
What Is Academic Writing?

Simply put, *academic writing* is writing done by scholars for other scholars—and that includes you. As a college student, you are engaged in activities that scholars have been engaged in for centuries: you will read about, think about, argue about, and write about great ideas. Of course, being a scholar requires that you read, think, argue, and write in certain ways. You will need to make and support your claims according to the expectations of the academic community.

How do you determine what these expectations are? It might help to think about scholarship as if it were an ongoing dinner party to which you

have been recently invited. The conversation (which in this case is about movies) has been going on for quite a while when you arrive. What do you do? Do you sit down and immediately voice your opinion? Or do you listen, try to gauge the lay of the land, determine what contribution you might make, and then make it?

The etiquette that you would employ at the dinner party is precisely the strategy that you should use when you write academic papers. In short, listen to what other scholars are saying. Familiarize yourself with the scholarly conversation before jumping in. Books like *Looking at Movies* are the perfect “dinner companion” for film scholarship, getting you up to speed, filling you in on the conversation that preceded you. But you should make use of other resources too. Your professor, for instance, is a living, breathing expert on what film scholars care about. Books, journals, and even credible Internet sites also offer an opportunity to eavesdrop on the ongoing scholarly conversation about film. Once you understand the conversation, you can begin to construct an informed argument of your own.

Constructing an Informed Argument

Consider What You Know When you sit down to write an academic paper, you’ll first want to consider what you know about your topic. Different writing assignments require different degrees of knowledge. A short paper written in response to a viewing of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, for example, may not require you to be familiar with Hitchcock’s other films.

However, if you’re asked to write an academic paper on the film, you’ll want to know more. You’ll want to have a firm grasp of the terms covered in *Looking at Movies* so that you can explain how Hitchcock is building his film. You’ll want to be familiar with Hitchcock’s other films so that you can understand what themes are important to Hitchcock and his work. Finally, if you’re watching this film in an upper-level film class, you’ll want to be aware of different critical perspectives on Hitchcock’s films and on films in general, so that you can “place” your argument within the ongoing critical conversation.

Consider What You Think The aim in thinking about your topic is to come up with a fresh observation. After all, it’s not enough to summarize in a paper what’s already known and discussed. You must also add something of your own to the conversation.

Understand, however, that “adding something of your own” is not an invitation to bring your own personal associations, reactions, or experiences to

the reading of a film. To create an informed argument, you must first recognize that your writing should be *analytical* rather than personal. In other words, your writing must show that your associations, reactions, and experiences of a film have been framed in a critical, rather than a personal, way.

This is not to say that your personal responses to a film are irrelevant. Indeed, your personal responses are a good starting point for the academic work to come. For instance, being terrified when you watch *The Blair Witch Project* can be the first step on the way to a strong analysis. Interrogate your terror. Why are you scared? What elements of the film contribute to your terror? How does the film play with the horror and documentary genres in order to evoke a fear that is fresh and convincing?

Interrogating your personal responses is the first step in making sure that your argument will be appropriately academic. To help ensure that your responses are critical rather than personal, subject them to the following critical thinking processes: summary, evaluation, analysis, and synthesis.

Summarize The first step in thinking critically about film is to summarize what the film is saying. You can construct several different summaries, depending on your agenda. But beware: even the most basic of summaries—the plot summary—isn't as simple as it seems. It's difficult to write both economically and descriptively, to discern what's essential to your discussion and what's not.

Consider this: Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* has a very complex plot using seven narrators and consisting of nine parts (five of which include flashback sequences). Further complicating matters is that the story duration is about seventy years, while the plot duration is one week of a reporter's research. *Citizen Kane* is a notoriously difficult film to sum up—though the following plot summary by Jesse Garon, taken from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), does an excellent job:

Multimillionaire newspaper tycoon Charles Foster Kane dies alone in his extravagant mansion, Xanadu, speaking a single word: "Rosebud." In an attempt to figure out the meaning of this word, a reporter tracks down the people who worked and lived with Kane; they tell their stories in a series of flashbacks that reveal much about Kane's life but not enough to unlock the riddle of his dying breath.

