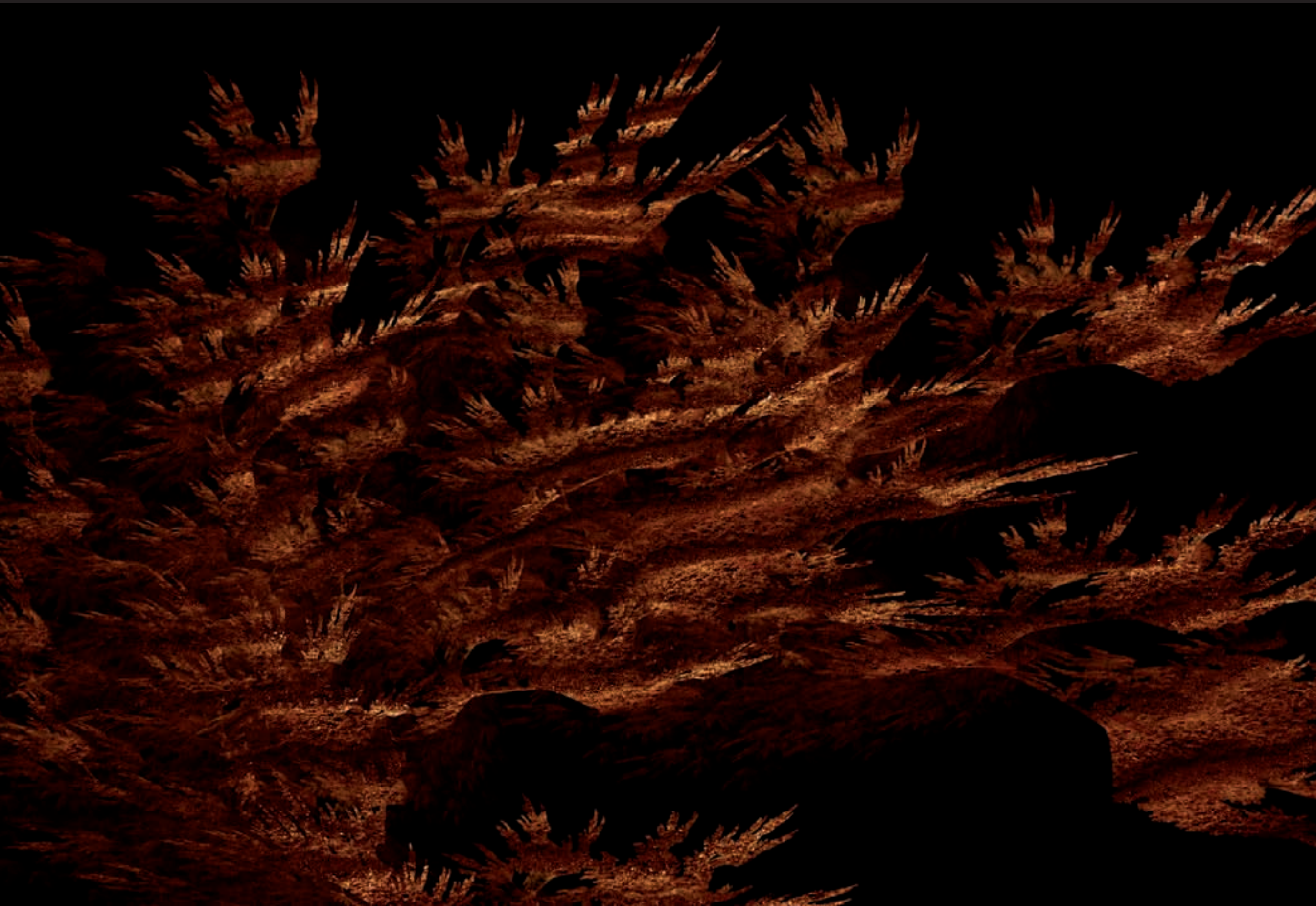
REASON TO WRITE



GINA L. VALLIS

accurate and fair answer to that question would be: "Many dogs should be leashed, under certain circumstances, but not all dogs." That's why this essay fails to prove its thesis—not because it does not have a structure, but because it provides an inadequate answer to the question that it poses.

Yet far more important than the essay's failure to prove its thesis is the fact that the real answer to this question is obvious: one might as well produce a thesis from a question querying the existence of rocks, or whether a human is a piece of fruit, or if two-plus-two usually turns out to equal four.

