

**POLICY BRIEF: WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

The Drama Department believes that writing skills are important. The ongoing practice of writing builds investigative strengths, clarifies understandings, and enhances the articulation of ideas. The quality of one's writing creates impressions in a reader and can influence others' perceptions of our knowledge and abilities, potentially affecting our job opportunities. Because the Drama Department sees these issues as significant, it is our policy to encourage written projects in all classes and to be rigorous in their grading. Projects will be graded not only on the content of ideas, but also on the sophistication of grammar, spelling, and other technical writing skills. Unless otherwise directed by an instructor, students are encouraged to refer to [A Student Guide to Writing at UCI](#) and the [MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers](#) as guides to writing formats. Brief guides to punctuation and to commonly confused words can also be found in the back of some dictionaries, and a more complete guide to grammar and construction is featured in Sally Barr Ebest's [Writing from A to Z: the Easy-to-Use Reference Handbook](#).

The strengthening of writing skills today will serve us well throughout the rest of our lives.

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# • THE PERSUASIVE ESSAY •

BY STEPHEN BARKER WITH ROBERT COHEN, KEITH FOWLER AND CLIFF FAULKNER

The properly presented persuasive argument is not merely a point of view. Anyone can say "the *Odyssey* is the greatest work in Greek literature," for example. It is the building of a case to support a position. It should truly persuade the reader either to share or to recognize the validity of a certain interpretation that you happen to hold at the moment—even if you change your opinion later. Writing of this kind is valuable because it forces you to take a stand and to try to make someone else take it as well. This requires energy and skill, not "talent," which is something entirely different.

Every word in the persuasive essay contributes to one thing: support for a central contention—the thesis. The thesis is the point to be made in the essay, the position to defend, the choice the essay makes and wants the reader to share. The thesis is like an umbrella under which everything that follows must fit; nothing in the paper may stray from the thesis, and everything must contribute to its support.

The standard thesis is usually one sentence long and derives from an idea that is sometimes fairly general. A good thesis requires much thought and many attempts at formulation. This usually means much "free writing," the jotting down of thoughts you do in response to the topics you are considering for the paper, and then the honing of them into a more formal and dynamic structure. ABOVE ALL ELSE, REMEMBER THAT A THESIS IS NEVER A PLOT SUMMARY. The thesis comes about in response to your identifying a theme in a work or works, and then asking the most important question an interpreter can ask: "*So what?*" If you can answer this question and can still ask "So what?" about your answer, you don't yet have a good thesis.

The support of a thesis is developed through careful outlining. Dynamic and convincing support cannot come from random presentation. The most effective way to construct a persuasive argument is to organize supporting points in the most powerful order possible, ascending from the least to the most important. The structure in which you present your supporting ideas is as important as are the ideas themselves.

Before we continue, let's review: **The two vital elements of a good persuasive paper are the thesis, or the assertion that will be proven, and the support that convinces your reader that your thesis is true.** Without both of these, you don't have a persuasive essay. Now let's look at some more specifics:

**The Title:** A paper's title is important. It should distill the thesis and prepare the reader for the paper ahead. Do remember, however, that a title cannot be assumed to be the subject of the paper's first sentence or paragraph. For this reason the opening sentence cannot begin with a pronoun that refers back to the title. This frees you to create vivid titles that engage your readers.

**Structure:** Each paragraph typically contains at least five sentences. The first paragraph's intent is to introduce the reader to the material that will be argued. Its organization should proceed from subject to topic to thesis, which means from general to less general to the specific statement that will be proven by the rest of the paper. Let's look at a novice's sample of this, followed by a more sophisticated example:

**Subject (most general; the first sentence of Paragraph One):** Last Thursday's performance of UCI Drama's *Arcadia* was surprising in several ways.

(The sentence is general, but introduces the name of the work to be discussed and the attitude the writer is taking or the terms in which the subject will be considered. A transitional sentence or two might well follow this.)

**Topic (the sentence at the halfway point in Paragraph One):** For one who is used to high school dramatic presentations, this first experience of a university level production was impressive in both the artistry of the actors and the subtlety of the playwright.

(This is more specific. It narrows the areas of consideration and hints at the subjects that the writer wants the reader to explore. Again, transitional material would follow this, leading to the conclusion of the paragraph, the thesis statement.)

