

Academic Writing
June 24, 2020

Housekeeping

- assignment 4 folder not visible to students
- people got an extra day to complete work
- professor again asked students to join the class using a computer, not a phone
- essays due on July 3

Informal fallacies

- straw man argument (from last day)
 - credit somebody with a weak argument then imply that negates the conclusion
- circularity (petitio principia)
 - aka circular argument, circular reasoning
 - aka begging the question
 - professor said this expression is often used but almost always misused – it's used to mean provoking a question
 - the question itself provides its own answer without adding anything
 - assuming the conclusion by stating it as a premise of the argument
 - a closed loop doesn't work in terms of argumentation, the professor said
 - examples:
 - Why should ex-convicts not be allowed to vote? Because they're criminals
 - It's clear that we should return to the ways of Nature. After all, it's only natural to do so
 - Women should be able to choose to terminate a pregnancy, so abortion should be legal.
 - sometimes bears some resemblance to equivocation

Recursive process of writing

- you need to revisit your work
- revision = you change the sequence of ideas, rewriting sentences, simplifying sentences
- editing = looking for errors
- write, then let it sit for a few days, then revisit it later – this allows your mind to take some distance from the work and return to it with a fresh pair of eyes
- one of the best ways to revise/edit your work: read it aloud to yourself
 - are the sentences flowing? Sensible?

Exercise: the writing process

- fill in the intermediary steps to writing an essay:
 - first step: to understand the essay assignment
 - last step: to hand in the final draft
 - professor gave 2 minutes to do this
- what goes in the middle?
 - Narrow the topic
 - brainstorm ideas – think it through in a freewheeling way
 - form initial thesis
 - generate questions and counterarguments
 - sketch out an outline – best way is to think of arguments

- do research and take notes
- the point is that you can't just choose a topic and sit down to write – there are several steps to go through

Writing task for today

- summarize your project by writing down 5 pieces of information that someone would need to know to understand what you're doing in your essay
 - some statement of topic, of the controversy around the topic, of the research already done on it, of the background of the situation
 - professor gave 3 minutes to do the above

True/false

- all essays have 6 paragraphs: introduction, conclusion, 3 body paragraphs
 - false: you do have an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion, but there is no set number of paragraphs
- it's a good idea to have a separate file or section of a file where you write freely without thinking about how your ideas will turn out in the end
 - true: you need a space to write freely without worrying about how it sounds, just to brainstorm and get your ideas out
- it's important to make sure you include everything you write so you don't waste your time
 - false: you don't have to use every single thing you wrote; sketching things out is valuable
- of course you should start writing your essay from the beginning to the end
 - false: it's a mistake to begin at the beginning – you should begin with what you think is the most interesting idea
- you should develop a 'hook' to engage readers' attention at the beginning of the essay
 - false
- the thesis statement is always found in the last sentence of the first paragraph
 - true: for now – you can stop doing this later in your academic career
- it's good to refer to yourself and your own personal experience in your essay
 - false: there are very few exceptions to this
- when you are done your first draft, you're finished the work
 - false: you keep revising

How an essay works

- writing an essay is similar to writing a paragraph
 - paragraphs: topic sentence, examples/details/support, concluding sentence
 - essay: introduction with thesis, body paragraphs, conclusion
- don't start at the beginning
 - professor used analogies: lava lamp, dot matrix printer
 - if you were going to paint a bowl of fruit, you'd begin by sketching out the major components – the bowl, the banana, the pear, etc. (individual fruits), but you're just sketching, there's no detail because you know you will have to alter things as you go
 - the point is: you can start wherever you want – you don't have to go in any particular order, and you don't fill in all the details up front
 - rather than forcing yourself through it line by line, which is tedious, choose the idea you want to begin with, develop it as far as you can, and when you get tired of that you can move on to something else

