STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN ACADEMIC WRITING

This handout was compiled by Deb Kochman, M.A. using the following sources:
MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, APA Manual, and information from The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
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√ THEESIS STATEMENT

According to the MLA Handbook, a thesis statement is “a single sentence that formulates both your topic and your point of view. In a sense, the thesis statement is your answer to the central question or problem you have raised” in your paper (42). Typically, the thesis statement is the last sentence of the introduction; however, it’s not required to be, especially if context is required before making the claim/argument.

Topic + Your Comment/Opinion/Position on that topic = Thesis Statement

* A thesis statement follows the prompt/assignment
* A thesis statement considers audience (not limited to your professor – think academic community)
* A thesis statement expresses the topic of your paper and your comment or claim about that topic. Can someone disagree with you? If not, it’s probably not a claim (revise!) Is it debatable? Surprising? Interesting? Provocative?
* A thesis statement promises your reader what you will discuss
* A thesis statement focuses your thinking, research, and writing throughout the drafting process

√ PARAGRAPH STRUCUTURE & DEVELOPMENT/PARAGRAPHING

Paragraphs need a topic sentence or a unifying idea that controls what is discussed/presented in that paragraph. Developing the paragraph means offering support for the topic sentence; specifically, presenting the evidence in the form of statistics, quotes, examples, anecdotal evidence or comments and reasons. Then, analyze the evidence for the reader; in other words, relate the claim and the support. Don’t assume the reader knows what you mean or makes the connections. Make the connections explicitly and justify; in other words, relate the parts to the whole. (Put yourself in the reader’s shoes).

√ QUOTE INTEGRATION

Each style of documentation (MLA, APA, and CMS) sets forth rules for integrating quotes and paraphrased material into the text of a paper. Students must consult the documentation manual for proper format, but generally speaking, quotes have 4 parts: the signal, the quote, analysis (usually just a sentence explaining the quote), and synthesis (how the quote works to support your point). [Eliminate “dropped quotes,” which are quotes simply dropped into the text of a paper without a signal or integration into the text.]

√ CLARITY AND CONCISON

After drafting or revising, read your paper aloud. This exercise will help you shift from reading as the writer to reading as the reader. While reading aloud, specifically look for vague pronoun references (e.g., this, our, we, it), redundant pairs and empty modifiers, and most importantly, revise sentences written in passive voice.
**PRONOUN OVERUSE & ABUSE**

Vague pronouns: Each pronoun must refer clearly to a preceding noun (antecedent). A vague pronoun reference occurs when a pronoun like *it, this, that,* and *which* refers to an implied concept or word rather than to a specific, preceding noun. Also, when using demonstrative pronouns (e.g., *this*) in academic writing, you must state the noun after the word to avoid ambiguity.

Ambiguous pronouns: Ambiguous pronouns occur when it’s not clear to which noun a pronoun refers. Example: Dipping the brush into the can of paint, Mike felt it slip out of his hand. (The pronoun *it* could refer to the brush or the can of paint).

Second person pronouns: Avoid using the second person (*we, our, you*) – simply use the noun instead.

**UNNECESSARY PHRASES, REDUNDANT PAIRS, AND EMPTY MODIFIERS**

Unnecessary Phrases: As a matter of fact/Based on the fact, I believe/I think/I hope, In my opinion, It is interesting to note that, It is essential, The fact that, It is/there are

Redundant Pairs: full and complete, each and every, brief summary, whole entire, first and foremost, (see longer list here: http://grammar.about.com/od/words/a/redundancies.htm)

Empty modifiers: Very, really, great, good,

Reduce qualifiers: actually, really, basically, probably, very, definitely, somewhat, kind of, extremely, practically

**ACTIVE VOICE**

Avoid passive voice (and “to be” constructions) in academic writing. Active voice is more direct, reduces wordiness, and improves clarity.

Passive sentences always use a form of the verb “to be.” Scan your paper for *be* verbs and revise sentences to active voice.

Also, look for sentences that begin with “It is” and “There are” to reduce wordiness and improve clarity.

Helpful online resources:


Reading papers aloud, reviewing your writing with a peer, and attending writing consultations help improve writing skills!

All writing consultations are by appointment only. Beginning in Fall 2013, make appointments via USFSM WCOnline at: https://usfsm.mywconline.com. Register using your USF email address and follow the instructions to schedule your writing consultation. If you have trouble registering, please call the Information Commons desk at 941-359-4225 or Learning Support Services at 941-359-4323.