

Writing Self-Assessment

Name: _____

Date: _____

Self-assessment: describe your writing process, your strengths and weaknesses as a writer. Do you have any concerns or anxieties about your writing?

What are your present writing projects?

How far along are your writing projects?

Do you write on a schedule?

Summarize the thesis or main argument of your primary writing project:

Describe the audience of your writing project and who will be evaluating it. Note any discipline specific expectations for content, structure or style.

Prewriting

1. What is *Problematik* of my paper?
2. What is the main argument-the single most important point that I want to get across to the reader?
3. What has been written about this topic? Compile a short bibliography of secondary sources here.
4. What sources do you plan to use to answer the questions?
5. How will I address the questions? Theories and methodologies - how will you process your sources?
6. What are the potential weaknesses of the paper?
7. How will I address those weaknesses?
8. Why is the paper important?

WRITING GUIDELINES

Each paper must have a thesis or set of theses- that is, fundamental idea(s) or argument(s). The reader must come away with more than mere information. Depending on the subject, you may find it most productive to pose a question, challenge a textbook interpretation, apply a new method, or explore a neglected dimension. Whatever the case, the paper must present a clearly stated thesis and argument to substantiate your view.

The following guidelines will help you to find way to deliver that thesis in the most effective, least distractive possible ways. They also reflect the standards expected in formal academic prose-the kind expected in theses, dissertations, and publications by university presses like Yale, Oxford, and Princeton.

Structures

1. **Paper Titles:** Be sure to have a proper title to key the reader to your subject and, ideally, main thesis.

- A. Definitive: specify subject (The Religious Attitudes of Peter the Great)
- B. Argumentative: state the thesis (Peter the Great: the Pious Westernizer)
- C. Interrogative: pose a question (What Was the Goal of the Petrine Church Reforms?)
- D. Intriguing or witty but with a point: (Jonathan Sarna, "The Pork on the Fork: A Nineteenth-Century Anti-Jewish Ditty")

2. **Abstract ("Executive Summary")**: Your paper must have an abstract (also called "executive summary"), running approximately 50 to 75 words and providing a distilled, precise summary of the paper. Its form will depend on the paper and how it is presented. It might be a simple statement of objective and summary of the main theses:

Example 1: "Scholarship treating Andalusian Hebrew literature has generally approached poems depicting natural settings as "nature poetry" without considering "landscape" as a distinct literary topic. This article reconsiders this body of literature from the perspective of landscape, focusing on the associations between garden, desert, and forest and cultural meanings. In particular, the contrast between the garden and its counterpoints in desert and forest is linked with a poetics of estrangement and nostalgia that arose with the displacement of Andalusian Jewish intellectuals following the Almoravid conquest (c. 1090). As Islamic Iberia began to fade into memory, the garden emerged as an icon of Andalusian culture, while the desert and forest represented landscapes of exile, each bearing specific cultural connotations" (Abstract: Jonathan Deeter, "A Myrtle in the Forest: Landscape and Nostalgia in Andalusian Hebrew Poetry").

Example 2: "The traumatic event of her father's death is a fundamental experience in Dahlia Ravikovitch's writing. This loss and simultaneity of the death's presence and its concealment create an emotional mechanism of psychological imprisonment in the orphan's world. This study explores the effect of this emotional break on Ravikovitch's oeuvre and singles out a sort of "poetics" of orphanhood." Using various psychoanalytic theories, it examines the connection between Ravikovitch's poetic preferences and the particular nature of her traumatic event" (Abstract: Ilana Szobel, "Forever Beholden: Orphanhood in the work of Dahlia Ravikovitch").

