

The Write Place Presents. . .

Basics of College Composition



Introduction

Although writing requirements differ among disciplines, some basic guidelines remain constant.

If the **requirements** of your writing assignment are ambiguous, it is always best to ***consult with your instructor before proceeding with your paper.***

It is impossible to write a good paper if you are unclear about the requirements, i.e. **purpose** and **audience**.

Higher Order Concerns (HOCs)

Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) are matters of

- **Thesis**
- **Organization**
- **Development**
- **Voice**

You can dramatically improve your writing by attending to HOCs.

Common Errors

As Writing Specialists, we often see many common errors in student writing. The following information is our attempt to help you avoid these errors.

HOC 1: Thesis

Your **thesis** is usually one sentence placed at the end of your introduction which explicitly states the argument you intend to defend in the body of your paper. The thesis is the **focus** of your paper. A thesis must be controversial or arguable. It is not a mere statement of fact, nor should it be obvious or vague. A thesis prevents your paper from becoming a mere “report.”

Example of a Weak Thesis Statement

The Civil War was caused by social, economic, and political disagreements in the North and South.

- This statement is too **vague** and **broad** because it does not explain which specific disagreements caused the war.
- This statement is **not arguable** because it would be impossible to claim that these kinds of developments did not cause the Civil War.

Example of a Strong Thesis Statement

Disagreement between the North and South over tariffs and states' rights was a more significant cause of the Civil War than opposing views about slavery.

- This statement makes an **arguable**, even **controversial**, claim because many people believe that slavery was the primary factor that caused the Civil War.
- This statement clearly identifies **specific** economic and political factors.

Thesis: Your Paper's Anchor

Without a thesis, your paper, at best, becomes a mere summary of your ideas and research (a “report”) or, at worst, a hodgepodge of miscellaneous and unconnected information. Your paper will be adrift.

With a thesis, your paper is anchored by clarity, focus, and purpose.

If you are having difficulty writing your thesis, try these tips:

1. *Create a bumper sticker* that states your main idea and position.

For example:

Slavery didn't cause the Civil War.

Or:

Slavery caused the Civil War.

Or Try This:

2. As you ponder the content of your paper, ask yourself:

So what?

The answer to this question will help you clarify your position and determine if your thesis is arguable and specific.

HOC 2: Organization

Now you have your thesis.

As you plan how to structure your paper, remember that every paragraph in the body must begin with a **topic sentence**. As you may recall from past composition classes, the topic sentence directs the paragraph just as the thesis directs the paper. Be certain that every topic sentence focuses explicitly on your thesis. When you do this well, your paper is both **cohesive** and **coherent**.

Organization

Before you begin writing, you may find it helpful to list the points that you intend to cover in your paper so that you can decide the best arrangement to argue your thesis. Will you put your most compelling evidence first or save it for the end of your paper? Do you need to present your evidence in any specific order to achieve greater clarity? These are the decisions a writer must make—and it is best to make these decisions before you start to write your paper.

Organization

Some writers find it helpful to **outline** their ideas. An outline need not be formal or elaborate.

As you map your paper's structure, ask yourself these questions:

- Is each point or paragraph tied to the thesis?
- Could the paper be significantly improved by the reordering of the major parts?

HOC 3: Development

Development is a crucial feature of any paper, but often it can be a primary problem. Your thesis may be clear, and your organization reasonable, but perhaps you just haven't said enough.

If development is a challenge, point to places in your paper where you think readers might want to know more. Or, if you were to read this aloud to a few readers, what do you think their first questions would be about? Now, **elaborate**, and your paper becomes more fully developed.

Development

To argue your thesis, you need to find **evidence** to support your claim.

Evidence can be facts, figures, quotations from the text, expert opinions, anecdotes, illustrations, or anything else that offers convincing proof for why your thesis is credible.

Development: Focus on Your Thesis

Use the **body paragraphs** of your paper to present your evidence and to develop your argument.

- Use as many body paragraphs as necessary to develop your points.
- Each paragraph should begin with a **topic sentence** that develops your thesis statement and should include evidence to support that topic sentence.
- Always include your own words to explain **why** the evidence supports your argument. While evidence is essential, it is **your** explanation of the evidence that makes or breaks the paper.

Development: Cohesion

Transitions guide your reader through and between your body paragraphs.

