

# STETSON UNIVERSITY

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## Writing Program

### What is Good Writing?

There are some rules about what makes good writing. Some students think of “rules” as the kind of thing that tells them when to use a comma and when to use a semicolon. These rules, however, are more like **guiding principles**.

- *Know your audience*
- *Know your purpose*
- *Know your forum...and be able to identify its conventions.*
- *Know your topic, and be willing to learn even more about it*
- *Know what kinds of evidence and appeals are possible...and how to choose which kinds are appropriate*
- *Let your organization grow organically from the interaction of what you know about your audience, your purpose, your forum, and your topic.*

Good writing, regardless of the course or the discipline within which it is taught, shows the following characteristics (this is not an exhaustive list, and it is not prioritized):

- *Clarity of expression*
- *Coherence (not just comprehensible—coherence in the sense that all the parts of the written piece form a single unit)*
- *Response appropriate to question asked (i.e., an accurate reading of the essay question and a complete response to all parts of that question)*
- *Synthesis of ideas (whether from reading or class discussion)*
- *Focus and concision (i.e., narrow topic within a greater subject; ability to develop an idea without having to broaden the topic, staying on track with a topic or argument)*
- *Relevance (the “so what” element)*
- *Evidence of critical thinking*
- *Independent thought, thought that moves beyond summarizing a reading or a discussion, thought that contributes to an academic conversation*

When we say we want students to think critically, we mean to think **analytically**. Students often come to us thinking that **criticism** is something you do to people or ideas or things you don’t like. In contrast, we mean for you to take apart an idea or a plan, assess its

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individual parts, ask questions designed to give you a fuller understanding of the topic at hand, challenge assumptions they might hold, and then—and only then—to come to conclusions. To think critically is to be aware of all the factors that play into our understanding of what goes on around us. The ability to think critically involves being able to ask questions about **causes and outcomes, histories and patterns, experiments and innovations**. Most importantly, the ability to think critically involves not making any judgments without first establishing a good understanding of the idea, proposal, or issue in question.

One popular critical thinking exercise used in many institutions is the “alien tour.” The set up is this: imagine that you are giving a guided tour of your hometown or city to an alien— someone who has no idea why you do what you do. As part of your tour, you take a hot air balloon ride over the city, and your alien guest sees a baseball stadium below. Suddenly, you have a lot of questions to answer, and what’s challenging is that your guest shares none of the assumptions and understandings that would help you explain. For instance: *What do these people find so interesting about this game? What is a game? Why are there no women on a baseball team? What is the point of this game? Why do people like to watch it? What is a team? Why can’t the people watching go down into the field and join the game? Why are they so excited?*

It’s hard to explain things to people who do not share key elements of cultural understanding with you. In fact, anything is easier to explain if your audience already knows some of it. But what if the audience really has no idea? Where do you start?

Each field of study has its own set of assumptions, things it finds important, traits it values, behaviors it expects, and so forth. Each course students take here will help develop critical thinking, and each student’s skill at assessing a given situation will be shown in the way she writes, speaks, and interacts. The connections are unmistakable, and the way we teach is to help students see those connections and show them to us. Those skills will transfer out into other courses, other contexts, and the world at large.

We recommend a visit to the [Foundation for Critical Thinking](#). Here you’ll find an excellent resource for understanding and applying the principles of being a smart thinker

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(rather than just a clear thinker). And once you're thinking clearly and smartly, we usually see clearer writing, writing that pays attention to fine shadings of meaning, relationships between ideas, innuendos a less canny thinker might miss, and so forth.

### You The Writer

When you write, you're acting and composing within a set of parameters: **you**, the writer, have both an **assignment** and a **reader** who will respond to it. This set up provides a triangle of sorts: in the field of writing, we call it **the rhetorical situation**, in which any writer with a purpose, an audience, and a text can decide strategies and techniques to use. Most students coming to Stetson are familiar with the idea that a writing assignment is expected to let you speak your mind or to fulfill some expectation or other: *Did you do the reading? Did you understand the reading? What did you think about the reading?* In high school, the instructor may well have been interested primarily in your completion of the task. Here at Stetson, we want you to show us *how* you're thinking about the subject matter.

As a part of the academic community, you are now a participant in a tradition of thinking that goes back centuries, and as part of that tradition, your responsibility to the world of the idea is much greater. Your writing has significance in college; it has a place and a relevance that it may not have had before. You are now a contributor, not a passive observer or regurgitator of facts. The challenge may be substantial as you grow in your abilities to express what you're thinking in a way that's interesting and relevant to your audience.