- this allows you to move freely between ideas and more importantly the ideas will start expanding on their own
- start making a paragraph out of one of your ideas
- start building paragraphs – they don't have to be perfect
- when you have a few paragraphs, combine them together
- then add finishing touches
- professor said you should write the introduction last – because you don't know what you're going to write until you write it
 - you aren't just extracting the ideas from your mind – you're creating them as you go
- how to start writing
 - set aside a separate page where you record quotes, statistics, pieces of research, ideas, citations you know you want to use
 - choose one that you find interesting and start building around it
 - or, choose an idea and start building around it
 - like building a snowman – you start with a small chunk of snow and start rolling it around to build it up; you don't randomly pack a bunch of snow together

Exercise: Bertrand Russell quote

- “We are less bored than our ancestors were, but we are more afraid of boredom”
 - build around this citation – add a sentence below it and above it, then repeat that
 - include a reporting verb
 - include Russell's name
 - explain what he means and give an example
- professor gave class 2 minutes to do the above
 - don't forget to indent your paragraph
 - professor did the exercise too
 - his last sentence was a question – this would lead into the next paragraph to come
- when you're writing you will have several paragraphs or “blobs” that you have to rearrange and place them

(break: 10 minutes)

Introductions

- an introduction to the topic and the problem/question the essay is addressing
- last sentence is the answer to the question (thesis statement)
- similar to a conclusion but not identical
- capture the reader's attention
 - professor doesn't like the term “hook” - but you can include a statistic or possibly a rhetorical question (but be careful about the latter – don't be cliché)
- state your purpose
- example
 - professor showed a sample introduction for an academic essay
 - starts with a general point about the issue – introduces the terms to be used
 - include stipulative definition of key terms/concepts (but don't cite a dictionary - it's what YOU mean – as long as you're consistent in your writing)
 - gives an overview of the key issues in the topic
 - indicates the direction the argument will take

- uses words from the title to show understanding of the question
 - at the end, makes a link to the first part of the essay

Opening sentences and hooks

- pique the curiosity of the reader in an unobtrusive way
- a quotation, a statistic
- tell a story
- epigram (quotation at the start of a paper, before the introduction itself)

Body paragraphs

- each paragraph develops ONE idea only
 - the sentences in each paragraph are examples, explanations, reasons, etc
 - if your paragraph is too long, split it in two
- develop as many paragraphs as you need to develop your idea fully

Outline

- professor showed a sample essay outline
- introduction – thesis, supporting ideas
 - each supporting idea becomes a paragraph/section

Conclusions

- remind reader of what you just explained
- remind reader of the thesis but hedge it differently – is more conclusive than the introduction
- should mirror the introduction
- professor said to resist the compulsion to add something new at the end – this is a mistake many students make
 - exercise restraint – less is more

Establishing unity and coherence

- unity – single idea, clear to reader how it relates back to thesis
- coherence – logical flow from one sentence to the next
- transition signals
 - additionally, moreover, by contrast, on the other hand, for example, to illustrate, in other words, that is to say, therefore, as a result...
 - these are important words/phrases because they indicate to the reader the direction of your thought and how one thought relates to another

The Milgram experiment

- Video: Psychology Electric Shock Experiment (vimeo – 14 minutes long)
 - replication of the 1961 Milgram experiment
 - 12 members of public arrive to do a memory test, as well as volunteers who are actors
 - “lab instructor” meets with each participant and volunteer; the volunteer always is the one to receive the shocks
 - subject observes the “learner” be strapped into the chair
 - entire experiment is filmed and social psychologists watch
 - some participants ask about the pain the learners will feel; are told that's not part of the experiment

