English 421:
On Writing

Join the Community
If you want to contribute to the discipline, if you want to be part of the community of literary scholars and critics, then, as David Bartholomae reminds us, "the student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community."

"Speaking our language" certainly has to do with ways of reading and thinking, but it also has to do with writing, and there are specific academic moves that good writers make.

As you introduce, support your claims, and conclude, please follow my advice. This are not "my" strategies. They are simplified versions of what all scholars do.

Introduction Theory: Consider Your Situation
As writers, we are in a difficult position. We have to write from a position of authority. To gain authority, we can either talk down to the reader, often using "you." We talk to our audience as though he or she knows less than us. The problem, however, is that we will probably come off sounding patronizing. We will sound like a parent talking to a child. It's true that we will be writing from a position of authority, but turning readers into misguided children may not be the best approach.

We could also gain authority by taking on the voice of an expert, often using excessively formal, elevated syntax. Sure… we do use and should use specialized vocabulary in school, and this class in particular requires you to use discipline-specific terminology. That's part of what we should learn. David Bartholomae reminds us that "the student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community." But what makes "academic prose" academic isn't necessarily the formality of the language or the complexity of the syntax. There is more to it than that. We want, then, to avoid these first methods.

We have to find a strategy that solves this problem. Scholars, in any field, either show how their contribution builds on another's work or respond to what somebody else thinks. That's our mantra: **Respond to or build upon what someone else thinks**. This is the bread and butter of scholarship. Real scholars don't read what other people have to say in order to find out what to say. Instead, they read to find out what **not** to say. New knowledge is a product of an ongoing

conversation, a process of response and counter response. In short, we research to find out what others have said so that we can go beyond them.

Consider these questions:

- Have scholars ignored your text?
- Have scholars just done a poor job with your text? Are they misinformed or uninformed or wrong?
- Have scholars addressed your text but left it “incomplete”? You may need to update their findings, take their insights and apply them to a similar subject that they did not address.
- Are you going to use a new method or approach to a text that has been thoroughly researched using traditional methods or approaches?

You will use two introduction strategies when you write essays for me. Again, these strategies are rather traditional. Pick up any scholarly book or essay, and odds are, you will find some version of these introductions. They are based on building a context that includes you, your audience, and a third reader who knows less than you (what I call a “naive reader” or “nay-sayer.”)

Bartholomae maintains that “In general ... the more successful writers set themselves in their essays against what they defined as some more naive way of talking about their subject—against ‘those who think that...’—or against earlier, more naive versions of themselves— ‘once I thought that...’” (153).

Put another way, you have to create a context for your contribution. You have to justify the existence of your paper. You have to imagine that you are part of an academic community that includes at least three people—you, your audience, and a third party who knows less than you—so that you can write “across” to fellow academics. In other words, you have to answer the question (before it’s even posed), “Why are you telling me this? Why are you writing this paper?” If your answer is, “Because you told me to write it,” your “voice” will sound artificial and shallow. You will sound like a student after a grade (although that may be the truth). The strategic response is, “I am answering an unresolved question, a persistent problem. I am responding to so and so who thinks that ...” Your voice then will sound like a scholar’s, like someone who belongs to the academic community.

OUTLINE

1. Introduce issue, topic, problem, or question.
2. Position yourself again a "naive view" or "naysayer."
3. Briefly explain the logic or reasoning of this naysayer.
4. Transition to your view by complicating or undermining naysayer's view.
5. Declare your thesis.

Introduction #1: Respond To What Someone Else Thinks

1. Introduce your issue, topic, problem, or question by ...

describing it as neutrally as you can

or, providing a statistic or figure

or, citing (quoting) someone who brings up an issue, topic, question, or problem

or, describing an event that raises an issue or problem

Say something along the lines of …

It is scarcely possible to open a newspaper without finding some new example of ...

One recurring problem/issue today is...

X has recently argued in "title" that "blah, blah, …"

History offers us several examples of …

2. Position Yourself Against a "Naive View" or "Naysayer."

Describe a "naive" response or interpretation of your text. Remember that a "naive view" is a view that you personally disagree with or a view that misses something important. But don't use the word "naïve." Say something along the lines of …

I used to think that…

A common view is that…

A common view is ...

At first glance...

Many think that…

X argues that… [The most sophisticated writers argue against other, real scholars whose words are in print. So, yes, you need to research a bit.]