It may be helpful to realize that incoming students demonstrate very specific characteristics in their writing. This table's left hand column represents some of the most common perceptions about writing for students who join us in their first year. The right hand column includes some of the same perceptions from writers in their senior year.

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<u>Entering College Writers</u>	<u>Experienced College Writers</u>
Think of writing as a <b>task</b> to get done	Think of writing as an intellectual <b>challenge</b>
Tend to see ideas as <b>separate</b>	Tend to look for <b>relationships</b> between ideas
During revision, generally focus more on editing <b>surface</b> elements like punctuation and word choice	During revision, generally focus more on <b>deeper</b> issues of explanation, relevance, and support
Often see teacher's suggestions as <b>reminders</b> of what to do next	Usually see suggestions as <b>prompts</b> to continue thinking about a concept along specific lines

One note of caution: learning and retaining all the skills it takes to move from “entering college writer” to “experienced college writer” is not easy. It generally takes time and effort for the course of your college career, and, if your courses do not require a lot of writing, you may not develop as much as you’d like to. Seeking out opportunities to improve your writing will pay off well in the end.

### **Speaking and Writing English (when it isn’t your first language)**

Academic English, rhetorically, can be considered and treated as a second language comparatively to conversational English. With a wide-range of conventions that diversify for each discipline, even native-speakers struggle with writing academically in English. Alongside this concern, students using English as well as their own native language often run into trouble with the grammatical elements of sentences, including verb tenses, plurals, and

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articles (like *a*, *an*, and *the*). Even for students whose written and spoken English is fairly fluent,

Grammatical elements can be the last things to get firmly under control. Most of the issues can be resolved with careful, one-on-one attention from professors, other students, and the tutors in the Writing Center. Forming study groups with other students in the same position can also help; students learn a great deal from each other. In the short term, though, here are some reminders to keep in mind when tackling written English assignments:

- ✚ Develop a reading/editing relationship with someone whose skills you trust, who can help you find and fix editing and grammatical issues (Your professors can help with this, or you can ask a peer in class to help you. Also, remember that Writing Center tutors are trained to help you develop these skills.)
- ✚ Take your writing tasks one at a time. Work on clarifying your ideas and your essay structure **first**, separately from checking for grammar mistakes. Although this process seems like it would take more time, it can often save you time from writers-block and enable you to have your complete focus to catch more issues pertaining to the particular step you are at. This strategy will help you move more efficiently through the process and will result in a better essay at the end.
- ✚ Read slowly. It is easy to let your brain and your eyes “fill in” what you know you’ve been trying to say, even if the words and the sentence structure are not actually saying it. If you read out loud, one sentence at a time, you can focus on structure and correctness more effectively than if you skim over quickly.
- ✚ Compile a list of the mistakes you consistently make and use that list to guide you as you edit. Missing articles, verb agreement, comma placement, and word endings such as –ed and –s are common errors.
- ✚ Avoid thinking of your writing as separate from your speaking, and try to use the correct speaking habits to help you reinforce accuracy in your writing.

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Before you start writing and while you're thinking about writing, you need to consider questions like these because they are key to how a reader understands you on the page. In fact, the answers to these questions will help you figure out your **goal** for writing.

- ✚ What point do you want to make?
- ✚ Do you have enough information to be persuasive, or are you relying on your own opinion (or the opinions you've inherited from others)?
- ✚ Is your perspective objective enough to stand on its own, or do you need research?
- ✚ Have you thought through the implications of your idea clearly enough to be able to anticipate what others might say?
- ✚ Do you plan to argue against a well-established viewpoint, or are you planning to agree with something?
- ✚ Considering your position, how will you express it?

With this in mind, it is also important to think about the **audience** of your writing. Your writing grade will often depend on your ability to demonstrate an awareness of different audience needs. To name a few, some of your professors are going to be reading from the perspective of political science, some from the perspective of philosophy. Those disciplinary differences help you adjust for some audience issues; what about academic expectations?

- ✚ How will you show your professor that you have done the necessary reading and thought about it carefully?
- ✚ Have you shown in your writing that you have paid attention to what the professor has asked of you?
- ✚ What forms and conventions are expected in the course you are taking?

Once you have been able to clarify what is expected of you, the **writer**, and you have been able to identify some of the needs of your **audience**, it is time to think about the actual **assignment**. That is the focus of the next section.

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