



Five Tips for Writing

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The MWC is a Writing Across the Curriculum initiative serving Northwest Vista College students, faculty, and the community through tutoring in writing skills, critical thinking, and building writing pedagogy. Effective writing is a cornerstone of education.

The Center is located in Mountain Laurel Hall (MLH) 232
Large Print Edition Available by Request

Aug 2023

Writing is a technical skill, which means it can be learned, practiced, and improved upon. During the course of our academic and professional lives, we will face many situations that require us to put our thoughts into words. Intentionally improving writing skills will prepare us for those situations.

There are many ways to tackle the writing process, and writers must identify approaches that work best for them. However, a few key concepts may assist any writer.

Become an Engaged Reader

It may seem obvious, but engaged readers often become skilled writers. An engaged reader participates in the reading process—think of the kayaker who paddles with the current rather than the one who passively coasts along. Participating in the reading process requires the reader to paddle through the text by identifying the main idea (What does the writer want the reader to know?), noting strengths and weaknesses (What makes the work successful/convincing/meaningful/etc.?), and identifying how to mirror the strengths in one's own writing.

Identify a Purpose

Before sitting down to write, identify a purpose. The purpose could be anything from responding to an assignment to writing a cover letter to expressing oneself creatively. If we're responding to an assignment, it's important to understand what the assignment is asking us to do. Check the prompt for key words like “analyze,” “research,” “reflect on,” or “argue” to determine if the assignment is asking for a report, a personal response, or an argument. Once a purpose is identified, it will be easier to respond to expectations.

Develop a Plan

Once the purpose for writing is clear, it's time to develop a plan. Determine the scope of the written document, the audience it needs to appeal to, and the style it should adopt. For instance, if the identified purpose is to convince the reader of the primary cause for World War I, a plan may include researching,

critically reading texts, forming an opinion, identifying reasons that support that opinion, gathering evidence, anticipating opposing arguments, responding to opposing arguments, and (finally) writing an essay that persuades the reader to accept the argument.

Guide the Reader

While the plan for a document may be clear to the writer, it isn't always clear to the reader. A document that displays strong writing skills should be easy for the reader to follow. In the case of an academic essay, this means that the writer guides the reader through the content by introducing the topic, asserting a thesis, organizing ideas effectively, addressing one key point per paragraph, supporting ideas, and more. Additionally, clear, concise, and accurate word choices and sentence structures are used so that little mistakes don't distract from the content. By the end of an academic essay, the reader should be able to summarize the main idea and content with ease.

Be Willing to Reflect

It's very tempting to think a document is done the second the last word is written. However, the most skilled writers revisit their works to identify areas of improvement. Writing is a reflective process. This could mean taking a break from a draft and returning to it with fresh eyes. When re-reading the draft, ask if the purpose is met, if the plan was followed (or needs to be revised), and if the reader will understand the content. Proofreading may reveal sentence-level concerns (such as unclear word choices or poor comma usage) or larger concerns (like unanswered questions or unsupported statements) that must be addressed. In order to become a skilled writer, one must be willing to reflect and revise as needed.

Facing a blank screen or an empty page can be intimidating. Approaching the writing process as a skill that can be practiced and strengthened will make it less intimidating and increases the likelihood of academic and professional success.