What makes this summary effective? It follows the basic structure of any film: a conflict/riddle/problem is proposed; someone tries to solve the problem, meeting obstacles along the way; finally, the problem is resolved. The

writer of this summary traces the conflict without being sidetracked by the many plot complications. He sticks to the theme and to the basic conflict/resolution structure. He also makes sure that his sentences are simple and clear. In the end, he produces a summary that is faithful to the film but that doesn't overwhelm the reader with details.

Summarizing a film's plot helps you to see its structure, conflicts, and themes. But when thinking critically about a film, you needn't limit yourself to plot summary. Equally useful, depending on your purpose, are summaries of a film's production values (lighting, editing, sound), its production history (financing, casting, distribution), or its critical reception (reviews, scholarship, and so on). The point is that summarizing is useful in helping you clarify what you know about a film, laying the foundation for the more complex processes to come.

Evaluate Evaluation is an ongoing process. You evaluate a film the moment you encounter it, and—if you aren't lazy—you continue to evaluate and to reevaluate as you go along. As we've been saying, evaluating a film is different from reacting to a film. When you evaluate for an academic purpose, you need to clearly articulate and support your own personal response. What in the film is leading you to respond a certain way? What's *not* in the film that might be contributing to your response? Watching *Citizen Kane*, for instance, you are likely to have found yourself caught up in the film's suspense. What in the film is making you feel this way? The editing? The acting? The script? Can you point to a moment in the film that is particularly successful in creating suspense? In asking these questions, you are straddling two intellectual processes: experiencing your own personal response, and analyzing the film.

Evaluation also encourages you to compare a film with other films that you've seen. How does the acting in *Citizen Kane* compare with the acting in other films from the same era? What about the editing? The camera angles? The sound? The story? How do they compare? Evaluating what's special about a film allows you to isolate those aspects that are most interesting—and most fruitful—to investigate further.

Analyze In the analysis stage of constructing an informed argument, your first task is to consider the parts of your topic that most interest you, then examine how these parts relate to each other or to the whole. To analyze *Citizen Kane*, you will want to break the film down by examining particular scenes, point of view, camera movements, sound, and so on. In short, you'll want to ask, What are the components of Welles's film, and how do these components contribute to the film's theme? How do they contribute to Welles's work as a whole? When you analyze, you break the whole into parts

so that you might see the whole differently. When you analyze, you find things to say.

Helping students to analyze movies by isolating their parts (shots, editing, sound, lighting, and so on) and determining their relationship to the whole is the purpose of *Looking at Movies*. We'll discuss the matter of analyzing films at length later in this supplement.

Synthesize When you analyze, you break down a film into its parts. When you synthesize, you look for *connections* between ideas. Consider once again *Citizen Kane*. In analyzing this film, you might come up with elements that seem initially disparate. You might have some observations that at first don't seem to gel. Or you might have read various critical perspectives on the film, all of them in disagreement with one another. Now would be the time to consider whether these disparate elements or observations might be reconciled, or synthesized. This intellectual exercise requires that you create an *umbrella argument*—a larger argument under which several observations and perspectives might stand.

For example, consider the analysis of *Citizen Kane* in *Looking at Movies* (pages 278–282). The author observes a series of elements that initially seem at odds with one another. For instance, he notes the range of conflicting emotions that the actors experience (each shifts among various feelings that include tenderness, joy, annoyance, guilt, and rage). He notes, too, how the interior and exterior actions contradict our typical expectations (whereas outside in the snow the boy Charles plays gleefully, inside the house, which one would expect to be warmer, the lamps remain unlit and the action is cold and strained). The point that the author makes by calling our attention to these conflicting aspects of the film is that Welles is constructing a scene rich in ambiguity. The effect, the author argues, is that Welles, through this ambiguity, is shifting the challenge of interpreting the scene to the viewer. This idea synthesizes the author's many observations, transforming a list of points into a powerful and intriguing argument.

Finding a Rhetorical Stance

When writing an academic paper, you must consider not only what you want to say, but also the audience to whom you're saying it. In other words, it's important to determine not only what *you* think about a topic, but also what your audience is likely to think. What biases does your audience have? Values? Expectations? Knowledge? To whom are you writing, and for what purpose?

