MISSOURI S&T University of Science & Technology

THE WRITE TRACK

Writing Center Student Newsletter

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The Writing Center

A FREE Resource for Undergraduate Student Writers

Our friendly and enthusiastic peer tutors receive intensive training so that they can help you produce your best written work.

Whether you're brainstorming ideas, outlining a paper, or proofreading a final draft, they can offer valuable suggestions and feedback. Tutors can help with:

- **Essays**
- **Proposals**
- **Résumés**
- **Short Stories**
- **Abstracts**
- **Lab Reports**
- **Research Papers**
- **Newsletter Articles**
- **Cover Letters**

To make an appointment, visit us at:

writingcenter@mst.edu

A Second Opinion

By Chance Franklin

"Do I really need to have someone else look at my paper?" Well, no, not necessarily, or at least, not unless you'd like to become better at writing. See, a major problem with writing academic papers is that, while you're seated there at your desk typing away on your computer, you're trapped inside your own head. Now I don't mean to suggest that this isn't a pleasant place to be, but while you're in there, you may become a little too accustomed to your own ideas. This familiarity can cause a variety of problems as these ideas begin to pour out on paper.

Upon completing an initial draft, chances are you already have a fairly sound understanding of the material that you've been discussing in your paper. You probably also know exactly what you want to say and just how you want to say it. Because of this familiarity with the document, it is often easy to make simple mental auto-corrections when reviewing your paper. For example, you may read correctly words that are actually spelled wrong, or you may add appropriate pauses where there's no punctuation telling the reader to do so.

However, while hiccups due to grammar and punctuation errors can be a nuisance, there are larger concerns. To understand these concerns, remember that any piece of writing you create acts as a dialogue of sorts between your mind and the mind of the reader. Again, the familiarity you have with the ideas you're discussing can often result in the misconception that a thought has been fully expressed when, in fact, it hasn't. Perhaps the only reason why a certain part of your paper makes any sense is because you are aware of some additional bit of information the reader doesn't have. Or your knowledge and experience may give you a perspective that the reader doesn't have the background to understand. For these reasons, it's always a good idea to have someone else take a look at what you've written. It may not be clear to you that something is missing, but a quick glance at your paper by an objective reader may reveal places where additional information is required to help keep your audience on track.

Additionally, a second point of view is useful for eliminating bias and strengthening an argument overall. An objective reader can play devil's advocate, revealing statements that are not properly or sufficiently supported with credible evidence. This person could be a friend, but it's often useful get help from someone who you know will be impartial (such as a Writing Center tutor!). This type of outside review can also function as a check to identify other potential problems with issues such as tone, coherence, and flow.

Write Till Midnight

Are end-of-semester writing assignments sending you into a panic? The Writing Center can help!

Every semester, during the last week of classes, the Writing Center hosts *Write Till Midnight*, a marathon writing event during which tutors are available until midnight to help students with those last-minute papers. This semester, *Write Till Midnight* will be held on Wednesday, 12/5. You can make an appointment in advance by visiting our website. We'll also accommodate walk-ins on a first-come, first-served basis.

So take some of the stress out of writing that final essay or lab report by getting the feedback you need to write as effectively as possible. And help yourself to the pizza, snacks, and sodas that will be available to keep you going!

If you have questions about the Write Till Midnight event, please call us at 341-4436.

Decomposing an English Prompt

By Joseph "Gus" Steurer

"The tools and methods for decomposing a project specification can be generalized and applied to an English prompt."

Recently, a man named Felix Baumgartner completed a freefall from the edge of outer space. This feat was made possible through careful identification and consideration of the requirements for success.

Just as Baumgartner did, engineers and scientists must consider all elements of a problem to ensure the success of a project. The engineer who neglects or bends requirements may find that the airplane falls out of the sky. Similarly, students must understand and address all the requirements of an assignment or their grades may fall—just like that plane. Both engineers and students can avoid disaster simply by identifying the requirements of their task and approaching the project accordingly. The tools and methods for decomposing a project specification can be generalized and applied to an English prompt. Consider the following practices before you begin drafting your paper:

Create a list of all requirements included in the prompt.