Example 3: "This article presents a theoretical framework and illustrative findings from a longitudinal study of teacher preparation and learning to teach. The study followed 6 elementary education students enrolled in 2 contrasting programs through 2 years of undergraduate teacher education. One goal was to describe what students learned in relation to what they were taught. A second goal was to appraise the content and import of the lessons learned and consider how they contributed to preparation for teaching. To accomplish these goals, we developed a framework that relates empirical description and analysis with normative questions about teacher education. In this article, we describe briefly the framework and the study and then present 2 sets of findings from 4 of the 6 case studies. The framework identifies a central task for teacher preparation and offers a model of teacher learning. The findings illustrate the power of these ideas for describing the thinking of teacher candidates and the influences on their learning. Together the findings and framework can help teacher educators clarify the special mission of preservice preparation and consider the kinds of learning opportunities that are especially appropriate at this stage of learning to teach" (Abstract: Sharon Feiman-Nemser and Margret Buchmann, "Describing Teacher Education: A Framework and Illustrative Findings From a Longitudinal Study of Six Students").

3. **Introductions.** Your paper must have a strong introductory paragraph to clue the reader to the main thrust of your paper, at once making it easier to read the paper and to grasp clearly, from the outset, precisely what you seek to do.

Openings:

(From *Spunk & Bite: A Writer's Guide to Punchier, More Engaging Language and Style*)

The opening paragraph sets the tone and promises the rest of the story. One needs to deliver the opening promise in a few sentences. "Prolonged openings are mainly an indulgence of brand-name authors. . . . Readers may be more patient with book and chapter openings, but within a half page or so they should be convinced that soul or synapse will be jostled at some point down the line."

A. Six types of openings identified by editor Robert I. Barker:

1. *Someone's remark--a quotation:*

"Apostasy," a historian once observed, "endangered the sanctity of the most hallowed relationships in the community--between parent and child, husband and wife, rabbi and disciple" (ChaeRan Freeze, "When Chava Left Home: Gender, Conversion, and the Jewish Family in Tsarist Russia").

2. *An intriguing, troubling, or amusing question:*

"The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a

strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States....the silent question--'Is this all?'" (Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*)

3. *A striking or startling statement:*

"For the first time in the history of the world, every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals, from the moment of conception until death" (Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*).

4. *Descriptive stage-setting:*

"On the night before appearing in the arena the gladiators and the *bestiarii*, the men who fought against wild beasts, had an elegant dinner, the *cena libera*. Greek and Roman sources show this was a regular practice, providing a spectacle that the public in manifest voyeurism would come to observe. . . . Despite the attention it received in antiquity, Greek and Roman sources are silent about the pre-history of this macabre custom" (Marc Zvi Bretter and Michael Poliakoff, "Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish at the Gladiator's Banquet: Rabbinic Observations in the Roman Arena").

5. *Storytelling narrative:*

"The following tale is told of the Hebrew linguist Moshe Aharon Wiesen (1878-1955), who as a youth in Galicia served one of the zaddikim of the day. Summoned by the zaddik, he was informed that he must leave the court--heretical books had been found in his possession. Upon querying the zaddik, Wiesen discovered that the book in question was Avraham Shalom Freidberg's *Zikhronot leveit David*. He asked "Rabbi how do you know that this book is heretical? Have you read it?" (David Assaf, *Untold Tales of Hasidism*).

6. *A one-line attention getter called a "capsule" (usually used in shorter essays, newspaper articles, etc.)*
Gary Robinson died hungry . He wanted fried chicken, the three-piece box for \$2.19.

It is sometimes useful to have a two-paragraph introduction. The first paragraph that begins with one of the openings above, followed by one of the other models below.

B: Other scholarly openers (these can stand on their own without the introductions discussed above)

1. *Executive summary* ("This paper reexamines Princess Dashkova's self-representation in her autobiography. It shows how she... It also investigates... It demonstrates that....")

2. *Challenge conventional wisdom or approach:* This model poses a generally accepted view or approach, either to confirm its veracity or to offer a modified view.

Example: "The gesture of placing one's hand on the head of a person or animal described in the Hebrew Bible has been the subject of quite intensive study. In particular, scholars have expended rather indefatigable efforts in attempting to determine and explicate the meaning of the act. Many articles and portions of books, not to mention commentaries, have been devoted to this purpose. But despite all this inquiry, there has been no general consensus regarding the significance of the gesture The purpose of the present study is to reexamine the meaning of these two forms of hand placement in the Hebrew Bible" (David Wright, "The Gesture of Hand Placement in the Hebrew Bible and Hittite Literature").

