# W-2 Academic Contexts

An **ARGUMENT** on a psychology exam debating whether genes or environment do more to determine people's intelligence, a **REPORT** for a science course on the environmental effects of electricity-generating windmills on wildlife, a **PROPOSAL** for a multimedia sales campaign in a marketing course—all of these are kinds of writing that you might be assigned to do in college classes. This chapter describes some of the elements expected in academic writing.

## W-2a Key Elements of Academic Writing

**Evidence that you've carefully considered the subject.** You can use a variety of ways to show that you've thought seriously about the subject and done any necessary research, from citing authoritative sources to incorporating information you learned in class to pointing out connections among ideas.

**A clear, appropriately qualified thesis.** In academic writing, you're expected to state your main point explicitly, often in a **THESIS** statement, as MIT student Joanna MacKay does in an essay about selling human organs: "Governments should not ban the sale of human organs; they should regulate it."

Often you'll need to qualify your thesis statement to acknowledge exceptions or other perspectives. Here's a qualified thesis from an essay by Michaela Cullington, a student at Marywood University: "Although some believe that texting has either a positive or negative effect on writing, it in fact seems likely that texting has no significant effect on student writing." By adding **QUALIFYING WORDS** like "seems likely" and "significant," the writer indicates that she's not making a definitive claim about texting's influence on student writing.

**A response to what others have said.** Whatever your topic, it's likely that others have written or spoken about it. It's almost always best to present your ideas as a response to what others have





said—**QUOTING**, **PARAPHRASING**, or **SUMMARIZING** their ideas and then agreeing, disagreeing, or both.

For example, in an essay arguing that the American Dream is alive and well, University of Cincinnati student Brandon King presents the views of two economists who say that because wealth is concentrated in the hands "of a rich minority," "the American Dream is no longer possible for most Americans." He then responds by disagreeing, arguing that "the American Dream . . . is based on perception, on the way someone *imagines* how to be successful."

**Good reasons supported by evidence.** You need to provide good **REASONS** for your thesis and **EVIDENCE** to support those reasons. Joanna MacKay offers several reasons that sales of human kidneys should be legalized: a surplus exists; the risk to the donor is not great; and legalization would enable the trade in kidneys to be regulated, thereby helping many patients and donors. For that third reason, her evidence includes statistics about death from renal failure.

**Acknowledgment of multiple perspectives.** In any academic writing, you need to investigate and represent fairly the range of perspectives on your topic—to avoid considering issues in an overly simple "pro/con" way and, instead, to explore multiple positions as you research and write. Brandon King, for instance, looks at the American Dream from several angles: the ways it is defined, the effects of government policies on achieving it, the role of education, and so on.

**Carefully documented sources.** Clearly acknowledging sources and **DOCUMENTING** them correctly both in your text and in a list of **WORKS CITED** or **REFERENCES** at the end is a basic requirement of academic writing. If your text will appear online, you can direct readers to online sources by using hyperlinks, but your instructor may want you to document them formally as well.

**A confident and authoritative STANCE.** Your **TONE** should convey confidence and establish your authority to write about your topic. To do so, use active verbs ("X claims," "Y and Z have found"), avoid such phrases as "I think," and write in a direct style. Michaela Cullington establishes an authoritative stance in her essay on texting this

way: "On the basis of my own research, expert research, and personal observations, I can confidently state that texting is not interfering with students' use of standard written English and has no effect on their writing abilities in general." Her simple, declarative sentences and strong, unequivocal language ("I can confidently state," "has no effect") send the message that she knows what she's talking about.

**An indication of why your topic matters.** Help your readers understand why your topic is worth exploring—and why your writing is worth reading. In an essay called "Throwing Like a Girl," James Fallows explains why that topic matters, noting that his title reflects attitudes about gender that have potentially serious consequences.

**Careful attention to appropriate style norms.** For academic contexts, you should almost always write in complete sentences, use capitalization and punctuation as recommended in this handbook and other guides, check your spelling by consulting a dictionary—and avoid any abbreviations used in texting and other informal writing. Grammar conventions are important, and it's a good idea to follow them, especially in academic writing. Still, the primary goals of your writing are clarity and appropriateness and not simply strict adherence to convention for its own sake.

## W-2b Thinking about the Writing Context

- What GENRE does the assignment suggest—or require?
- What is your instructor's PURPOSE for this assignment? What is your purpose, apart from fulfilling those expectations?
- Who is your AUDIENCE?
- How can you convey a confident, authoritative STANCE?
- What MEDIA are available, permitted, and appropriate? Are any required?
- What DESIGN issues need to be considered?

» To read the student essays cited in this chapter, go to **digital.wwnorton.com/littleseagull4**.

# W-3 Reading Strategies

We read for many different purposes. We read textbooks to learn about history, biology, and other academic topics. We read social media to find out what people think of the events of the day. We read what other people write, but we also read our own drafts to make sure they say what we intend them to say. This chapter offers strategies for reading both your own and other people's texts accurately and strategically—and with a critical eye.

## W-3a Reading Strategically

Academic reading can be challenging; it presents new vocabulary and new concepts, and scholarly articles and books often assume that readers already know key ideas, vocabulary, and background information. As you progress in an academic major, reading will become easier, but the following tactics will help you understand and remember what you read now—and ultimately save you time.

**Adjust your reading speed.** Different texts require different amounts of effort. Simple, straightforward texts can be skimmed fairly quickly, but academic texts usually require a slower, more careful reading—and may require more than one.

**Look for organizational cues.** As you read, look for hints that signal the way the text's ideas are organized and how each part relates to those around it. Introductory paragraphs and the THESIS usually offer a preview of the topics to be discussed and the order in which they will be addressed. TRANSITIONS guide readers in following the direction of the writer's thinking from idea to idea. And headings identify a text's major and minor sections.

**Be persistent with difficult texts.** For texts that are especially challenging or uninteresting, first try skimming the abstract or