How are you being asked to build your thesis? How should you present information to support your argument? What are you explicitly being asked NOT to do?

Organize the list of requirements by priority.

Which items concern the entire assignment? Which are focused on specific details?

Plan your approach to each requirement.

Define ambiguous terms. Use a dictionary. Ask your instructor. Use the Internet. Relate your source material to these requirements. Which main ideas, quotations, or arguments can be applied to satisfy each item?

Research the type of essay you've been asked to produce.

If you're asked to write a specific type of essay, such as a synthesis or an argumentative essay, be sure you understand what that type of essay should do. Don't hesitate to ask your instructor to clarify the expectations.

Refer to the prompt as you write and edit your essay.

Does your discussion stick to the main ideas and the expectations you've outlined? Have your forgotten to address anything?

Don't hesitate to expand or modify this list to suit a given problem. The tools and methodologies developed in one discipline may suggest an effective solution for a project in another discipline—including an English assignment.

Writing is easy; all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead.

- Gene Fowler

A Writer's First Priorities

By Cortney Chapman

Many students come into the Writing Center and say to me, "I just need to check for grammar errors." Often, though, the student and I end up reading through the paper only to realize that there are much larger issues at stake. When professors grade papers, they make their decision based on a series of priorities. I'm going to give you some insight into two of the highest priorities in the hope that understanding them will help you avoid the need to rewrite part or all of a paper in the future. The keys to writing a good analytical paper are fully addressing the prompt and having a strong thesis statement.

Your first concern is to make sure you've fully addressed the writing prompt. This task can be especially hard for freshmen whose high school experience may have prepared them for different types of assignments. It's extremely important to identify key words like *analyze*, *assess*, *compare/contrast*, *critique*, *discuss*, *evaluate*, *explain*, and *synthesize*. Knowing the meanings of these words and writing your paper accordingly can make or break your grade on a paper.

The second concern is your thesis statement. I see too many people panic when I ask them to point it out because often they're not entirely sure what a thesis statement is. A thesis statement doesn't have to be intimidating; in fact, a strong thesis will help you stay on track and write clearly. A thesis statement simply expresses the main point you're trying to make in your paper. Always write it first, before you begin writing the rest of your paper, but don't be afraid to change it later if you find yourself headed in a new direction. What's most important is that it be clear and concise.

If you've fully addressed the prompt and provided a strong thesis statement to guide your paper, you're well on your way to pleasing your professor. Only after you've considered the prompt and your main point should you go on to work on sentence-level errors like spelling

The Grammar Guru

Q: My professor says I use the passive voice too much. What does he mean? How do I know when I'm using the passive voice?

A: The passive voice is all about the role of subjects and verbs in sentences. You probably remember your English teachers telling you that a verb expresses the action in a sentence, and the subject tells us who is doing the action. This is true—***if*** a sentence is written in the active voice. For example, in the sentence *The boy threw the ball*, the word *threw* expresses the action, so it's the verb. The words *the boy* tell us who did the throwing, so they are the subject. This is a standard active-voice sentence.

In passive-voice sentences, the roles of verbs and subjects are different. Consider the sentence *The ball was thrown by the boy*. Here, the subject of the sentence is *the ball*, but the ball isn't throwing anything; it's not doing the action. That's the passive voice in a nutshell.

The form of the verb is key to identifying the passive voice. Notice that the verb in our sample sentence above is expressed with two words: *was thrown*. The first word is a form of the verb *to be*. Other forms of this verb include *were*, *is*, and *are*. The second word is a past participle (often, but not always, ending in *–ed*). Whenever you see this combination, you're probably looking at a passive-voice sentence.

The passive voice has its place. It is useful when a writer doesn't know (or doesn't want to emphasize) who or what is performing the action in a sentence. But it often makes sentences sound awkward, so avoid it unless you have a specific reason for using it.

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