**Thesis (the position which will be proven after Paragraph One):** A closer look at this particular *Arcadia* shows that the exceptional skills of the cast were the factor that best revealed playwright Tom Stoppard's clever blending of cynicism and sentimentality.

(The topic sentence narrows the area of concern and leads directly to the choice the writer has made, stated in the thesis. Note how the three sentences are related, how one leads to another. The thesis itself makes a case that's clear and yet opinionated.)

Here is another example of the subject, topic, and thesis relationship:

**Subject:** Greek plays seem to concern themselves with the issue of fate as a moral determinant.

**Topic:** Something seems to have happened between the time of early and late Hellenic drama which, though it makes plays more accessible to us, forces us to ask whether the same concern for ideas is at stake as had been earlier.

**Thesis:** Although late Greek drama seems very modern, the playwrights' increasing concern with "realism," particularly that of Euripides, made them blind to the rigorous concern for cultural ritual that had made earlier plays so effective.

By starting with a general subject statement and becoming increasingly specific as you approach your thesis, your first paragraph will carefully establish the territory of your paper and the argument that you will prove. The next step in building a paper is to ask: "If I said this to someone who disagreed with me, or who didn't share my opinion, what would I need to point out to make them see that I'm right?" This consideration leads to the outlined material that will follow, the support for the thesis.

**The Body of the Essay:** Each of the subsequent paragraphs of the essay consists of a miniature imitation of the essay as a whole. Each paragraph begins with a topic sentence that is subordinate to but closely related to the thesis, and that controls the content of that paragraph. The structure of the paragraphs that follow the thesis arranges the supporting ideas that convince the reader to share the writer's position. These, too, are presented in the order of ascending importance, the least substantial idea first, the most important last. This is done because the reader will remember best that which was read last.

Just as the essay as a whole consists of a beginning, middle, and end, so each paragraph is so constructed. Each will have a topic sentence, evidence that is both specific and detailed, and a conclusion. The standard paragraph is constructed in this order:

1. Topic sentence
2. Transition and introduction of evidence
3. Evidence
4. Comment on evidence
5. Conclusion of that paragraph's point using key words

Be aware of the implications of this list: while styles may vary, a paragraph of a persuasive essay typically contains at least five sentences. Paragraphs of one or two sentences may not do what you want them to do.

**Evidence:** No paragraph—and no essay—can be successful without sufficient specific evidence in support of its contentions. Three ways to cite such material are the summary, the paraphrase, and the quotation. The most specific evidence is the best, generally, so quotation is the usually the strongest sort of citation and an important part of persuasion. You must know how to handle quotations to write successful papers, and writers' guides such as the [MLA Handbook](#) and [Writing from A to Z](#) and [A Student Guide to Writing at UCI](#) all provide excellent help in this area. Each is available at the UCI Bookstore.

Everything you say in a paper is a matter of opinion or interpretation, but the opinion that can most accurately account for the greatest percentage of the argument is the "best." The alternative is to find an original interpretation, one that has not been thought of before but that reveals some new way of looking at all or part of the subject, and then to organized evidence that proves this new interpretation. Whichever of these you strive for, the form of your essay will be the same. Work in the deductive mode with strong arguments.

The final format of your paper will also contribute to its success. After composing your thoughts, writing a first draft, reviewing, and correcting in subsequent drafts, you're ready to write your final draft. Unless your instructor indicates otherwise, UCI Drama suggests the following format for final drafts of class essays:

1. They should be typed with margins no larger than one inch and in a font no larger than twelve point.
2. They should be on standard sized bond paper, with all pages stapled.
3. They should begin, on page 1, with your name, the name of your instructor (and the T.A. if there is one), the name of the class, and the date.
4. They should not begin with a title page, nor be in any kind of folder or binder.
5. They should contain no corrections, although some kinds (e.g. white-outs) are better than others (e.g. cross-outs.)

Remember that it is not the difficulty you experience in writing that counts, nor the hours you put in slaving over a hot desktop, but rather the quality of the work that results. In the end it is the quality of your ideas and your supporting evidence that counts: the product and not the process. Before you hand your paper in, you must ask yourself repeatedly whether you have done what you set out to do, and if not, how you can alter the paper to make it more successful. The reader can show no more respect for your ideas (and therefore for your paper) than you do.