In other words, the real flaw of this essay is: What's the point? Who cares? This is what happens when writers are required to provide an answer before being given the opportunity to formulate a thoughtful question.

4 PROCESS VS. PRODUCT

> "We don't write what we know. We write what we wonder about."
>
> —*Richard Peck*

A thesis is an essential part of an academic essay. The thesis is present even if it is implicit. It is present even if it is explicit, no matter where it is placed in the final draft—in the beginning, shortly after the beginning, or at the end of the paper.

So, too, a question always plays an essential part in academic writing. That question is present even if it is implicit. It is present even if is explicit, and wherever it is placed in the body of the paper, although it usually shows up pretty early in the writing, because the reader needs to know what's *in* question.

Following are excerpts from three essays taken from a textbook entitled: *Making Sense: Essays on Art, Science, and Culture.* The authors of this anthology included these essays because the

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Double quotation marks (") are used to indicate that you are quoting someone else's words within your prose. Single quotation marks (') are used only to indicate that the person whom you are quoting is quoting someone else, as in "Jane said 'I like you.'"

In general, all punctuation goes *inside* of single or double quotation marks, like this. The only exception is if there is an interruption between the end of the words in a sentence, and the end of the sentence, as when "one is quoting from a source" (Author 11).

textbook is designed to provide examples, to students, of effective academic writing, across disciplines.

In the excerpt of each essay, pay attention to how the writer treats the issue at hand:

- Sven Birkerts: "The Owl Has Flown"

  Reading and thinking are kindred operations, if only because both are invisible. …How do people experience the written word, and how have those experiences, each necessarily unique, changed in larger collective ways down the centuries? (70)

- Julie Charlip "A Real Class Act"

  I once asked a sociology professor what he thought about the…middle class. His definition was: If you earn thirty thousand dollars a year working in an assembly plant, come home from work, open a beer and watch the game, you are working class; if you earn twenty thousand dollars a year as a school teacher, come home from work to a glass of white wine and PBS, you are middle class. How do we define class? Is it a matter of values, lifestyles, taste? Is it the kind of work you do, you relationship to the means of production? Is it a matter of how much money you earn? Are we allowed to choose? (79)

- Richard Florida

  "The Transformation of Everyday Life"

  Here's a thought experiment. Take a typical man on the street from the year 1900 and drop him into the 1950's. Then, take someone form the 1950's and

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Some writing instructors discourage the use of "I" (first-person voice) although it is used routinely in published academic essays. George Orwell used first-person voice in his famous 1946 essay "Politics in the English Language."

Some instructors also discourage the use of passive voice, which is one of the best ways a writer can avoid first-person voice. Passive voice is also frequently used in essays, because it produces a certain effect: "The experiment was conducted" sounds more objective and credible than "I conducted the experiment."

Both are a stylistic and genre choice, and both are sometimes effective. How else could politicians say things like: "Mistakes were made"? That said, there are a few things to keep in mind: 1) Always follow your instructor's guidelines; 2) "I" voice is no reason to make an essay a personal narrative; 3) Passive voice gets boring, very quickly, for the reader.

> move him Austin Powers-style into the present day. Who would experience the greater change? (194)

Obviously, there are no thesis statements in these opening paragraphs. Rather, the writer poses an interesting question. In posing this question, the writer strikes an attitude of curiosity and promises to try to answer this question in a thoughtful, reasonable manner.

Some academic writing does, in the opening, offer an answer to the question that the writing poses. However, that answer, or thesis, is not placed at the beginning because the writer thought of the thesis when she he or she started to write.

Scholarship is the ability to ask smart questions, and to answer them well. It is more than becoming a walking encyclopedia of factual information; it is to have a certain ability to put the knowledge that one has acquired to good use. People do not place answers in front of questions. Rather, the answer is moved, in a rewrite, because disciplines have developed ***conventions*** in the writing that occurs in certain academic disciplines.

DEFINITION

A *convention* is an established rule or set of rules that have built up over time. Sometimes these conventions make sense, and sometimes they're just the result of habit. Wearing a tie, for example, used to be for the purpose of wiping one's mouth after dinner. Now it is merely a convention.

