

Writing As An English Major

Joe Pellegrino

“Strive for clarity. Pray for grace.”

Bob Bain

Basic Points

1) Fundamentals Matter

Below is the “Theme Standard Policy” which was used by the Technical School System in South Carolina when I taught there. That’s the Technical Schools, as in two-year degrees, as in basic English classes for those who want focused employment training. In other words, these standards are set not for students who desire a well-rounded “education,” as you do. So the bar here is set very low. Given that you’re attending a four-year school, and are taking upper-division English classes, this level of expectation should always be met. Unfortunately, the fact that I’m writing this tells you that this level of writing is still only aspirational for many of you. Nevertheless, this is the minimum to which I will hold you.

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Theme Standard Policy

1. The English faculty considers the following errors to be serious and to warrant special consideration in the grading of papers:
 - sentence fragment
 - comma splice and/or fused sentence
 - agreement (subject/verb and/or pronoun/antecedent)
 - incorrect verb form
2. Any paper having a combination of four or more of these serious errors will automatically receive a failing grade (F).
3. Also, any paper having six or more different misspelled words will automatically receive a failing grade (F). (Misspellings include mistakes with the use of the apostrophe.)
4. A combination of the above-mentioned serious errors and misspellings, even though not sufficient to fail a paper, will lower the grade substantially. Of course, a paper can fail also for such reasons as weak content, poor organization or confused sentence structure; not meeting assignment requirements; plagiarism.

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Application Of The Theme Standard

As I mark your papers, when I reach any of the limits above, I will stop marking your paper and give you the grade you have earned.

2) Writing In This Field

Our style and formatting guide is *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (8th edition), otherwise known as MLA 8. Buy it. Use it. Learn it. This is the lowest function of writing, the scut work which is merely emulation, not creation. It’s a middle-school activity, this ability to follow the directions for your discipline. If you can’t look at a model and mimic it, you might not have the chops needed to succeed in this major, and so might think about finding peace in another vocation. And if you think the presentation of your work doesn’t matter, and that you can throw any format you’d like at your professors, you *definitely* should find peace in another vocation, because you don’t get one of the fundamental things about why we study and write about literature.

Advanced Points

3) Assertions And Arguments

A preface, just in case you don't remember it:

Everything you write, from a tweet to an encyclopedia, is an argument. Writing, if it's not merely therapy for the writer, is about convincing your reader to think, act, or see the world in a certain way. That makes all academic writing an argument. With that as our ground, let's make some distinctions:

Assertion 1: T.S. Eliot is an alien, a being from another planet.

Argument 1: T.S. Eliot is an alien, a being from another planet. We can see this in his visage, as he looks like he comes from a place where the jowls are pulled toward the center of the mass of the planet by an extraordinarily strong gravitational force.

Assertion 2: Statesboro is a cultural wasteland.

Argument 2: Statesboro is a cultural wasteland. When we recognize the dearth of live theater, the relative absence of live music venues, the preponderance of chain (as opposed to fine dining) restaurants, the minimal town-gown engagement, and the lack of a "campus culture" such as those present in Atlanta, Athens, Ann Arbor, etc., we can see that Statesboro is truly a cultural wasteland.

Assertions are observations or statements without support.

Arguments are observations or statements with support. Further, there are distinctions between good arguments and bad arguments, which are based on the quality of the support offered and logic presented. The first argument above is a bad argument. The second is not.

English papers contain arguments, not assertions. If you can't support it, you don't get to say it.

The strength of an argument, especially in the analysis of literature, has little to do with its accuracy. The strength of an argument is gauged by its clarity, its reasonableness, and its use of evidence. Look at those three things again: CLARITY. LOGIC. SUPPORT.

4) Don't Build On Shifting Sands

If you begin a paper by suggesting that a certain text, passage, or critic, may be read in a certain manner, you cannot, later in the paper, shift that "may" to "must." In short, conditional readings cannot become foundations upon which you base arguments later in your paper. This is a subset of the "strength of an argument" assessment above; your argument will fall apart because the support you offer for it, by your own admission earlier in the paper, is merely hypothetical.

5) Treat Critics Fairly

Let's face it, not many people, and even fewer students, like literary critics. To many of you, they just seem like extra verbiage, and time spent looking at them means time not spent looking at primary texts. However, this doesn't mean that you can misrepresent them, misapply them, or take their words out of context. If Critic A writes that the "little house" in Dickinson 712 signifies a grave, this does not mean that every house in every Dickinson poem signifies a grave. Again, this is a subset of the "strength of an argument" assessment above; your argument will fall apart because you have misused your evidence, and therefore your support is suspect.

6) Teach Your Reader How To Read

When you quote, from either a primary or secondary text, merely including the quotation does not prove your point. You have to show your reader how to read that passage. With primary texts, this means that you offer an interpretation of the text you just presented. With secondary texts, this means that you show how what you just quoted applies to and furthers your argument (always making sure that you do not transgress against the Advanced Point immediately above). In short, you shouldn't allow anyone else to have the last word; the argument is yours, and you should make it so.

