

HELPING STUDENTS WITH PAPERS IN DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES

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Often students come to English tutors for help with papers in different disciplines, assuming that what is regarded as good writing is the same in every field. In fact, ideas about good writing differ depending on the history, the content, and the mission of the discipline. English tutors cannot be experts on writing patterns in every discipline and should be cautious about applying English patterns that may not be appropriate. Here are some examples of areas in which disciplines are likely to differ.

Structure/Main Point

The overall structure of an essay varies by discipline. There are important differences in the placement of the main point – the thesis or controlling idea of the whole essay. The thesis is actually the endpoint of reasoning; in other words it is a statement of the “bottom line,” the conclusion the writer comes to after thinking through the information. In some disciplines – particularly the humanities – the main point is usually stated early in the essay, typically at the end of the Introduction. A typical essay in the humanities might be thought of as roughly circular: the main point is stated early and then reemphasized at the end, with detailed evidence and discussion in the middle. In other disciplines – particularly the sciences – the main point is usually stated at the end of the essay, after the evidence has been presented. Thus a typical essay in the sciences is more linear, moving from background information to detailed presentation of evidence, and finally to discussion of what the evidence adds up to, what it suggests about the overall understanding of the issue – in other words the main point or controlling idea.

Headings

Signposting is a very important part of academic writing; all academic writing uses devices designed to help readers understand where the essay is headed. One way to do this is with sentence-level transitions. For example, numbering is a frequently used strategy for orienting readers. If a writer refers in the introduction to an essay on three subtopics necessary to understand an issue, then he or she can refer to “the first issue,” “the second,” and so on as the discussion continues. These sentence-level transitions help readers to keep their place and understand the overall flow of the essay.

Another strategy to orient readers is the use of headings and subheadings – brief phrases that act almost like “mini-titles” to announce the topic under discussion in different parts of the essay. In some disciplines, headings are entirely optional and are less common than sentence-level transitions – for instance, the practice of using headings is not widespread in the humanities. Other disciplines require headings; in fact, in certain types of papers, such as the empirical report, a specific set of headings is expected. Empirical reports follow a well-established pattern, announced in a particular set of headings: Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion.

Students need to learn whether or not headings are expected in a particular piece of written work; expectations may differ with the discipline or with the instructor. In psychology, headings are routine; in English, they are not. Some history instructors may prefer headings while others may prefer that students guide the reader through the essay using only sentence level transitions.

Language

One of the most difficult features of academic writing to deal with is the distinctive language of a discipline. It is always to the student's advantage to use language in the way that professionals in the discipline do. This means learning and using the important terms in the field (even if there are commonplace terms which may seem to say the same thing). It may mean identifying conventional verb tenses for all or specific parts of an essay – literary sources are generally discussed in the present tense; the methods section of an empirical report is predominantly past tense. It means finding out whether all or part of an essay must be in third person or whether first person is acceptable (and what form of the first person – whether, for example, “we” is used but “I” is not). Some disciplines, particularly the humanities, are interested in language for its own sake; in these fields, colorful metaphors and striking turns of phrase are appreciated and add to the writers' stature. But in other fields, colorful language is regarded as flamboyant and inappropriate to academic work. In the sciences and in many of the social science disciplines, writers seek language that is as “transparent” as possible – language that does not call attention to itself but encourages readers to focus only on the content.

Two aspects of language usage deserve particular comment because they highlight the differences in disciplinary expectations. In many English classes, students are given absolute instructions to avoid the passive voice of verbs whenever possible. However, in other disciplines such as the sciences and social sciences, heavier use of the passive voice is customary, and in certain situations – or example, in the methods sections of empirical reports – it is required. It is important for students to be aware of patterns of verb usage in the disciplines they are writing for.

A similar difference occurs in the language writers in different disciplines use to express their conclusions. In the humanities, frequent use of “hedgewords” like “seems,” “may,” “might,” “suggests,” or “perhaps” is regarded as a weak pattern of expression that makes the writer sound insecure. Even though everyone understands that a judgment about a literary work is just that – a judgment – a direct and confident tone is preferred. In the sciences and social sciences, however, conclusions drawn by one researcher are seen as part of a long, never-ending process of investigation in which the interpretation of a set of data may always be altered by new experiments and new theories. Therefore, a prudent and confident writer is more likely to “hedge” conclusions with a pattern of language that recognizes its more or less temporary claim to accuracy. Therefore, heavy use of such words as “seems,” “suggests,” “may,” and “might” – particularly in the conclusions of articles – is the norm. Careful students try to be alert to these patterns of language and to imitate them.