Rather, the thesis is placed in the opening in the final draft, or revision. This is especially true in the case of papers written within the sciences, including the social sciences. Often, this answer comes in the form of an *Abstract*. The abstract covers:

1. What the writer was trying to accomplish
2. The results (answer, or thesis)
3. How those results could be applied

In the writing *product*, the abstract is presented first. In the writing *process*, the abstract is almost always written last, because the writer wouldn't know the answer until after the question has been posed.

Writing that has an abstract usually occurs in APA style, and APA style is usually used within the social and hard sciences, especially those that concentrate on quantitative data.

Writing in these disciplines routinely requires that the writer first submit what is called a *Proposal*, before even beginning the research, much less a draft of the

writing, itself. The proposal always covers the initial area of inquiry—or, in other words, a question. The proposal covers:

1. The question to be posed, problem to be solved, or issue to be resolved
2. The method that will be used to answer that question or resolve that issue
3. Why answering that question or resolving that issue is important

Let's say that a scientist is going to write an article, based upon an experiment in a laboratory. No scientist steps into the laboratory, glances at the experiment, and immediately turns to the computer to write an article on his or her findings. The experiment is conducted around something in question, and the scientist must work with that question before coming to a conclusion. In writing up his or her findings, the scientist may *produce* a final article that places those conclusions on the first page, but the *process* begins by identifying the question at hand.

5 REVIEW

"I don't wait to be struck by lightning, and don't need certain slants of light in order to write."

—*Toni Morrison*

CHAPTER REVIEW

The information to take from this chapter is that academic writing is for the purpose of answering questions, solving problems, or resolving issues. No matter where the thesis is presented in the final draft of the writing that you produce, the following will always apply:

- An answer is the logical *end* of the academic writing process
- A question is the logical *beginning* of the academic writing process

That is because all academic thinking and writing begins with the idea that something is in question. If there were not something in question, well…there wouldn't be a reason to write.

EVER WONDERED?

When listing, use bullets (or equivalent) if the order of the items on the list doesn't matter, and numbers if the order of the items on the list does matter.

GRAMMAR REVIEW

The Hyphen and Dash

The hyphen (-) is used to indicate that two or more words have been brought together to provide a description. Thus, one can be a "no-nonsense person."

The hyphen is also always used in numbers, which, unless they are very large, are always spelled out (e.g.: "twenty-one").

The hyphen is not needed if there is one adjective that is being used to describe the word. Thus, one can have a "strict person."

A hyphen is also not needed if the descriptive word is already an adverb, often indicated by ending in -ly. Thus, one can have a "slovenly person."

A Dash (–) is slightly longer than the hyphen. A dash should be used sparingly. Basically, it indicates an interruption of thought—a kind of sideline—within the writing. It can replace the colon, semi-colon, or the parenthesis, but be careful—it's difficult to use correctly, and can become tiresome for the reader. Use it only if you understand the rules that govern what it replaces.

A dash is also used as a replacement for the word "to," as in:

"January to March" becoming January—March

Emphasis

The preferred way to *emphasize* a word is to use italics. Just be consistent.

Bold and Underline are not used to emphasize words in academic writing.

Quotation Marks (' or ")

Double quotation marks serve the main purpose of telling the reader that you have taken someone else's writing, and inserted it into your own. It means that these are not your words, but someone else's, and you have copied them *directly*.

This is not the same as paraphrasing, which is an *indirect* quotation, and does not need quotation marks. Warning! Do not paraphrase someone else's words unless you understand the rules that allow your reader to separate your words and ideas from other people's words and ideas.

Single quotation marks tell the reader that there is a quotation inside of a quotation. In other words, you copied the words of someone who copied the words

of someone else. In either case, all punctuation goes inside of single or double quotation marks.

Lengthy Quotations

Quotations that go on for more than a certain number of lines are set off from the rest of the text. The number of lines depends on the formatting style you are using. Even though these words are someone else's, there is no need for quotation marks. The left margin of the quotation is moved in five spaces to indicate that it is a quotation. Check a style guide for exact rules.

First-Person and Passive Voice

There is a great deal of grumpy fighting about this one, so make sure you know what your instructor expects in your writing. If you are instructed to use neither first-person, nor passive voice, it's going to be difficult, because one is used to avoid the other. An example would be:

"I attended the conference on grammar."	(first-person)
"The conference on grammar was attended."	(passive voice)

So, you might have to get somewhat creative, as in: "At the conference on grammar, speakers covered the use of first-person and passive voice."