Examples of transitions:

also, in addition, nevertheless, further, furthermore, moreover, however, nonetheless, on the other hand, in contrast, still, on the contrary, rather, conversely, instead, otherwise, likewise, similarly, consequently, therefore, thus, hence, accordingly, for this reason, of course, in fact, certainly, obviously, to be sure, for example, for instance, in other words, incidentally, in short, generally, overall, all in all, in conclusion

HOC 4: Voice

Sometimes, students write their papers with an inappropriate **voice**.

In general, academic writing requires a formal, **third-person voice** without contractions, clichés, and slang. Avoid using first person unless your instructor has specifically given you the go-ahead.

Voice

- First person – I, me, my, we, our, us
 - “**I** think that people shouldn’t smoke.”
- Second person – You, your
 - “**You** should not smoke.”
- Third person – He, she, it, they, or nouns
 - “**People** should not smoke.”

Voice

A cautionary:

Formal third-person voice does not necessitate **inflated rhetoric**. Using a lot of big words won't make you sound smarter. Wordy, unwieldy sentences that sound good but don't have much content will create an empty bombastic tone that will fail to win over readers. Clear, precise writing will make a greater positive impression upon your reader.

Lower Order Concerns (LOCs)

Lower Order Concerns (LOCs) are matters related to surface appearance, correctness, and standard rules of written English.

It makes sense for you to shift attention to these matters once HOCs have been addressed.

As Writing Specialists at ODU, we have seen the most problems with the following LOCs:

LOC 1: Comma Splice

A **comma splice** improperly uses a comma to connect sentences.

Example:

“The city is lively, the clubs are open late.”

Do you see why this is an error?

Corrected version: “The city is lively; the clubs are open late.”

LOC 2: Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

When a pronoun and the object to which it refers do not agree in number, then this error is called “**pronoun-antecedent agreement.**”

Example:

“No one ever remembers their responsibility to their country.”

Do you see why this sentence is incorrect?

LOC 3: Subject-Verb Agreement

A lack of **subject-verb agreement** occurs when a plural noun is paired with a singular verb or vice versa.

Example:

“The owner have gone bankrupt.”

Do you see why this is wrong?

Corrected version: “The owner has gone bankrupt.”

LOC 4: Possessive Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used to indicate **possession** as in “Susan’s coat.” However, trouble often arises when apostrophes are needed with singular nouns that end in “s.”

Example:

“School was cancelled because the bus’ windows were vandalized.”

Do you see the problem?

LOC 4: Apostrophes Continued

Also, possessive apostrophes can be confusing when plural nouns show possession.

Example:

“The sister’s dogs are at the Bark Park.”

Hint: There are **two** sisters.

Do you see the error?

LOC 5: Quotes

You will use quotes in your paper to support your thesis. That's good!

Always remember to

- **introduce** the quote
- **explain *in your own words*** how the quote helps you to support your thesis

LOC 5: Quotes Continued

We often help students to format long quotes according to MLA guidelines.

According to the MLA, if you quote four or more typed lines of prose, do not use quotation marks. Instead, begin the quotation on a new line and indent the quotation one inch or ten spaces from the left margin. After a long indented citation, put the period before the parenthetical citation.

Miscellaneous LOCs

We often see other errors such as sentence fragments, comma faults, inconsistent verb tenses, and unclear pronoun references, among others. If you need additional review, we suggest that you visit ODU's Write Place (Spangler 206B), consult a grammar text, or visit the numerous websites available which offer a wealth of useful information. We especially recommend

- [ODU Academic Resource Center Helpsheets](#)
- [OWL - Purdue Online Writing Lab Handouts](#)
- [OWL - Purdue Online Writing Lab Resources](#)
- [Houghton Mifflin e-Exercises](#) (over 700 interactive grammar exercises)

Good Luck!

We hope that this brief tutorial will help you succeed in all of your writing assignments.

We are all part of the same community—Ohio Dominican where each of us **can** achieve our academic goals.

Works Consulted

- McAndrew, Donald A. and Thomas J. Reigstad.
Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for
Conferences. Portsmouth, NH:
Boynton/Cook Publishers Inc., 2001.
- Raimes, Ann. Keys for Writers. 4th ed. Boston:
Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

ODU Contributors

Vicki Lefevre, Assistant Director, Academic Resource Center; Coordinator, Write Place.

Ann Trotter, ODU Senior, Peer Writing Specialist; Future High School English Teacher.

Created August 2006.