Tables And Figures

Another way that disciplines differ is in the use of visuals (tables, graphs, charts, diagrams, illustrations, etc.). Those in the humanities tend not to use visuals (since the focus is on language), and, if visuals are included (usually an illustration or photograph), they are seen as supplementary to the written text, which is primary. However, those in the sciences and social sciences tend to use visuals (particularly statistical tables and charts) quite consistently – usually there are multiple visuals in an essay – and, far from seeing visuals as supplemental or secondary, these researchers believe that visuals give information that is impossible to convey in the written text. In these fields, the visuals are often read before the text of an article – to get the “big picture,” so to speak. The visuals and the text are seen as working together: the visuals show the numerical results of an experiment, for example, and

the written text interprets the results. Students need to understand how various disciplines use visuals and to what purpose.

Students also need to understand how to read and produce visuals. Since visuals often involve discipline-specific conventions of presentation, students may have difficulty with these tasks and should work closely with instructors for guidance.

Quotations

Disciplines vary in the way that they incorporate primary and secondary sources into their writing. In the humanities, particularly in the field of English, a common way of incorporating source material is to quote it directly word for word. As long as the direct quotation is introduced properly and commented on sufficiently, a writer may quote fairly often and at some length if necessary (perhaps as much as three to five sentences). Since writing in the field of English often involves analysis of literary texts, it is imperative that quotations be used, since the literary text is in effect the evidence the writer must supply in order to support his or her conclusion. Similarly, in the field of history, arguments must be grounded in the documentary record of historical events, so that quotations from the record are necessary as evidence. Additionally, it is important in these fields that the quotations are well chosen – that they provide an interesting and apt example or illustration of the point being made. In the humanities, direct quotation from sources is convincing evidence, and the graceful incorporation of well-chosen quotations is a mark of expertise.

In the sciences, on the other hand, using direct quotations is viewed as the mark of an amateur, a sign that the writer does not understand the source well enough to put the ideas in his or her own words. Students in these fields must develop the habit of paraphrasing and summarizing their sources accurately and succinctly. As we saw in the section on language,

the sciences do not value language that draws attention to itself, so the “apt quotation” is likely to be viewed as distracting from the focus of the writing, which is its content.

Documentation

Each discipline has one or more preferred ways of documenting source material – that is, of citing sources within the text and of listing references at the end of the text. It is important that students know which style of documentation is acceptable in a given discipline. Some fields have a high degree of standardization; in psychology, for example the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* dictates the style that is used throughout the field, with little or no room for variation. This American Psychological Association system has been so successful that other fields (especially in the social sciences) have adopted it. Even some specializations within the humanities have embraced APA, though the standard documentation systems remain MLA (Modern Language Association) and the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

Unlike psychology, some fields allow for a range in documentation systems; for example, in Physical Anthropology alone (only one branch of anthropology) there are at least seven separate acceptable documentation styles, each dictated by a particular journal.

It is important for students to be attuned to documentation conventions of a particular field as well as to the preferences of an individual instructor (especially if the field allows for a range of documentation styles). Whatever documentation style is used, the student must find the most current style manual and follow its guidelines scrupulously, with careful attention to details of placement, capitalization, spacing, punctuation, abbreviation, and so forth.

Conclusion

An experienced tutor is aware of some of the significant variations in writing for different disciplines. But the special features that characterize disciplinary writing are so varied that it is unlikely an English tutor will know them all. Perhaps the single most important thing for tutors to understand and convey is that the concept of “good writing” is not monolithic.

Writers need to observe carefully models of disciplinary writing suggested by instructors; they need to ask well-focused questions to clarify instructors’ expectations. Sometimes faculty who have extensive expertise in a particular discipline are so familiar with the patterns of writing in that field that they have actually forgotten that other disciplines do things differently. If the tutor can prompt interaction between the student and instructor about patterns of writing, the student will learn not only about superficial aspects of writing, but fundamental principles of the discipline itself.