

## 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." With language 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 **WORKS CITED** or **REFERENCES** list 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, 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 correctness.** You should almost always write in complete sentences, use appropriate capitalization and punctuation, check that your spelling is correct—and avoid any abbreviations used in texting.

### 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 [www.norton.com/write/little-seagull-handbook](http://www.norton.com/write/little-seagull-handbook).

## W-3 Writing Processes

To create anything, we generally break the work down into a series of steps. We follow a recipe (or the directions on a box) to bake a cake; we divide a piece of music into various singing parts to arrange it for a choir. So it is when we write. We rely on various processes to get from a blank page to a finished product. This chapter offers advice on some of these processes—from generating ideas to drafting to revising and editing.

### W-3a Generating Ideas

The activities that follow can help you explore a topic—what you already know about it or how you might look at it in new ways.

- **Brainstorming.** Jot down everything that comes to mind about your topic, working either alone or with others. Look over your list, and try to identify connections or patterns.
- **Freewriting.** Write as quickly as you can without stopping for 5–10 minutes. Then underline interesting passages. Write more, using an underlined passage as your new topic.
- **Looping.** Write for 5–10 minutes, jotting down whatever you know about your subject. Then write a one-sentence summary of the most important idea. Use this summary to start another loop. Keep looping until you have a tentative focus.
- **Clustering.** Clustering is a way of connecting ideas visually. Write your topic in the middle of a page, and write subtopics and other ideas around it. Circle each item, and draw lines to connect related ideas.
- **Questioning.** You might start by asking *What? Who? When? Where? How? and Why?* You could also ask questions as if the topic were a play: *What happens? Who are the participants? When does the action take place? How? Where? Why does this happen?*