Writing at University: A Start-Up Kit

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This module is available in an alternative format on request
Part One: Understanding the transition from high school to university writing

All images in this module are from Microsoft Office Online.
But first, which one of these best describes your usual approach to writing a paper?

A. **Ahead of the pack**: start early by planning and drafting. You have a full draft early to revise extensively.

B. **Let it bake**: start researching and planning several weeks ahead, jotting down ideas. Start on the writing itself 2-3 days before the due date.

C. **One at a time**: start researching and writing 2-3 days before the deadline. You work on one assignment at a time and complete each just in time.

D. **Wait for the adrenaline**: put off thinking about the assignment till the night before it’s due, and then stay up all night on the computer.
Your approach has worked so far--you’ve made it to university! Why retool now?

Consider some typical comments we hear from first-year students:

- “All the paper deadlines and exams come at the same time! Who planned this?”
- “Even if you start ahead, it’s easy to let one course’s work, like a paper deadline, sneak up on you.”
- “I really misjudged how much time my research paper would take.”
- “I just haven’t figured out how to handle this amount of work.”
- “My first term was just a huge learning experience. I have to change my whole approach to how to do my course work.”
Why is writing at university such a challenge?

• Think about crucial differences that distinguish academic writing from assignments in high school:

  1. **specialization**: specific forms of writing for each discipline or field (you often have to use new formats)

  2. **purpose**: the production and sharing of knowledge (or culture—art, music, etc.)

• Hence, while high school emphasizes an all-purpose, formal style of writing, at university you’ll learn more specialized **types** of academic writing.
Exercise: Pinpointing differences in types of writing

• In the next slide you’ll compare a formal argument that might be written in high school to an academic article.

• To spell out the differences between the two modes of writing, create two columns on a sheet of paper, with “Formal” and “Academic” at the top.

• List the characteristics of each type of writing in the appropriate column. What do you learn from this comparison?
Anti-smoking ads aren’t working. Why aren’t they reaching the most needy groups? We see teen smokers outside the school grounds every day taking a quick smoke between classes. Even though schools have banned smoking, the number of new smokers increases. Smoking is a particularly serious problem with adolescents, the largest growing group of new smokers in Canada.

An understanding of why adolescents decide to smoke and the development of successful countermeasures are important issues in the public health and social marketing fields today. . . . Adolescents are estimated to have three times the sensitivity to cigarette advertising than adults (Pollay et al., 1996), and recent documents have shown youths to be an important target market for the tobacco industry (Cohen, 2000; Pollay and Lavack, 1993).

How will your writing need to change? Consider key characteristics of academic writing:

• Like much formal writing, it is **logical** and **concise**, but academic writing is even more concentrated, concisely packing in information and references.

• It presents positions or prior knowledge in a more **objective** manner than is often characteristic of other formal writing.

• While formal writing may not mention or specify source material, a hallmark of academic writing is its careful presentation of **scholarly research**.

• Writing in university contexts thus places a high value on **academic integrity**, acknowledging sources with great care.

• And, more than formal writing of some types, academic writing exhibits a high degree of **critical thinking**.
And what exactly is “critical thinking”? Educators view thinking skills as a process, from simplest (at the bottom) to most complex:

- Evaluation
- Synthesis
- Analysis
- Application
- Comprehension
- Memorization

See the next slide (green box) for a definition of each of these critical thinking skills. Consider how they build on each other, from the bottom up.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Marginal</th>
<th>Inadequate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ strong evidence of original thinking;</td>
<td>▪ evidence of grasp of subject matter;</td>
<td>▪ student who is profiting from his/her university experience;</td>
<td>▪ some evidence of familiarity with subject matter and some evidence that critical and analytic skills have been developed.</td>
<td>▪ some evidence of familiarity with subject matter and some evidence that critical and analytic skills have been developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>▪ good organization; capacity to analyze and synthesize;</td>
<td>▪ evidence of capacity and analytic ability;</td>
<td>▪ understanding of the subject matter;</td>
<td>▪ ability to develop solutions to simple problems in the material.</td>
<td>▪ Memorization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>▪ superior grasp of subject matter with sound critical evaluations;</td>
<td>▪ reasonable understanding of relevant issues;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>▪ evidence of extensive knowledge base.</td>
<td>▪ evidence of familiarity with literature.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▪ student who is profiting from his/her university experience;</td>
<td>▪ understanding of the subject matter;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▪ evidence of familiarity with subject matter;</td>
<td>▪ ability to develop solutions to simple problems in the material.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▪ student who is profiting from his/her university experience;</td>
<td>▪ understanding of the subject matter;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▪ ability to develop solutions to simple problems in the material.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-</td>
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<tr>
<td>D+</td>
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<td>D-</td>
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<td>F</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Bloom’s Taxonomy***

- **Evaluation**
  - judging results of analysis and synthesis, qualitative or quantitative according to internal criteria (can identify logical fallacies, exactness of statements) or external criteria (major theories, methodologies, recognized standards)

- **Synthesis**
  - applying logic, deducing or extrapolating facts from general theories/concepts to form a precise conclusion, arranging and employing elements/parts creating a new interpretation/plan, relating knowledge to individual knowledge formation

- **Analysis**
  - relating form and content, examining structure and arrangement of elements for logic and clarity, pattern recognition, inferring meaning

- **Application**
  - combining concepts in new learning situations, problem solving, employing abstractions in specific concrete situations

- **Comprehension**
  - explaining or using concepts at a surface level, understanding and translating non-literal statements and vice versa, basic data interpretation, summarizing, generating inferences and predicting trends

- **Memorization**
  - recalling of facts, terminology

Go back to the previous slide and think again.