3. Briefly explain the logic or reasoning of this "naive" view.

Answer the question, "Why would someone think this way? Why would they find their answer or solution logical or reasonable?" Why did I think this way? Say something along the lines of …

We cannot deny that ...

This way of making sense of the text makes a degree of sense. [Why?]

This position seems reasonable. [Explain why.]

I can understand why someone might interpret X in this way. [Explain how so.]

These conclusions seem compelling. [Why?]

4. Provide a transition that indicates that you are going to contrast this "naive" view. Say something along the lines of …

However…

But it's more complicated than that.

This interpretation is helpful, it misses an important point.

This interpretation raises a fundamental question.
While this view seems plausible/reasonable at first glance, we should look closer...

5. Lead into your thesis statement.
Answer the question, "So what's your point?" Make sure that you could write the words "I will prove that…" before your thesis (but don't actually write the words).

OUTLINE

1. Introduce and contextualize.
2. Ask a question, identify a problem, or identify a puzzle to solve.
3. Introduce theory/concept.
4. Declare your thesis.

Introduction #2: Build Upon What Someone Else Thinks…

You have to create a context for your written contribution. As I noted earlier, Bartholomae echoes the spirit of our course when he suggests that we need to use "the work of one author ... as a frame for reading and interpreting the work of another"(18). Your task is to summarize the "frame," way of thinking, or theoretical concept. It's also a way to introduce key vocabulary and definitions that you will then repeat as you write your essay. **Every** application essay you write must do this.

You may be able to do it in one paragraph, but it may take two. Take no more than one to one and a half pages.

1. First, introduce and contextualize the text by answering "Who wrote or produced the text?" "When was it published, screened, or produced?" "What else was going on in the political, social, or literary world?" Second, briefly and neutrally describe the text and plot. "What is the text about?" Consider this example:

> A "graphic novel," Maus I was first serialized in a somewhat different form in the underground comix magazine Raw between 1980 and 1985, then cast in book form in 1986 under the title Maus: A Survivor's Tale, I: My Father Bleeds History. Parts of volume two, Maus: A Survivor's Tale, II: And Here My Troubles Began, were also published in Raw, but arrived in book form in 1991 along with a CD ROM version produced by Voyager in 1994 which includes interviews, color sketches, camp maps, journal entries, family photographs, and early drafts. Maus is a hybrid of sorts, crossing multiple genres. At once biography, autobiography, history, novel, and of course, comic strip, the books record the life of Art Spiegelman's father Vladek Spiegelman, from prewar Poland to Auschwitz to Rego Park, New York. Importantly, this story is told within a self-reflexive and guilt ridden frame-tale, blurring the boundary between Art Spiegelman the artist, and "Art Spiegelman" the character.

2. Ask a question, point out a problem or interesting aspect of the text, or summarize a misguided interpretation—all in an effort to say, “How do we make sense of this text? Or in the case of a couple of your essays, “Is it any good?”

You can also use aspects of introduction strategy #1 at this point. Summarize a “naïve” reading of the text, then problematize it or point out unanswered questions or problems. You still need to create a motive for the theory to follow.

3. Introduce the theory/concept you plan to use.
Briefly summarize the theory or concept you plan to use to answer the questions or solve the problems. Be sure to cite a small passage and talk about it. To start, say something along the lines of …

> One way to answer this question is to turn to the ancient theorist Horace who insists that “blah, blah, blah…” In other words, Horace argues that ...
>
> Louis Althusser’s concept of “interpellation” provides a useful way to talk about identify and culture. For Althusser, “interprellation” refers to ...
>
> One way to make sense of this vexing text is to think of it as a “performance.” Julian Wolfreys argues that a performance text requires....

4. Given the theory or concept you chose, what’s your point?

Your claim must pass the “I will prove” test. That is, I don’t want you to write the words “I will prove that…” but if you can’t mumble the words before your thesis and still have it make sense, then it’s probably not a clear thesis statement.

While it depends on the specific assignment, most of the time you will be making claims about what the text “does” instead of what the text “says.” Therefore, use verbs that convey an action. Use these kinds of verbs: challenge, reinforce, subvert, appropriate, undermine, celebrate, tame, redefine, valorize, devalorize, legitimize, questions, problematizes, unsettles, undermines, encourages, etc.

And if you do need to make claims about what a text says, then use these verbs: suggests, implies, conveys.