Writing persuasive essays involves skill, not talent. The technique for writing them can be learned. Your ability to write a successful persuasive essay will be determined entirely by the amount of energy and interest you give it, and the way in which you assimilate constructive criticism to improve your technique. No one writes perfect papers, yet together we can work to eradicate as many errors as possible and to better accomplish our goal: to persuade the reader to see our point of view.

## • NINE REVISION TIPS •

BY IAN MUNRO

There is no easier way of improving your writing, and your grade, than effective revision. Once the paper is complete, with all your ideas and arguments presented in their full form and all grammatical problems, spelling and punctuation errors, and typos eliminated, it's time to start polishing it up. Keep the following tips in mind as you do so.

1. Vary your sentence forms. This doesn't mean that every sentence has to be different from the one preceding it, but as you revise your work you should consider the degree to which you're repeating the same structures. Especially avoid putting too many simple sentences in a row, as these sound "choppy."

2. Make the agent of the sentence the subject. In other words, choose your subject based on what you want to emphasize.

*Our research* showed that twenty-five percent of students' time is spent studying.  
*Students* study twenty-five percent of the time, according to our research.  
*Studying* occupies twenty-five percent of students' time, according to our research.

3. Minimize weak verbs. Linking verbs, especially the verb "to be" in all its forms, can weaken active sentences because they force the action to be expressed by something other than the verb:

The students *were of the thinking* that the assignment *was not* one that they would enjoy.  
The students *thought* that they would not *enjoy* the assignment.

Similarly, prefer the active voice to the passive voice:

The test *was hated* by the students. ["The students" should be the subject of the sentence.]  
The students *hated* the test.

4. Avoid long strings of modifiers, especially on subjects, as they are difficult to read.

5. Reduce "padding," redundancy, and empty phrases. *Never use six words when one will do.* There are many phrases—"as a matter of fact," "due to the fact that," "as a result of," "in a very real sense," "in the process of," "the point I am trying to make is that," etc.—that typically add almost no semantic value to a sentence. Avoid these wherever possible.

6. Avoid clichés and worn-out phrases wherever possible. When revising your writing, always ask yourself whether there might be a less "automatic" way of putting something. Also avoid slang and casual constructions, and eliminate contractions.

7. Avoid artificial language. Many people try to "ramp up" their formal writing by using complicated words that they wouldn't ordinarily use. Sometimes complicated words are necessary, or even desirable, if they allow you to say something complex in a concise manner; most of the time, though, overblown language tends to obscure your message.

8. Minimize repetition of important words and phrases, especially in successive sentences. This is also true for the paper as a whole: a paper about intellectual ambition in *Dr. Faustus* should be sparing with the phrase "intellectual ambition." This is partly an issue of what's called "pleasing variation," but it's also about packing in a little more information by finding a different, though related, way of talking about the same thing.

9. As a general rule, the best sentence is the shortest one—as long as it communicates all the information you want it to in a clear manner. When revising your work, strive to reduce unnecessary language: the resulting sentences will be stronger and more effective.