How do the U of T definitions of grades connect with types of critical thinking?

Look especially at the skills that “A” work displays.

The lesson is clear: critical thinking will shape your GPA!

- strong evidence of original [critical] thinking;
- good organization; capacity to analyze and synthesize;
- superior grasp of subject matter [comprehension] with sound critical evaluations;
- evidence of extensive knowledge base [memorization and comprehension].
Part Two: Tools for a smooth transition into writing at university
So, at this point, you’re probably asking . . .

- How can I meet the expectations of university writing assignments?
- How can I learn all the different specialized types of writing and formats for each discipline?
- How can I improve my research skills and use university-level research in my writing?
- How can I reach my potential by sharpening my critical thinking skills?

*The following five tools can really help. As you encounter each, follow the links to learn more . . . .*
Tool #1: Practice critical reading

• A common misperception views the writing process in terms of a sudden stroke of insight:

  ![Diagram]

• But it’s better to see your writing for each course as cumulative work that begins on day 1: read your course materials actively and critically, and take excellent notes. Most important:

  Annotate—don’t just highlight!

For reading & note-taking strategies, attend the workshop “Reading Academic Texts” (see the Intranet for details)

Use the handout “How to Read Critically”: http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/sites/default/files/CriticalReading.pdf
Tool #2: Analyze your assignments

• In another window, open an assignment from City Studies or Religion (use the links at the bottom of this page).
• See if you can pick out the parts that indicate the assignment’s purpose, including skills the students would need to demonstrate.
• Pick out key words that encapsulate what students should be careful to do and avoid doing.
• Would you have to look up any terms or ask questions to understand the assignment’s requirements?

To learn more about how to decode assignments, come to The Writing Centre’s workshop “Understanding Your Assignments,” offered in September.

City Studies: [http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/sites/default/files/CITB01_Annotated_bibliography.pdf](http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/sites/default/files/CITB01_Annotated_bibliography.pdf)

Religion: [http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/sites/default/files/RLGA02_Analysis.pdf](http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/sites/default/files/RLGA02_Analysis.pdf)
Tool #3: Break assignments into steps

• Use the Assignment Calculator: http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/assignmentcal/

• Take a few minutes to try this tool: put in a due date (say, in a month), pick a type of assignment, and hit “Calculate Schedule.” Check out some links in the schedule you get: you can get help at each step.

• Also, many UTSC students find that they must choose a day-planner (calendar or agenda) and really stick with it!
Tool #4: Use the U of T library

• As you probably suspect, Google searches will not provide the research you need to write a good university paper. And many of your instructors will question use of Wikipedia.

• Instead, use the U of T’s world-class library system: take materials from the library and access electronic sources from its website, http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utsc/. Many courses have their own specialized “lib guide”: http://guides.library.utoronto.ca/index.php?gid=3069

NOTE: save yourself lots of time and headaches by keeping excellent records of all your research!

Tip: Ask a librarian how to use RefWorks, the U of T online system to save all your research.

Note that RefWorks will even format your list of references, in a standard style like APA—whichever style your instructor requires!
Tool #5: See writing as a process with regular feedback loops

Consider ways to get feedback at any of these steps:

- Plan
- Read/Research
- Write/Outline
- Write/Rewrite
- Edit/Proofread

Where can you ask questions & get feedback as you write your papers?

Course TAs: often provide great help

UTSC Librarians: always available!

First, your instructors: they appreciate questions in class & office hours

The Writing Centre: one-on-one help at each step!
So, to keep improving your writing at UTSC, regularly visit **The Writing Centre**

The Writing Centre offers all these resources:

- One-on-one help, in 50-minute appointments, drop-in hours, and writing clinics on specific assignments
- Writing instructors who provide assistance at any step in your writing process, from initial thinking to final editing
- Numerous free handouts in AC 210—just stop by!
- Even more resources available on The Writing Centre website: [http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/](http://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/twc/) Follow this link to make an appointment, find handouts, and access more tools
And if you come to like writing at university, get published!

• Many undergraduate journals, in print or online, are devoted to publishing good writing from university courses

• Take a look at some journals at the U of T/UTSC:
  – *Noumena* (Philosophy):
    [http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~phlub/project-overview.html](http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~phlub/project-overview.html)

• To get a taste of some good university writing by undergraduates, take a look at these essays:
  – “Safeguarding the Canadian Broadcast Industry” ([http://imagi-nations.ca/?p=148](http://imagi-nations.ca/?p=148))
  – At the *Noumena* link (above), click on “Download” to peruse a recent issue, full of good essays
Congratulations! You’ve completed The Writing Centre’s introductory online writing module. Try our other modules if you found this one helpful.

And we’d love to get your feedback about this module. Please post your (anonymous) comments here: https://ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/booking/students/feedback_wcs.php.