- “shock machine” has series of switches labelled with the voltage of the shock, up to a lethal shock
- teacher is given a sample mild shock so they know what it feels like
- teacher reads out word lists, learners are to remember the words; if wrong answer given, teacher asked to administer a shock; with each wrong answer, the shocks increase in voltage
- several subjects resist, the lab instructor just says “please continue” or “the experiment requires that you continue”
- after a few shocks, the learners start vocalizing – asking to be let out, saying their heart is bothering them
- subjects defer to the professor – this allows them to defer responsibility
- after awhile the learners stop responding; teacher told to treat that as a wrong answer
- 9 out of the 12 participants went all the way to the fatal shock
- immediately afterwards, the subjects are debriefed and told the true nature of the experiment
- subjects said they found it quite stressful but they continued because of the reassurance of the lab instructor
- how did the “scientist” get people to comply?
 - Depersonalizes – never says “you need to listen to me”; instead uses carefully scripted prompts (please continue, the experiment requires that you continue) – the entire background apparatus of science requires you continue
 - this is what Lessing meant by 'obeying the atmosphere'
 - one phenomenon Milgram couldn't explain: why did people under extreme duress start laughing? Laughter was a common response
 - also tearing at their hair, biting their nails, biting their lip, clenching their fists
 - collapse in a heap when it was all finished
 - professor said this could be a question posed in an essay

Thesis statements

- evaluate according to the criteria we looked at last day
 - is it arguable?
 - Can you infer the question to which it is the answer?
 - Is it narrow and specific?
 - Is there any indication it was developed in coordination with research?
 - Is it a single idea?
- People should have the right to disobey a person in authority to decrease the cruelty that involves obedience due to the power of authority.
 - professor said this is a clumsy sentence – lots of conjunctions
 - would any reasonable person disagree with this?
 - Very vague, too broad, not specific enough
- Milgram's use of existing humans should not have been used for their experimental purposes. It was dysfunctional as in the end there were not solutions provided. The people were manipulated through power, encroachment through their personal boundaries. The guidelines, rules or limits to identify reasonable, safe and permissible ways for other people to behave towards them.
 - Professor noted the last sentence is a fragment
 - 4 sentences – which is the idea we're meant to agree with?
- In my opinion all humans are cruel to each other due to the respect of obedience and authority.
 - Don't say “in my opinion” because it can't be argued
 - are all humans cruel to each other? That's difficult to demonstrate

- The human's manipulable nature is heavily influenced by what is taught and practised in the society, that can result in losing one's sense of morality and control. One's manipulable characteristics and how they react to authority differs from person to person
 - contradictory – everybody is influenced by the same factors yet how they react differs across people
 - which idea are we meant to agree with?
- It is the combination of the environment and the participants' manipulation are the reason the outcomes of the experiment came out that way.
 - Faulty grammar
 - this is obviously true – the experiment was set up in exactly this way and it was transparent – so nothing needs to be said in support of it
- I believe all people, man or woman are capable of evil. However, maybe some people are simply immaculate and that the goodness that resides within them is simply so strong that it cannot be changed.
 - If you disregard the first sentence this is the most promising thesis
 - this paper ended up talking about religious individuals like monks, and talked about the kinds of people not susceptible to this manipulation
- The experiment begs the question of why did the subjects stay and carry out the shocks despite the subjects knowing it was wrong?
 - Incorrect use of 'begs the question'
 - inarguable – this is the whole point of the experiment – so there's nothing more to say
- The Germans and the participants in the Milgram experiment all shared the same character flaw which derived from being in the presence of an authority figure, this led them to make the decision to bring harm upon others. This flaw is known as blind obedience to authority.
 - Contains a run-on sentence (comma splice)
 - circular reasoning – why did they act the way they did? Because they had the same character flaw, which is obedience – so, why did they obey? Because they're obedient. How do you know they're obedient? Because they obeyed

Next day

- one more class!
- Editing/revision process – especially how to expand and vary sentences, and how to simplify
- review – will also post review materials
- S: why have we called them informal fallacies? Are there formal fallacies?
 - P: yes, and if we have time I can introduce you to some – for example: affirming the consequent, modus ponens (not a fallacy but a valid form of argument)
 - formal fallacy = within the domain of formal logic (logic that is given in logical notation like $X \rightarrow Y, Y/X$)
 - informal fallacy = fallacies you encounter conversationally
 - professor said if people are interested he could do a follow-up class on this
- S: so they're another set of fallacies or logically explain the informal ones?
 - P: they are distinct from each other, though there can be some overlaps
- note: marks should be available on Nexus