Personal Points

7) Phrases You Should Never Say To Your Professors

Phrases like these, or variants of these, should never cross your lips when discussing your work with your professors, or when turning in a paper:

- What you say: “This isn’t my best work, but here it is.”
- What we hear: “Yeah, this sucks, but it should be good enough for you.”

- What you say: “I know this isn’t very good.”
- What we hear: “I’ve got more important things to worry about than this class.”

- What you say: “This is pretty rough . . .”
- What we hear: “You can’t tell the difference between a draft and a polished piece of writing.”

- What you say: “I just finished this last night.”
- What we hear: “I know you’ll pass anything, as long as it has a minimum of effort.”

- What you say: “I worked very hard on this paper.”
- What we hear: “I’m not used to actually working, so treat me like I’m in kindergarten and give me a grade based solely on my effort.”

- What you say: “I’m really a creative writer, and you’re killing my creativity.”
- What we hear: “I don’t understand the creative writing process, either.”

- What you say: “The computer / printer / flash drive / wasn’t working, so . . .”
- What we hear: “Computers are some form of uncontrollable wizardry. Their magical ways and my lack of preparedness, understanding, or timeliness should force you to grant me an extension on this paper. I am unable to control the fundamental tools of this field, so I should be given special treatment.”

If you’re thinking anything like this when you turn in a paper, you obviously haven’t worked on it enough.

8) A Time For Pride, A Time For Embarrassment

Your professors are not your copy editors. Asking them to do your editing work is insulting, to both you and them. It also detracts from your work, for every minute we spend trying to figure out just what a particular word, phrase, or sentence means—and correcting those elements—is a minute we don’t spend considering your argument. That means your argument is weakened. We can’t judge the quality of your thought if we can’t get past the quality of your writing. If we’re focused on the “how” of your writing, we will never get to the “what.”

Therefore, every error you see corrected on a paper should be, for you, a source of embarrassment. If you have the same errors marked on the next paper you turn in, you should be doubly embarrassed, because you can’t plead ignorance. You should be embarrassed that you have displayed your skills so poorly, especially such fundamental skills. You should be embarrassed when you turn in what you know is a first, or even a second, draft. Because when you turn in something rife with errors, you’re saying one of two things: either you don’t know the basics of grammar, mechanics, and formatting (which is embarrassing for both you and your professors, as we have to point this out to you), or you don’t care to follow the disciplinary rules (which is insulting to your professors).

Let me be clear: We don't enjoy your embarrassment. We don't want you to be embarrassed. We don't have an ax to grind with you. We don't use papers as a punitive measure. Marking papers is the most onerous task in our careers, and we just want it to pass quickly. So when you embarrass yourself, and draw out such a tedious process, we are more and more aware of you and your shortcomings as a writer, and are less and less aware of the thought behind your writing. And we are embarrassed for you.

On the other hand, pride in your writing should come when you've convinced your reader, any reader, to read a text in the same way that you do. Your professors read and interpret texts for a living. So when you offer a clear, supported argument that leads to a richer understanding of a text, you have done something professional. You have entered into the discipline in a way that you can be proud of. This isn't an unattainable goal. This isn't an unreasonable goal, or even a set of unreasonable standards. This is within your grasp if you're willing to do the work. And in the end, the amount of work you do is directly proportional to the amount of pride you will feel in your accomplishment.

9) The Meaning of "Mean"

Many students have complained that professors are "mean" to you in our comments on your returned papers. I've thought a long time about the nature and tenor of my comments on papers, and have come a number of conclusions:

I have never met a professor who does not treat student writing with respect. That is, we think you mean what you say, in the way that you say it. Our assumption is that you're smart enough to present your work in the way you wish it to be considered. So we do you the honor of taking you at your word. Thus, when you offer us a document which is factually incorrect, sloppily formatted, or poorly reasoned, we think you meant for it to be that way. And so we try to understand why you wrote what you did. Our frustration (or, at least, my frustration) manifests itself in comments like "Do you know the difference between possessive and plural?" or "Did you actually proofread this?" We expect a certain level of understanding on your part about how sentences are formed, how grammar and punctuation works, and how arguments are constructed. And as you have seen in #1 above, our expectations are pretty low, but they do exist. When you're unable to perform to this level, many of the questions we must ask you may seem insulting, but they're not. They're coming from the disconnect we see between your displayed skills and our minimal guidelines.