3. *Question model:* Pose questions that, in the same order, you will try to answer in the paper ("To reassess the status and role of elite women in eighteenth-century Russia, this paper will examine the memoirs of Princess Dashkova and address three main questions. First, how did she perceive her role *in* the family? What was her relationship to her children and husband? Second, what was her role in the intellectual life of the time?

How did she represent herself and how did others respond to her? Third, what role did she have in the turbulent politics of the day?)

4. Thesis Model: It is perfectly acceptable to be explicit and clear about your thesis: "This study is a rhetorical analysis of Psalm 145 with a focus on its theme and structure followed by an inquiry into its communal liturgical use. The aim is to uncover the poetics that inform and frame the message in order to make the structural intention and achievement of the psalmist discernible" (Reuven Kimelman, "Psalm 145: Theme, Structure, and Impact").

4. Subsections: While not necessary in a short paper, in longer term papers it is helpful to add subheadings-these alert the reader, in advance, to the substance of the section, and also map the logic behind the paper's organization. It also helps the writer to focus material in that section, to avoid digressions, and to develop the main argument(s) of the paper.

5. Conclusions: A single paragraph at the end should either summarize the paper ("In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that...") or reflect on its broader implications (i.e., answer the "so what?" question: "This analysis of Dashkova's memoirs suggests the need to reconsider traditional stereotypes about women and their role in eighteenth-century Russia.....")

Conventional models for ending (*Spunk and Bite 143*)

- Closed circle or bookend - Echo or complete the opening. If you started with a quote, story or surprising statement, tie the paper back to that opening.
- Judgment: Explicit closing pronouncement to add to judgments made earlier
- Implications: Reflect on broader implications (see example above)
- Anecdote or vignette - stories on message or take an ironic twist
- Revelation: Details that have been withheld in the paper that concludes the paper.
- Quotation: Dramatized ending

Do Not:

- change an article's tone at the end;
- add a gratuitous tag such as "indeed" to a quote'
- suddenly introduce new or irrelevant ideas;
- drag endings out unnecessarily
- make early concluding sounds "Finally, lets review..."

Marshall J. Cook *Leads and Conclusions*: "Make your conclusions so good, so integral to their stories, [that] even the most insensitive scissor-wielding , delete-punching editor should know enough to leave them alone."

Paragraphs

6. Topic Sentence. Each paragraph MUST (to repeat, MUST) have a topic sentence- i.e., a sentence that serves as an umbrella for all within that paragraph and gives it coherence. One should be able to read the topic sentences and understand the whole chapter. Sometimes the topic sentence can be masked (as a quotation, as a question, etc.), but 99 percent of the time it should a straightforward declarative sentence that encapsulates the essence of the paragraph.

7.Paragraph Elucidation. The rest of the paragraph must develop that topic sentence. Each following sentence can: (a) illustrate; (b) offer statistical data; (c) cite significant quotes; (d) offer

qualifications, limitations, etc. Each sentence should link to the next.

8. Paragraph Length. A solid, normal paragraph should be one-half to three-quarters of a double-spaced text. Anything less is either underdeveloped or poorly organized; anything more is either diffuse or prolix. Imagine that it will be a paragraph on a printed page; that one-third of a printed page translates into two-thirds of a page in a double-spaced manuscript. It is essential to organize the narrative into coherent, intelligible, readable paragraphs.

9. Paragraph Linkage. The paragraphs should flow logically. The last sentence of one paragraph might foreshadow the next; the next paragraph might qualify, amplify, or illustrate the preceding paragraph. Paragraphs might also be chronologically sequential (In the 1830s... But in the 1840s...) or enumerating ("There were five factors..." "First, *or* The first was....") Whatever the style, logic must underlay the structural organization; the flow of paragraphs should constitute an intelligible, logical narrative. There must be sense, order, coherence to the narrative.