When you begin to answer all of these questions, you have started to reckon with what has been called the rhetorical stance. *Rhetorical stance* refers to the position you take as a writer in terms of the subject and the reader of your paper.

Consider Your Position Let's first consider your relationship to the topic you're writing about. When you write a paper, you take a stand on a topic. You determine whether you're for or against it, passionate or cool-headed. You determine whether you'll view this topic through a particular perspective (e.g., feminist), or whether you'll make a more general response.

To ensure that your stance on a topic is appropriately analytical, you might want to ask yourself some questions. Begin by asking why you've taken this particular stance. For instance, why did you find some elements of the film more important than others? Does this prioritizing reflect a bias or preconception on your part? If you dismissed part of the film as boring or unimportant, why? Do you have personal issues or experiences that lead you to be impatient with certain elements? Might any part of your response to the film cause readers to discount your paper as biased or uncritical? If so, you might want to reconsider your position.

Consider Your Audience Your position on a topic does not, by itself, determine your rhetorical stance. You must also consider your readers. In the college classroom, the audience is usually the professor or your classmates—although occasionally your professor will instruct you to write for a more particular or more general audience. No matter who your readers are, you'll want to consider them carefully before you start to write.

What do you know about your readers and their stance toward your topic? What are they likely to know about the topic? What biases are they likely to have? Moreover, what effect do you hope to have on the readers? Is your aim to be controversial? Informative? Entertaining? Will the readers appreciate or resent your intention?

Once you've determined who your readers are, you will want to consider how you might best reach them. If, for example, you're an authority on a subject and you're writing to readers who know little or nothing about the subject, you'll want to take an informative stance. If you aren't yet confident about a topic and you have more questions than answers, you might want to take an inquisitive stance.

In any case, when you're deciding on a rhetorical stance, choose one that allows you to be sincere. You don't want to take an authoritative stance on a subject if you aren't confident about what you're saying. On the other hand, you don't want to avoid taking a position on a subject; nothing is worse than

reading a paper in which the writer has refused to take a stance. What if you are of two minds on a subject? Declare that to the reader. Make ambivalence your clear rhetorical stance.

Finally, don't write simply to please your professor. Though some professors find it flattering to discover that all of their students share their positions on a subject, most of us are hoping that your argument will engage us by telling us something new about your topic—even if that “something new” is simply a fresh emphasis on a minor detail. Moreover, it's impossible for you to replicate the “ideal paper” that exists in your professor's head. When you try, you risk having your analysis compared to your professor's. Is that really what you want?

Using Appropriate Tone and Style

You understand what's required of you in an academic paper. You need to be analytical. Critical. You need to create an informed argument. You need to consider your relationship to the topic and to the reader. But what about finding an appropriate academic tone and style?

One thing to remember as you analyze and write about film is that you aren't writing a review. Reviews are generally subjective: they explore an individual's response to a film and thus do not require research or analysis. As a result, reviews are often both simplistic (thumbs up, thumbs down) and “clever” (employing the pun-driven or sensational turns of phrase of popular magazines). Although reviews can be useful and even entertaining pieces of prose, they generally don't qualify as “academic writing.”

The tone and style of academic writing might at first seem intimidating. But that needn't be the case. Professors want students to write clearly and intelligently on matters that they, the students, care about. What professors *don't* want is imitation scholarship—that is, exalted gibberish that no one cares to read. If the student didn't care to write the paper, the professor probably won't care to read it. The tone of an academic paper, then, must be inviting to the reader, even while it maintains an appropriate academic style.

Remember that professors are human beings, capable of boredom, laughter, irritation, and awe. Understand that you're writing to a person who will be delighted when you make your point clearly, concisely, and persuasively. Understand, too, that she will be less delighted if you have inflated your prose, pumped up your page count, or tried to impress her by using terms that you didn't take the time to understand. (For more on how to create an appropriate but engaging academic tone and style, see “Attending to Style” later in this supplement.)