

ENGLISH: WRITING CONVENTIONS — PART I (100 LEVEL)

When students take an English course for the first time, they may feel that there is something distinctive about writing assignments for English courses that they do not quite understand. This resource will provide an overview of some of the academic writing conventions for 100 Level English courses.



Learning the Essay Structure



Most English assignments should be written in “Essay style” with an introduction, a middle (known as the “body” paragraphs), and a conclusion. The introduction also includes a “thesis statement,” which is a condensed version of the argument you will make throughout your paper. In a short paper (approximately five pages or less), the thesis statement is usually only one sentence. Even assignments like a “Critical Response” paper or a “Rhetorical Analysis” paper commonly follow this Essay format.



Writing in the First Person



In most English courses students are also allowed to use the “first person,” which means that they can use “I” (as in: “I argue that...”). In fact, many English professors encourage students to find their own voice; being able to shift from summarizing someone else’s argument to constructing your own argument is a significant skill. This approach may differ from some science courses in which students are instructed not to use “I” and to adopt a more “neutral” or “objective” tone instead (although variation certainly exists across science courses too).

Using Direct Quotations



In some disciplines, students are only allowed to paraphrase and they are not permitted to use direct quotations. In English, other than the “Summary” assignment (which teaches students to use their own words to explain someone else’s work), students are allowed to use direct quotations as long as they cite their sources (which in most English courses means following “MLA Citation Style”). One reason for English students to use direct quotations is that they may be citing influential authors, poets, or playwrights who have well-known lines and unique writing styles that cannot be rephrased. Another related reason to use direct quotations is that students are often engaging in a close reading of the text and analyzing its language. Accordingly, it might be necessary to directly quote the text—sometimes even a single word or phrase—to draw attention to the author’s specific word choices.

Developing Reading Skills



Another English convention is to emphasize the importance of the relationship between reading and writing. Performing a close reading of a text (or texts) is one of the foundations of English writing. A literary analysis begins with this close reading; if you are not sure about what the text says, then the rest of your essay will probably not make good sense. Therefore reading comprehension, and the ability to discern relevant aspects of the text, becomes particularly important in English courses. Moreover, as a general rule, to be a good writer, you need to read a lot! Reading other people’s writing, especially writing that you enjoy and find inspiring, will help you improve your own writing skills. Ideally, you will begin to expand your vocabulary, pick up useful writing strategies (like sentence structures, transitional phrases, etc.), and improve your creativity.



*This handout was created by the CAC, not the ENGL department;
if in doubt, follow your professor’s instructions rather than this handout.*

