direct this one-on-one conference, the more beneficial it will be, and, the more confidence you will develop about your writing.

Finally, the Educational Resource Center, a University-wide facility located at 755 Commonwealth Avenue, offers assistance in writing, although that assistance is not specific to CGS courses. With all of the above resources, it is best for you to recognize as early as possible what you need for writing assistance and to schedule appointments promptly. Immediate or last minute help may not be available.
Additional Resources for Improving Your Writing

While all College of General Studies students are required to own The Saint Martin’s Handbook, an outstanding textbook and reference source, you will discover that The Saint Martin’s Handbook web site provides additional valuable resources including interactive exercises. We also recommend the following as among the best resources for you to consult to learn more about how to improve your writing:

**General and Discipline-Specific Writing Guides:**

The University of Chicago’s Writing Program’s Writing in College: A Short Guide to College Writing provides useful advice on how to produce quality college writing.

Boston University’s Department of History’s Writing Guide is an insightful guide to writing in the discipline of history with numerous examples to illustrate its points.

**Beginning the Writing Process/Developing Your Ideas**

The Purdue University On-Line Writing Lab’s Planning (Invention): Thought Starters (Asking the Right Questions) offers a list of key questions to help start the thinking process.

The University of North Carolina’s Writing Lab Reading to Write emphasizes the importance of strong reading in producing strong writing.

**Correcting Grammar and Punctuation**

University of Wisconsin’s Guide to Grammar and Punctuation reviews many frequent grammar and punctuation errors and offers tips and strategies on how to correct them.

**Revising, Editing, and Proofreading**

The University of North Carolina’s Getting Feedback is an outstanding discussion of how to work with instructor feedback as you revise your draft.

Purdue University’s Editing and Proofreading Strategies for Revision presents useful tips for editing and proofreading your writing.

**Documenting Sources and Avoiding Plagiarism**

Boston University’s Mugar Library offers Citing Your Sources, a guide to the four major formats for source documentation: American Psychological Association (APA), Chicago Style, Council of Science Editors (CSE), and Modern Language Association (MLA).

Georgetown University’s What is Plagiarism? presents clear, student-friendly explanations of what plagiarism is and how to avoid it.

**Research and Reference**

The home page of Mugar Library at Boston University provides access to library catalogues, databases, and other resources as well as general information about the library.

Compiled by Boston University reference librarians, Mugar Library's Research Guides are excellent resources for locating primary and secondary sources on an array of disciplines and topics.

**English as a Second Language**

Purdue University’s Basic ESL Tips: Writing for an American Academic Audience emphasizes a few important aspects of American academic writing for non-native speakers.
Final Remarks and Pointers

Grammar and Punctuation

There is no question that good writing requires a solid and sure grasp of mechanics at the sentence level. As previous sections like Kinds of Writing at CGS, Characteristics of a Well Written Paper, and How to Manage the Writing Process describe, correct grammar and punctuation are absolutes for any kind of document you write here in your CGS courses, in your other classes at the University, and in your future professional careers. Grammatical errors in subject and verb agreement, or inconsistencies with pronouns and antecedents, prevent your readers from understanding what you want them to know. Those mistakes ruin your chance to persuade them just as punctuation mistakes like comma splices, or syntactical wrongs like fused sentences, destroy your prose. The College’s standards for student writing and the instruction you receive in your classes train you to recognize, to correct, and, to move away from that kind of poorly constructed prose.

Letters and Emails

Never underestimate the importance of a finely crafted piece of correspondence. As the information in Mastering and Adapting to the Assignment explains, always keep in mind the audience for whom you write. You use a light tone, smiley faces, and informal spelling when you write to friends but not when you correspond with others. Whether you send an email to a professor for an appointment, or snail mail a letter of application for a summer internship, if you dispense with proper grammar and punctuation, you send a message that probably is not the type you intend. For instance, an email greeting like “Dear Professor” wins you far more than a breezy “Hey prof.” Furthermore, adherence to the rules of typing, like correct capitalization, and to those for grammar and punctuation, lets you keep your reader’s serious attention to your letter or message. An overly casual tone and sloppy typing make you seem like someone who does not deserve the information, the feedback, the job, the opportunity you may seek. Remember, your writing is “you” in another form. The first impressions email and letters create go a long way in determining how others may choose to acknowledge, or to ignore, you.

Proofreading, Proofreading, and More Proofreading

How to Manage the Writing Process describes the crucial part proofreading plays in your review of all you may write. Word processing programs offer the ease of tools that check grammar and spelling, but beware! These functions provide a superficial scan of possible mistakes. Always proofread your work. Whether you read from your computer screen, or, even better, from a hard copy you print out, read aloud so you hear the awkward moments, the misspelled words, the wrong punctuation mark, the typographical error.

Enlisting the Help of Parents and Friends

As The Role of the Professor and the Writing Center in the Writing Process explains, all writers, at some point, need to consult with another about their work. You may be tempted to turn to people you know well, a good friend, your high-school biology teacher, or your parents for feedback about your writing. However, you will receive
more specific and helpful advice if you go to the professor who gave you the assignment and/or the professional staff and faculty tutors in the Writing Center. These people have an **objective** and **less emotional** approach to conferencing with you about your writing concerns and goals. Their training in **academic and professional** writing means they will provide you with the rigorous questions and pointers you need to gain confidence and skill. Emailing drafts to parents for their remarks and copy editing hinders you from developing the independence that is part of your life at CGS and of your maturity as a scholar. You want to learn how to do your work and to claim, with pride, that you did so.

**Examples of Writing Assignments**

You may find yourself interested in illustrations of student writing that satisfied an assignment and received good or excellent grades. Most professors at CGS provide anonymous student examples that model high achievements in assignments. Often professors post these examples on their course info sites. Student answers to bluebook questions, lab reports, summaries of sociological theories, close-readings of a film, and so on, depending on the Division and the class, show you the realities of what **Characteristics of a Well Written Paper** describes. It is a good practice to ask your professors for the links to these examples especially since you will do so much and such varied writing at CGS. In addition, your freshman Rhetoric class uses a workshop format to go over many writing samples, yours and your classmates’. The workshop approach lets you see the kinds of good writing your peers practice and strive for, and trains you to be a better reader and editor of your own work.