10. Paragraph Unity. Try to keep the same actor (substantive, pronoun) to maintain unity and flow within the paragraph. Do not jump from subject to subject. This continuity enhances the flow of the paper.

Stylistics

11. Active voice. Avoid passive voice ("The writer who used the passive voice was criticized"). These are dead sentences; they are also less informative, hiding, above all, the actor: "Professor Freeze criticized the student who used the passive voice."

Example of passive voice: The body was discovered in the library; later an identification was done.

12. Variety: Sentences should vary in form and length; they should avoid using the same sentence structure (e.g., beginning each sentence with a dependent clause). Avoid distractions at the beginning of sentences, which Williams and Colomb call "throat clearing. Avoid words like fortunately, perhaps, allegedly, it is important to note, for the most part, etc.

13. Verbal Power. Bolsheviks like action verbs. For example, "is indicative of" should be "indicate"; "have an influence on" "influence"; "is capable of" "can."

Express action in verbs:

The **intention** of the committee of is **improvement** of morale.

Better: The committee **intends** to improve morale.

The Federalists' **argument** in regard to the **destabilization** of government by popular democracy was based on their belief in the **tendency** of factions to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good. (Most of the actions in bold are not verbs but abstract nouns).

Better: The Federalists **argued** that popular democracy **destabilized** government, because they **believed** that factions tended to further their self-interest at the expense of the common good.

Example: words to review previous scholarship (each one is distinct so use precisely)

accept
advocate
affirm
agree
analyze
assert
claim
concur
consider
contradict
counter
declare
defend
demonstrate
deny
describe
disavow
disclaim
discover
dispute
dissent
emphasize
establish
examine
explain
explore
express
imply
indicate
inform
inquire
investigate
maintain
mention

note
observe
offer
posit
present
probe
promote
propose
question
recognize
record
recount
refute
reject
relate
remark
report
repudiate
reveal
state
study
suggest
summarize
support
survey
theorize
urge

14. Prolivity. Economize on paper and the reader's time. Verbosity is the most obvious fault of poor writing; it tires readers. Expect to reduce your first-draft sentences by a third. Trim unnecessary words; seek the shortest, most economic (and, therefore, most powerful) construction. This does *not* mean simple-minded, five-word declarative sentences; it does mean that each word in a sentence, however long, is indispensable.

Don't use more words than you have to:

in this day and age= today

at this point in time = now

Don't say the same thing twice:

in the month of November= in November

yellow in color= yellow

Don't use words that don't add meaning:

The fact of the matter is that I'm tired= I'm tired

WORDY

CONCISE

an unexpected surprise -----a surprise
 at that point in time -----then
 due to the fact that -----because
 end result-----result
 past history.....history
 He is a person who can be trustedHe can be trusted.
 in order to.....to
 the field of computer science.....c omputer science
 There are many teens who smoke.....Many teens smoke.
 two different kinds..... two kinds
 refer back to..... refer to
 surrounded on all sides.....surrounded
 There is no doubt that he lost.No doubt he lost.

(From Williams and Colomb, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*)

Meaningless words: Williams and Colomb describe the following words as "verbal tics that we use as unconsciously as we clear our throats."

kind of, actually, particular, really, certain, various, virtually, individual, basically, generally, given, practically

Delete doubled words: full and complete, hope and trust, any and all, true and accurate, each and every, basic and fundamental, hopes and desires, first and foremost, various and sundry

Delete Redundant Modifiers: terrible tragedy, future plans, each individual, final outcome, true facts, free gift

Transform negatives

not different- similar
 not the same-different
 not allow-prevent
 not notice-overlook
 not many-few
 not often-rarely
 not stop-continue
 not include-omit

Words that are implicitly negative (without using 'not')

Verbs: preclude, prevent, lack, fail, doubt, reject, avoid, deny, refuse, exclude, contradict, prohibit, bar

Prepositions: without, against, lacking, but for, except

Conjunctions: unless, except when

Ben Yagoda, When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It: The Parts of Speech, for Better and/or Worse

Voltaire: "The adjective is the enemy of the noun."

