



Writing in University

Overview

Many of you will be feeling unsure of yourselves as you contemplate your place in University. Many of you will not think of yourselves as writers and may feel un-equipped to become competent writers in a post-secondary context. The first thing to know is that this is normal and you are definitely not the only one feeling that way. The expectation is not that you arrive at Ryerson with all the skills necessary to be full members of the academic writing community. The expectation is that you arrive with a sense of curiosity, a keenness to learn, a willingness to work hard, the capacity for flexibility and creativity, and a desire to think about ideas in new and critical ways. Our job is to help you to cultivate these ways of thinking and to teach you the ways to effectively and appropriately communicate your thinking to others. Writing is perhaps THE central way in which the academic community, articulates and shares ideas. And, to become full members of that community, you will be expected to become familiar with the shared conventions that govern this way of communicating.

During your time at Ryerson your mind and the realm of ideas will expand, and become more complex. It's natural, then, that you should expect some initial difficulty expressing your ideas in writing. Writing, for all of us, is a struggle. So, it's necessary, sometimes, to reconsider how you go about this complex activity. Many of the rules which you needed when you first began to write – and which may have been drilled into you by your first English teachers - were designed to help you avoid the problems inexperienced writers have. But those rules may actually hinder you now, as you try to write like a professional in your field.

Therefore

1. Before you follow any “rule,” ask yourself why? What will the rule achieve? If you can't think of an answer and you want to break the rule, go ahead. Ignore it; modify it.
2. Instead of rules, think in terms of 3 principles: Purpose, Audience, and Group Conventions.

Purpose

What are you trying to do in this paragraph, in this essay? (You may have more than one purpose.)

Audience

Who will read your essay, your report, your memo? Why did the professor set this assignment? What is he or she looking for? (If you are writing outside the university – How will your reader use what you have written? What does your reader already know about the topic?)

Group Conventions

Not every essay is an English essay. You may be writing an essay or a report in Fashion, Architecture, or Social Work. What will readers in your profession expect? How do social workers or business managers write when they are writing for each other? Think about professional journals you have used as sources. Did they use headings, subheadings, bullets, note form? If they did, you should consider using them too. Do the journal articles you read have an introductory paragraph that summarizes the whole article? If so, that is what your readers will be expecting. **Always ask your professor if you are in doubt.** You are also writing within a university, so you will reference all your sources and provide a bibliography, unless you are specifically told you need not. Academics expect this.

How We Can Help

Talking through these kinds of things is precisely what we do best at in Writing Support. Making the transition towards more sophisticated and developed academic writing takes time, thought, hard work, and practice. Figuring all that out alone and struggling in isolation is not the best way to do this. It's much better to talk it through with a Writing Support Consultant, someone who will give you his or her un-divided attention and non-judgmental guidance on these things.

We will help you to grapple with what you already know about writing, what the so-called rules are and how to bend them. We will guide you in your process of learning the writing conventions in your discipline, and help you to think more clearly about the purpose of your written work and the reasons for writing your assignment. We can also help you to better cope with the stress that often accompanies writing assignments, the perils of writer's block and the difficulty getting started. We also understand the great linguistic diversity present at Ryerson and know that many of you use English as a second, third, or fourth language. This presents particular challenges. Finally, we are very familiar with the other support services on campus, like English Language Support for students who use English as an additional language, Academic Accommodation Support for students with disabilities and many others. We can effectively refer you to those other services as required.

It's important to think of writing, not simply as a product to be evaluated, but a process to be undertaken. It's a problem to be solved. We will help you through that process. We are most effective as guides along the way as you struggle through the messy process of putting ideas and thoughts into written words. We are less effective if you come at the end of your process and ask us to simply "correct" your finished work. So come early and come often.

Resources

Writing Advice Link - a very useful handout from the University of Toronto Writing Centre that highlights some of the ways that expectations differ between University and High-School writing

<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/general/transition-to-university>

Writing Essentials- from the University of Ottawa, a comprehensive guide to the "Essentials of Academic Writing" <http://sass.uottawa.ca/en/writing/resources>

Writing Anxiety- from the University of Richmond, a guide to coping with the anxiety that often accompanies the writing process.

<http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/web/writinganxiety.html>