## • COMMON ERRORS TO AVOID •

BY IAN MUNRO AND CLIFF FAULKNER

- Verbs must agree with their subjects in number (singular or plural) and in person (first, second, or third). For fluent English speakers this is usually only a problem when there are aspects of the sentence that make the number or person of the subject unclear; watch out for these.
- Pronouns need to agree with their antecedent: the noun, noun phrase, or pronoun they are replacing. Make sure the referent of each pronoun is clear.
- *His* and *he* are not gender-neutral pronouns (consider "Every nurse finished his shift" or "Every mother nursed his baby"); use "his or her" or "he and she," or pluralize the antecedent. In informal English "their" is often used in place of "his or her," but this is not acceptable in formal English.
- Do not confuse the nominative with the objective case for pronouns following a preposition. It's not "between you and I," but rather "between you and me." Rather than "John gave copies to Sally and I," or "John gave them to she and I," write "John gave copies to Sally and me" or "to her and to me."
- *Who* is used only for subjects; *whom* is used only for objects. "Ted is the one who drove the car": Ted is the subject. "Ted is the one whom the cops arrested": the cops are the subject and Ted is the object. The same applies to *whoever* and *whomever*.
- Literature, including drama, is always present tense: "Hamlet believes the ghost," not "Hamlet believed the ghost." The only exception is when you're discussing time within the work: "Hamlet trusted Ophelia until he realized she was spying on him."
- Avoid sentence fragments. Every sentence must have a verb and a subject (or implied subject).
- Avoid faulty parallelism. If you write "Hamlet must consider x, y, and z," then x, y, and z must have the same grammatical form, must connect to the sentence root in the same way, and must be things that logically belong together in a list.
- Avoid the faulty connection of two independent clauses by a comma (known as a "comma splice"): "Hamlet is unhappy, his mother has remarried quickly." Instead of a comma, use a comma and a conjunction, or a semicolon, or a period. Or you could subordinate one clause to the other: "Hamlet is unhappy because his mother has remarried quickly."
- Semicolons are used to link independent clauses; both what precedes and what follows a semicolon must be able to stand on its own as a sentence. Colons are used to introduce things that summarize, restate, or explain something. This can take the form of a list, a phrase, a quotation, or an independent clause.
- Never end sentences with prepositions.
- *It's* is a contraction for *It is*. *Its* is the possessive form of *it*.
- *Alot* is not a word in English, and the meaning of *allot* is different than the meaning of *a lot*.
- Don't confuse *lay* and *lie*, *affect* and *effect*, *compliment* and *complement*, or *simple* and *simplistic*.
- Absolute concepts can't be modified; something can't be "very unique" or "fairly priceless." Don't use superlatives (*fastest*, *weakest*, etc.) unless there are at least three things being compared.
- Use your spell-check, but don't trust it to find every mistake: a correctly spelled word can still be wrong.

• CORRECTION SYMBOLS FOR UCI WRITING •

| Symbol | Meaning                                 | Example   | Writing from A to Z  |
|--------|---|---|--|
| agr    | Agreement                               | agr<br>A person has to rely on <i>their</i> own conscience.                       | 155-158 (pronouns)<br>158-163 (s-v)  |
| cs     | Comma splice                            | cs<br>It was a memorable <i>moment</i> , I think of it often.                     | 217-18   |
| frag   | Fragment                                | frag<br>Because they were so late. They entered quietly.                          | 439-41; 247-48 (dep. Clauses); 464-65 (sub. Conj's)                        |
| id     | Problem with idioms or set expressions  | id.<br>He always agrees to his mother and not his father.                         | 299-300; 400-01 (phrases);<br>409-10 (prepositions)                        |
| mixed  | Mixed constructions                     | mixed<br>Because he stole the car made him a criminal.                            | 356; 202-03 (clauses);<br>401-03 (phrases)                                 |
| num    | Number Singular/plural                  | num num<br>Those <i>mans</i> gave her very bad <i>advices</i> .                   | 370-72; 350 (mass nouns);<br>362-63 (noncount nouns)                       |
| p      | Punctuation                             | p<br>I know, that the world is a complicated place.                               | 419; 207-10 (:); 210-16 (,);<br>397-98 (.); 437-38 (;)                     |
| ref    | Unclear pronoun reference               | ref<br>John and Sam knew the work, but <i>he</i> still failed.                    | 414-15; 156  |
| ro     | Run on                                  | r.o.<br>The movie was good I especially liked the actors.                         | 436; 225 (compound sent.);<br>233-34 (conjunctions)                        |
| sp     | Spelling                                | sp<br>She <i>staid</i> with her friend during the storm.                          | 451-60; 318-20 (verbs);<br>spellcheck                                      |
| s-v    | Subject-verb agreement                  | s-v<br>He always <i>talk</i> about his life.                                      | 158-63; 206-07 (collective nouns)  |
| t      | Verb tense                              | t<br>Last night I <i>haven't finished</i> my homework.                            | 446-47; 470-72; 493-94;<br>425-26 (in quotations)                          |
| vb     | Verb error                              | vb vb<br>Because he hadn't <i>did</i> it, she made him <i>to leave</i> .          | 491-95; 307-10; 318-20;<br>238-40; 284-86; 357                             |
| wf     | Word form                               | wf<br>I needed to assert my <i>independent</i> .                                  | 465-67 (suffixes); 147-54 (adj/adv); dictionary                            |
| ww     | Wrong word                              | ww<br>I'm interested <i>with</i> the laser technology.                            | 501; 175-76 (articles); 486-89 (usage); 194-98 (case)                      |
| ^      | Insert                                  | ^<br>^ Police officer came to my house by mistake.                                | 175-76 (articles); 409-10 (prepositions); 299-300 (idioms); 486-89 (usage) |
| ∩      | Delete                                  | ∩<br>Despite <del>of</del> his best intentions, she left in <del>the</del> tears. |  |
| P      | Paragraph                               | P<br>It wasn't my best day. Another problem I had...                              | 381-88   |
| //     | Faulty parallelism                      | //<br>She wants health, happiness, and <i>to be rich</i> .                        | 388-89; 222 (comparatives)   |
| #      | Add a space                             | #<br>Teenagers like rock music <i>eventhough</i> it's loud.                       | 451-60 (spelling);<br>spellcheck   |
| ↪      | Move here                               | ↪<br>The man turned himself in <u>(who stole the gun.</u>                         | 241; 354-56 (misplaced modifiers); 445 (word order);<br>147-54 (adj/adv)   |
| ∩      | Transpose                               | ∩<br>My mother <u>just</u> / <u>had</u> heard the news.                           |  |
| ~~~~~  | Rephrase; find a better way to write it | ~~~~~<br><i>Due to the fact that</i> he's lazy, he lost his job.                  | 227-30 (conciseness), 241 (dangling modifier)                              |
| ??     | Unclear; not understandable             | ??<br>?? For the reason have gone.  | 165-66 (ambiguity); 299-300 (idiom)  |