William Zinsser: "Most adjectives are ... unnecessary. Like adverbs, they are sprinkled into sentences by writers who don't stop to think that the concept is already in the noun."

Avoid trite adjectives: important, great, wonderful, fantastic, terrific, incredible, remarkable, etc.

Yagoda includes a selection from Jonathan Raban's *Passage to Juneau* to show how our "perception of the world can actually be altered by cliched adjectives":

Two centuries of romanticism, much of its routine and degenerate, has blunted everyone's ability to look at waterfalls and precipices in other than dusty and secondhand terms.

Motoring through the Sound, watching for deadheads, I sailed through a logjam of dead literary cliches: snow-capped peaks above, fathomless depths below, and in the middle of

the picture, the usual gaunt cliff, hoary crags, wild woods, and crystal cascades¹¹ (Yagoda 29-30).

15. Precision. Use the exact word, phrase you need; avoid trite, casual expressions. Use meaningful descriptive words (claimed, demonstrated, contended) , not vapid defaults (noted, mentioned).

16. Writer's Words: Learn new vocabulary! Visit A.Word.A.Day (www.wordsmith.org/awad). Today's word was uxorious. ¹¹Writers appreciate recondite words as much as the next language junkie, but they don't want readers gagging on them." According to *Spunk and Bite*, to earn a place in an author's working vocabulary, a word should be at least one of the following:

Precise: *tor* (hilltop rock heap)

Concise: *mulet* (defraud, as of money)

Eu phonious: *fa nfaronade* (bluster)

Onomatopoeic: *williwaw* (violent squall)

Forceful: *fulgent* (dazzlingly bright)

Evocative: *mojo* (charmed object)

Fun: *cachinnate* (laugh immoderately)

Fresh: *nimiety* (an abundance instead of, say, stale *plethora*).

Tips for using a thesaurus (quoted from *Spunk and Bite*, 77-79)

- discover more fitting or more forceful words;
- find those good words you can't quite recall;
- avoid repetition of words;
- escape cliches and worn modifiers;
- help describe the so-called indescribable;
- refine your intended meaning (via related concepts); and
- simply luxuriate in the plentitude of language.

Don't use all the words that fit. Remember prolixity matters.

16. Dangling Modifiers (from *Spunk and Bite*, 197-99)

Writing madly, she didn't notice the killer. *Writing* is a present participle that modifies *she*.

¹¹When that logical subject is missing or misplaced, the participle dangles. ¹¹

Example : *Writing her book every morning before the kids arose, the strain was more than she could bear.*

Can *strain* write her book?! The phrase is a dangler.

Example : *With jurisdiction over the range of family issues, including adoption, divorce, domestic violence, child custody, and juvenile delinquency, Family Court's caseload has swelled enormously.*

What is the subject being modified?

17. Split Infinitives. Avoid in formal prose ("to forcefully argue" >> "to argue forcefully")

18. Since and While. Use these words to refer only to *time*. Do not use them to mean *because* or *although*.

Incorrect: **Since** asbestos is dangerous, it should be removed carefully.

While we agree on a date, we disagree about the place.

Correct:

Since its rediscovery in the nineteenth century, the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh has again captured the imagination of the literate public (Tzvi Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal")

We will wait **while** you eat.

19. Do not end a sentence with a preposition.

Incorrect: The peculiarities of legal English are often used as a stick to beat the official **with**.

Correct:**with which** to beat the official.

Mechanics

20. Period: Do not put a second period at the end of a sentence that concludes with an abbreviation.

We are leaving at 5:00 a.m.

21. Exclamation Point: Use sparingly in informal prose, and almost never in academic writing.

22. Question Mark: Do not use a question mark after an indirect question

I wonder who will win the book prize this year.