If you think a set of comments, or a particular professor, is being "mean," what are your criteria for that assessment? Did you actually read all the comments? Or did you single out one comment, decry them all as unfair, and offer an assessment based on such a small sample size? Are your thoughts based on the comments, or on the grade you earned? Do you see the errors which the professor is addressing? Are they significant, either in creating your argument or in number? Did you make the same mistake over and over? Are the issues pointed out "middle school" problems (formatting, grammar, and punctuation, for starters)? Or are they more advanced (clarity, logic, audience, incorporation of sources, etc.)? Does the tone of our comments match the level of your lapses? Do you think these comments are intended too bruise your self-esteem (if so, see #8 above), or are they instructive, pointing out areas that need your attention?

Underpinning these thoughts is the reality of college today. We don't teach writing in literature classes. We teach critical reading, argumentation, and analysis. There is no time or mechanism in an undergraduate literature class to go over the mechanics of middle school. Faced with this, you can either blame your previous instructors, bemoan your fate, loathe your professors, and resign yourself to doing inferior work, or you can do something about these gaps in your knowledge. The onus for improvement is on you; we can't make your papers better unless you are committed to doing the hard work of becoming a better writer.

Postscript: Writing "For" A Professor

Despite my attempts to clarify what I see as universal points about writing within our discipline, many of you still think in terms of writing "for Professor X" or "for Professor Y," as if we would not all agree on the advice and instructions above. Your professors do not reinvent the wheel and come up with some new form of writing for each class we teach. There are more than a few points of commonality between us, and the strictures above testify to that. I don't know why this notion of particularizing your writing for each professor persists, but it has made me think of those quirky things that I either focus on or neglect in papers. So, in the spirit of full disclosure, coupled with an examination of my own writing, I offer two more restrictive preferences of mine and one less restrictive guideline I use, along with the my reasoning for preferring these:

The “Educated Reader” Trope

This implicit contrast is usually seen in your introductions, constructed as this phrase or a variation on it:

It may seem, upon a first reading, that Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is about a lonely middle-aged man, but an educated reader [variants: “an informed reading”; “a closer reading”; “one who really delves into the text”; etc.] would see [note] that the poem is actually about Prufrock’s disappointment that Ariel, the Little Mermaid, will not speak to him.

I find this bothersome for two reasons. The first is the implicit assumption you make about other readers: they are incapable of reading the poem at a level as deep as the one you’re working on. The second is the implicit praise you heap upon yourself. You’re claiming that you are the educated reader, the one who will enlighten the masses who have struggled with this text, and you, like Lazarus, have come back from the dead to tell them all, you will tell them all. You don’t need to tell your readers that you’re intelligent; the clarity and reasonableness of your arguments will allow them to form their own opinions of your abilities.

The Self-Reflexive Road Map

This usually occurs at the end of your introduction, where you lay out what you’re going to do in the remainder of your paper with something like the following:

This paper will begin with a definition of “anomie” from Durkheim. Then it will move on to apply that definition to the speaker in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Next, it will present Prufrock as the ultimate anomic character. It will conclude with a consideration of the role of sociological discourse in several of Eliot’s other early poems.

Again, I offer two reasons why this is disconcerting. First, it refers to the paper in the third person, as the thing which is doing all the work, as if you are not the agent behind the paper. This pleasant fiction, while it addresses the injunction to keep the first person out of your writing, presents your paper as an entity severed from you. It smacks of skirting your responsibility for what you have to say and how you say it. Secondly, it’s cheap. You don’t give any reason for the structure you’re setting up; you merely say what’s going to happen, but not why. Here’s how I would write that passage above:

In order to understand Prufrock as an anomic character, one must begin with Durkheim’s definition of “anomie,” and then see how it applies to the narrator of the poem. It will then become obvious that Prufrock is a touchstone for anomie, the ultimate anomic character, representative of the culture which spawned him. But Prufrock is not alone. Eliot reflects on the anomic society which surrounds him by presenting a number of these characters in his earlier poems.

My reworking of the same ideas avoids both of the problems I mentioned, and keeps the first person out of the text (because I know that some professors see the use of the first person as weakening your argument). However, it requires the presentation of some justification for why your paper reads as it does.

Passive Voice

Unlike many of my colleagues, when I read your papers, I’m not looking to stamp out any use of the passive voice. To be honest, unless it creates a convoluted sentence or some glaring issue with clarity (usually a dangling modifier), I probably won’t notice it. Below is an extended quotation from April Toadvine, Allen Brizee, and Elizabeth Angeli from the Purdue Online Writing Lab, which explains my take on the passive voice:

Passive voice makes sense when the agent performing the action is obvious, unimportant, or unknown or when a writer wishes to postpone mentioning the agent until the last part of the sentence or to avoid mentioning the agent at all. The passive voice is effective in such circumstances because it highlights the action and what is acted upon rather than the agent performing the action.

(<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/04/>)

So when the actor is less important than the act or the thing acted upon, the use of passive voice is fine with me. But I realize that many, if not most, of my colleagues object to the dangers of the passive voice, because it can be less precise and more confusing. You would be well-served, then, to avoid it.