• GRADING GUIDE FOR UCI WRITING •

|          | <b>Conceptual</b>  | <b>Thesis</b>  | <b>Support</b>  | <b>Organization</b>   | <b>Language</b>   |
|----------|--|--|---|---|---|
| <b>5</b> | Responds incisively to the prompt; analysis relevant, sophisticated, and original.                             | Controlling thesis is specific, arguable, and complex; gives paper sense of inevitability. | Provides substantial, well-chosen evidence (such as research or performance/textual citations) used strategically; apt definitions. | Apt, seemingly inevitable sequence of paragraphs; appropriate, clear and adequate transitions between sentences and paragraphs. | Apt and precise diction; syntactic variety; clear command of Standard English.  |
| <b>4</b> | Responds well to the prompt; analysis goes beyond the obvious.   | Central thesis determines paper's structure.   | Provides adequate and appropriate evidence and makes an effort to contextualize it.   | Distinct units of thought in paragraphs, coherently arranged; some transitions between sentences and paragraphs.                | Some mechanical difficulties; occasional problematic word choices or awkward syntax errors; occasional grammar errors; some wordiness.  |
| <b>3</b> | Responds adequately to the prompt; may have some factual, interpretive, or conceptual errors or irrelevancies. | Overly general thesis; gives no indication of organization to follow.                      | Provides some evidence but not always relevant, sufficient, or integrated into the paper.   | Uneven: paragraphs sometimes effective, but some brief, weakly unified, or underdeveloped; some awkward or missing transitions. | Occasional major grammar error (e.g., agreement, tense); frequent minor grammar errors (e.g., prepositions, articles); occasional imprecise diction; awkward syntax; wordiness. |
| <b>2</b> | Confuses some significant concepts, including some of those in the prompt.                                     | Vague or irrelevant thesis.  | Evidence usually only narrative or anecdotal, awkwardly or incorrectly incorporated.  | Repetitive, wanders.  | Frequent major and minor grammar problems; frequent imprecise diction; wordiness; awkward syntax; repetitive sentence patterns; problems impede meaning.                        |
| <b>1</b> | Misunderstands prompt and/or course concepts.  | No discernable thesis.   | Evidence simply listed or not cited at all.   | Arbitrary or no paragraph structure, illogical or no transitions.   | Numerous grammatical errors and stylistic problems; overwhelmingly non-Standard English; errors in every sentence.  |