

Common Writing Pitfalls and Strategies

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Note

Many problems can be avoided simply by discussing the writing assignments you give students on several separate occasions before the assignment is due. Talk openly in class or in one-on-one conferences about what it is you expect from the students' writing, how they might go about writing it and why you think the assignment is important.

Writing Block/Procrastination

Students get blocked or experience procrastination for a wide variety of reasons: time-management difficulties; an inability to conceptualize the next step in the writing process; inadequate comprehension of the course readings; inadequate research; learning disability; lack of self-confidence; lack of motivation. It is important to spend time conversing with the student to identify the possible cause of the problem. Once the source of the block is identified, brainstorm with the student possible coping strategies. Possible strategies include:

- Encouraging the student to find a quiet place with no distractions to work.
- Identifying helpful as well as destructive rituals the student is doing when he or she writes. Think about ways to capitalize on the beneficial rituals and to eliminate the distracting or destructive ones.
- Locate models of the kind of writing assigned and share with the student. Models can give the students a better idea of what they are supposed to do.
- Help the student to organize a large project into manageable pieces. Set up a schedule whereby the student is only obligated to do one task during each work period.
- Show the student some prewriting strategies -- e.g., clustering, making lists, freewriting, who-what-when-where questions, free associations
- Encourage the student to tune out their "inner critic" and to think positively. Sometimes asking the student to imagine a supportive, empathetic reader (such as their best friend) for their writing can help them overcome their initial writing fears.
- Ask the student not to revise or edit while they are creating their first draft. If students refuse to write the second sentence until the first is perfect, they will lose their train of thought. They can always change things later, but get everything they think they want to say down first.
- Make sure the student understands the assignment completely.
- Encourage the student to begin assignments early.

No Thesis

Surprisingly, many students are unaware of exactly what a thesis is. Take time in class to explain that a good thesis statement will generally be:

- focused on one main idea, without too many parts.

- clearly stated, avoiding obscure or ambiguous phrases.
- analytical, rather than descriptive (saying something insightful is describing; evaluating its important insights is analytical).
- specific, avoiding vague, general phrases and assertions that are either too obvious or too broad to fit the length of your paper.
- making an original assertion about the subject, rather than a summary of what someone else said.

Bring in samples of good and bad thesis statements to class and have students evaluate them.

Poor Introductions

Explain to students that the introductory paragraph has one primary function: to introduce your thesis. Although it mentions your topic, it mainly functions to propose your thesis or your argument. The reader must come away from this paragraph with a precise idea of what you'll be arguing and doing in the rest of the essay. So make sure your thesis statement (1-2 sentences) is sharply honed and organized. Generally, writers do not open the paper with the thesis statement; it is probably better to begin broadly and focus down to the thesis at the end of the paragraph. The opening sentences of the paragraph should bring the reader into the writer's world, one recognizable and not alienating. In brief, the writer must make the reader comfortable and intrigued before offering the argument. Finally, in some cases (particularly in long essays), the writer may inform the reader where the argument is heading by outlining the plan of the essay. This brief (3-4 sentence) outline serves as a guide over particularly difficult intellectual terrain. Keep it concise, and follow it carefully in the body of the essay.

Poor Conclusions

Tell students that their last paragraph or paragraphs should bring the essay to a satisfying and meaningful conclusion. Generally writers synthesize and recount the argument provided in a concise but more sophisticated and precise manner than they did in the introductory paragraph. Moreover, the writer should formulate a deliberately rhetorical ending, bringing the final thoughts together by means of an allusion, metaphor or an effective prose rhythm. Finally, good conclusions often discuss the significance of the argument or point to ways in which the argument can be applied to other issues or events.

Undeveloped Papers

This problem is particularly common with lower-division students. Oftentimes, it results from students not understanding various means of delving deeply into the topic at hand. Possible ways to develop an expository paper include:

- Defining key and abstract terms carefully.
- Discussing the assumptions underlying the argument.
- Providing necessary background information.
- Analyzing key themes, passages, concepts (breaking them down into various components and considering each one separately and in conjunction with the other components).
- Providing insightful anecdotes or illustrations which clarify concepts or claims
- Offering significant and relevant comparisons or contrasts.

- Providing supporting evidence for claims in the form of quotations, paraphrasings, statistics, etc.
- Considering and refuting the counter-argument(s) to your position.
- Evaluating the significance or worth of your argument using clearly stated criteria.

Inadequate Revision

There is nothing more frustrating to a professor than receiving a revision from a student in which the only aspect that is changed is the spelling. While students sometimes revise superficially out of laziness, more often they simply do not understand what a substantial revision entails. It is important to discuss with the student precisely what the problem is with the paper. Prioritize those aspects needing improvement. Tell them that the higher order concerns (such as the lack of a thesis, organizational structure, or supporting evidence) are much more important to revise than the lower-order concerns (grammar, mechanics, spelling). Offer concrete strategies for how the student can address the most pressing problems.