Bullets or Numbers

This is not a typical stylistic choice in academic writing, but it's not bad to know that when thinking about the visual presentation of a document, one should use bullets for a list when the order doesn't matter, and numbers when the order of the items does matter.

A human requires:

- food
- water
- shelter

When boiling water, one should:

1. fill the pan with water
2. put the pan on the stove
3. light the fire under the pan

VOCABULARY REVIEW

heuristic
The informal ways in which most people go about solving problems or answering questions, including such things as trial-and-error, speculation, drawing a picture, etc.

negative definition
A way of defining a word by naming things to which it is similar, but that it is not. For example, a "pencil" is defined by the fact that it is not a pen or a marker

implicit
Something that is not stated, but that is implied, or suggested, or commonly understood to be so. The opposite is "explicit," where something is stated without ambiguity or equivocation

convention
In this sense of the term, a practice that has become a tradition or custom, sometimes just from extensive usage, and sometimes for a reason. Conventions can be very formal (one signs a contract for a legal agreement) or informal (the person who foolishly goes to investigate the noise in the cemetery in the scary movie is always the first to die)

CHAPTER 2

CRITICAL THINKING

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1 WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT CRITICAL THINKING?

"Writing and learning and thinking are the same process."
—William Zinsser

EVER WONDERED?

When you introduce the name of the person from whom you are quoting, within your own prose, it is called a "signal phrase."

Academic writing, in essence, is a clear record of a writer's reasoning from a question to an answer. As **Hans Guth** explains:

> The writer appeals to the reader's willingness to think a matter through on the merits of that logic. This systematic writing is the mode of most academic writing, from an economist's analysis of the causes of inflation, to a philosopher's examination of logical proofs for the existence of God. (18)

Academic writing uses a style that tends to offer a question, in an implicit or explicit manner, and then to move, step-by-step, to a conclusion, through reasoned argumentation.

So, what role does critical thinking play in academic writing? People often have a hard time figuring out what exactly is meant by the term "critical thinking." Sometimes it seems like analysis, sometimes like logic, and sometimes like just basic common sense.

2 CRITICAL THINKING AND LOGIC

"And as you come to practice this habit of thought more and more you will get better and better at it. To penetrate into the heart of the thing—even a little thing, a blade of grass, as Walt Whitman said—is to experience a kind of exhilaration that, it may be, only human beings of all the beings on this planet can feel. We are an intelligent species and the use of our intelligence quite properly gives us pleasure. When we think well, we feel good. Understanding is a kind of ecstasy."
—Carl Sagan

Critical thinking appears to be somehow both logical, but also to require a kind of creative leap on the part of the thinker, as when we speak of someone thinking "outside the box." Sometimes, critical thinking is referred to as "critical-creative thinking."

Creativity and logic often strike people as a strange combination—aren't people artists or accountants? Of course, we know such binaries are reductive. People are both creative and logical.

Critical thinking does involve a kind of speculative capacity, much like other forms of informal logic. The way that we think through things that we encounter may require an intuitive or experimental willingness to imagine other possibilities. Such thinking often yields unconventional answers to which people would not necessarily have arrived by more formal means.

For example, riddles are just such an exercise in intuitive leaps, because they appear, on the surface, to be logically unsolvable. Here's a simple one that many schoolchildren know:

What can run, but never walks, has a mouth, but never talks, has a head, but never weeps, has a bed, but never sleeps?

At first, it doesn't seem like it is possible to offer a logical answer to this riddle—which is, if you will notice, like many riddles, in the form of a question.

If one tries to tackle the question logically, all that seems to happen is a series of dead ends. Things that run are probably able to walk, so that doesn't make sense. There are lots of animals with mouths that don't talk, but we know that's not the answer. While a shark may be an animal that rests more than it actually sleeps, that doesn't fulfill the other criteria. More than that, it's not funny—or, at least, it doesn't fulfill our expectations of the answer to a riddle.

For as long as we stay within the "box," we can't answer the riddle. To answer the riddle, we need to understand that it is *the box itself* that is keeping us from imagining other possible answers. We don't need to think outside the box; we need to examine the box and see if it is really what we assume that it is.

Many interesting ideas and discoveries have been made by informal logic. We are not computers: a part of the way we think often involves imagining other possibilities, as Carl Sagan notes:

> But the scientific cast of mind examines the world critically as if many alternative worlds might exist, as if other things might be here which