23. Comma: Insert before conjunction (and, but, etc.) for two *independent clauses*.

Most new members of the Communist Party came from the working class, but a few did come from the privileged classes.

24. Serial Comma: Use commas to separate series of three or more words, phrases, clauses.

Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Left SRs collaborated in forming revolutionary councils at the provincial level.

25. Comma Splice: Do not use a comma to fuse two independent clauses.

Misused: *Nicholas II thoroughly detested the Duma, he wanted to eliminate it at the first opportunity.*

Correct: *Nicholas II thoroughly detested the Duma, and he wanted to eliminate it at the first opportunity.* OR

Nicholas II thoroughly detested the Duma; he wanted to eliminate it at the first opportunity.

26. Colon: Use after an independent clause to introduce a list, a quotation, or a second independent clause that illustrate or explains the first clause.

Lists: *Stalin received reports on collectivization in five oblasts: Novgorod, Iaroslavl, Tver, Moscow, and Tula.*

Quotation: *The Central Committee issued a clear ultimatum: "Any party member who*

refuses to repudiate Trotsky's line is to be expelled immediately from the party.
Explanatory Clause: *The party secretary was reluctant to expel "right-wing deviationists": it was not the first time he had heard such empty rhetoric, which was intended to intimidate, not shape policy.*

27. Dash: Use for emphasis, therefore sparingly (especially in formal prose).

During the civil war, the left Bolsheviks-especially Bukharin and Preobrazhenski-i envisioned an immediate transition to communism.

28. Parentheses: Use to clarify complex sentences, but do so sparingly.

The anti-religious commission consisted of two members from the oblast office of Narkomiust (Galkin and Popovich), two from the party obkom (Andreev and Vasil'ev), and two from the OGPU (Ivanov and Latsis).

29. Quotation Marks: Use for direct quotations but sparingly to indicate a critical distancing or sardonic usage: "The 'freedom' so vaunted in American policy evidently stops at the beaches of Guantanamo Bay."

American usage requires double quotation marks (with single quotation marks for a quote within a quote). Place outside periods and commas, but inside semicolons and colons:

*Lenin insisted that the OGPU purge the party of "unreliable elements."*¹

The OGPU purged the party of "unreliable elements" ; that did not, however, diminish Stalin's suspicion that its ranks still contained many more hidden enemies.

30. Slash. Do not use in formal writing; "and/or" is acceptable only for technical scientific writing.

31. Capitalization: Capitalize titles only if used with a name ("President Putin" but "the president").

Documentation

32. Use proper footnotes and endnotes (see Chicago Manual of Style)

Schedule for Writing

See: Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Clockwork Muse: A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations, Books*

- Write every day: set aside time to devote to writing. Keep track of when you are the most effective writer. Writing daily will help you maintain momentum and ensure "the continuous flow of your writing."
- Divide and conquer your project in smaller segments. A detailed outline of your paper or thesis will help you break down the project into feasible components.
- Estimate time to complete the writing project: research, writing, editing

- Create deadlines for yourself.
- Leave enough time to write a second or third draft. Read your paper aloud or to a friend.

"Resources for Writers": On-Line Help in Writing

Duke University has a website called "Resources for writers" with links to specific topics, many at other universities (<http://www.crlw.duke.edu/wstudio/resources/handouts/#edit>). The table of contents follows. Do consult the site to improve your prose and for help on specific problems.

Bruce Ross-Larson, *Edit Yourself: A Manual for Everyone Who Works With Words* (New York, 1996)

Bruce Ross-Larson, *Stunning Sentences: The Effective Writing Series* (New York, 1999)

Peter E. Meltzer, *The Thinker's Thesaurus: Sophisticated Alternatives to Common Words*

Arthur Plotnik, *Spunk and Bite: A Writer's Guide to Punchier, More Engaging Language and Style* (New York, 2005)

Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (New York, 2003)

Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Colomb, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (10th edition, 2010)

Ben Yagoda, *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It: The Parts of Speech for Better and/or Worse* (New York, 2007).

William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* (New York, 2006)