

Writing and Graduate School

Requiring students to write is a method of assessing whether or not a student has acquired the knowledge, core competencies, and can appropriately apply the wisdom he or she has obtained in order to solve a problem. If you cannot write, then you cannot communicate, and if you cannot communicate, then you have not learned.

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Introduction

In this essay, the MPA graduate student is provided with several helpful hints focused on improving his or her written communication skills. In order to achieve a graduate or professional degree, students must effectively demonstrate an uncanny command of the discourse used in his or her chosen field of study. Two methods of assessment used to ascertain if this is accomplished are through the use of oral and written communications. This essay focuses on the written communication skills of the student.

This essay begins with the topic of tackling essay questions and the method you can employ when answering these types of questions. After discussing essay answers, I present the reader with several important notes and recommendations focusing on how a student may improve his or her professional writing abilities. At this point I present one crucial caveat—professional writing should not read the same as an e-mail, text message, or a message sent via Twitter. Therefore, please avoid the use of contractions, and colloquialisms in your professional writing. Now, I turn your consideration to the subject of writing essay questions.

On the next page is a sample essay question taken from a PSC 502 Research Methods in Public Administration exam. Before answering any essay question, it is best to outline your response. In order to maintain a clear and concise train of thought, begin your an essay with an introductory paragraph in which you inform the reader of the purpose, content, and importance of the essay. The best way to approach the introduction is by taking the essay question and turning it into the introductory paragraph. One additional item, your essay response to an exam question should be written like it is for an audience that has no knowledge of the subject.

Question: Discuss the various methods of sampling. In your discussion ensure that you define your terms and the pitfalls and advantages of each method.

Response: Public administrators, in order to ascertain if the programs they manage are effectively accomplishing the legislative intent of the program, employ various research methodologies to determine the impact their programs have on the public. Regardless of the methodology chosen to study the program, the administrator may not be able to study the entire population affected by the program; therefore, the researcher will have to rely upon sampling in order to accomplish his or her program review. The purpose of this essay is to present the reader with various methods of sampling. I begin the discourse by clearly and concisely defining the terms used in

the essay in order to familiarize the reader with the *lingua franca* used by research methodologists as it relates to sampling. I then segue into a discussion focusing on the various methods of sampling employed in the field of public administration according to the work of O’Sullivan, Rassel, and Berner (2008). In this discussion, I note the advantages and pitfalls of each method discussed. In the field of public administration, it is imperative that all administrators be well-versed in the various research methodologies in order to ascertain the effectiveness of the policies and program they oversee (O’Sullivan, Rassel, and Taliaferro 2011).

If you write your essay in the same logical order that you outlined in your introductory paragraph, then your paper will flow in a reasonable sequence. What follows are some important notes and recommendation aimed at improving your writing abilities. Keep in mind that we all make mistakes in our writing, yet to get better at it, we have to practice.

Notes to the Writer

In academic writing, avoid the drawbacks of sentences that begin with phrases like “I believe, I feel, or it is my opinion”—or any similar phrase. The reason to avoid these expressions is simple—these statements, by themselves, cannot support a logical argument. The reason they cannot support an argument is that your opponents can simply argue their feelings, believes, or opinions, or better yet, employ clear and concise counter arguments backed up with evidence. Therefore, it is necessary for you to back up every claim you make in your writing assignments with sound evidence (citations from your readings, real world scenarios, even anecdotal evidence is OK, but not necessarily the best evidence, especially when empirical findings are available). In addition, you need to be *more aggressive* in your writing. What do I mean by this last statement?

If you begin a sentence with “I believe or I feel, or it is my opinion,” it makes you appear less professional and weakens your arguments. First, people know you are the author of the work, so you can simply leave out the phrase “I believe or I feel.” If your writing is weak, then your argument will appear weak, and if the argument is weak, your ability to influence people through writing is diminished. Instead, be more aggressive in your writing (see the examples on the next page).

Statement 1: I feel the policy process has many pitfalls. It is my opinion that the policy process....

Statement 2: The policy process is full of pitfalls. According to Cochran et al. (2003), the policy process....

Clearly, the way the second statement starts has the better chance of convincing the reader because it is more aggressive. In other words, the writer appears more assured of his or her abilities to convey a clear, concise, and logical argument that is supported by evidence. This is what you want to accomplish. Refrain from the editorial approach to academic writing, which is clearly the approach of the first statement above. Truthfully, no one cares how you feel simply because others will feel differently about a topic, and, as such, does not move the

discussion forward. However, if you present a clear, concise, logical argument, supported by evidence, then you stand a better chance of convincing your reader.

Recommendations

OK, how do you get better at writing academic papers, essays, and other professional material? First, take the time and explore the Internet looking for web pages that demonstrate effective writing techniques, especially techniques that are designed for academic and other professional writing. In addition, I recommend every student obtain a copy of the text entitled *The Craft of Research* by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph Williams (1995, 2003, and 2008). I have the first and second editions of this text, and it is an excellent guide for writing that provides you with valuable insight into the world of research and writing. Third, get ahold of a copy of Strunk and White's (2009) *The Elements of Style* (your writing should have style). Fourth, follow the formatting guidelines that your professors provide you in their course syllabi, and it helps if you acquired a style manual (*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* is one used in political science, as is *The Chicago Manual of Style*). Finally, read these aforementioned texts. I know that last recommendation sounds silly at first, but allow me to explain.

During my eleven year sojourn as a graduate student, I was told to buy and read the aforementioned texts, which I did—yet not all members of my cohort read the texts (they brought them to class, but did not read them). In the end, what separated the successful students in the cohort from the *not-so-successful* students was this: the successful students read and adhered to the teachings of the texts. As you all have probably heard, to even have a chance of being good at something, you have to practice, practice, and....wait for it....practice. Granted, there is no guarantee that you will be a great writer, but you can improve. This is accomplished by simply writing whenever you have the time. The more you work at it, the better writer you become. However, the pitfall for students is doing the work.

Some students will work harder at avoiding work and spend more time dreaming of ways to take shortcuts to avoid the work, than it actually takes to do the work in the first place. In my travels through the world of academia, as well as my work in the public sector, I have been amazed at the number of students—as well as academicians and professionals—who think that they can take shortcuts and succeed. Yes, you can take shortcuts in your classes, and, at times, you may succeed, but remember, in the end it is all about the knowledge you have obtained and whether or not you are able to use that knowledge via critical thinking and communication skills in order to solve problems.

The last hurdle a student faces in the MPA Program at Jacksonville State University is the written comprehensive examination. To successfully pass this exam, the student must demonstrate that she or he has mastered the discourse of the discipline and, the student's concentration area, in order to obtain a Master of Public Administration degree. You cannot *fake* your way through this exam—either you know the material and are able write about it in a professional manner or you do not know the material, and are not able to write about the material. Even if you know the material, if you cannot discuss it through your writing, then

you will not succeed in the MPA Program. This is why students have a lot of writing they must do in the courses they take during their tenure in the program. Bottom line: you cannot pass an assignment by writing about your feelings and opinions.

I reiterate, you need to present clear, concise, logical arguments backed up by evidence that supports your claims and apply all of the aforementioned in an appropriate manner in order to solve a hypothetical or real-world problem, critique a theory, defend a policy or process, or present and defend your own hypothesis. After all, communication is one of the core competencies we instill in our students during their tenure in the program.

There you have it, in just a little over three pages, profound thoughts on writing along with recommendations on how you can improve your written communication skills. Let me know what you think of these tidbits of advice—write me a note explaining the pros and cons of the ideas presented here. I look forward to reading your responses and incorporating your recommendations in an updated version of this guide.