Office of Multicultural Services Notes to Students

University of Alabama in Huntsville

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I want to offer some general don't—let-this-happen-to-you kind of advice, plus some about what to do, regarding college level writing (essay exams, compositions, research papers, whatever). The problems I have in mind cause professors and students alike to throw fits.

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Students: “I don't know what he wants.”
or,
“She just doesn't like my writing.”)

I am thinking of problems that often have so much to do with common sense that they are barely (if at all) addressed in writing handbooks, rhetorics, and composition classes. Of course, in the anxiety over performance — (English teachers: “You can't teach people to write when they won't think.”) [sounding words
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I am thinking of problems that often have so much to do with common sense that they are barely (if at all) addressed in writing handbooks, rhetorics, and composition classes. Of course, in the anxiety over performance — Somebody’s going to read this stuff. My teacher! — common sense frequently goes the way of spontaneous wit, dry arm pits, and other forms of natural grace and appeal. And I’ll be forthright about this: In most lower-level academic writing, your reader — your professor — knows more about what you’re saying than you do. You’re talking up to someone. As often as not, you’re trying to use the language in an area where, to you at least, the expression “common sense” may sound like a contradiction. Still, writing remains, from beginning to end, a form of communication; and there are certain basics about communication which you probably already know, but which are too easily forgotten in the strange land of high wisdom mongers and red pen wielders. Following are a few reminders about how language works and doesn’t work to let you tell someone what’s on your mind. The categories comprise word usage, bull, common consideration for the reader, and content.

I. Word Usage

In A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, Hank Morgan cries, “...random is a good word, and so is exegesis, for that matter, and so is holocaust, and defalcation, and usufruct and a hundred others, but land! a body ought to discriminate...” The point is that words have more or less specific meanings, a fact too often unheeded in the high sound of an attempted writerly style. Every writing handbook has its section — every professor her favorite story — about the confusion of similar sounding words (effect/affect, continual/continuous, plateau/platitude, etc.). A more common problem has to do with using a term according to vague associations with equally vague types of subjects the term is often used to discuss. For example, the word existential has been paired so often with such serious/sophisticated sounding terms as angst and malaise that too many careless writers now throw the word about as the smart boy’s general intensifier for anything meaning misery. Wrong. If there is the slightest doubt about what a term means, look it up. If you are not in the habit of using a word at least once every other week, use a dictionary before putting the word on paper.

Then be rigorously mindful of how the individual meaning of each word plays in the complete thought expressed by a sentence. Again, this is the kind of common sense that seems so obvious that we forget to use it. How else could the narrator of a recent television commercial say something like, “Since the beginning of time, humankind has beheld with awe the beauty of the diamond?” The language sounds good, has a general feel of enchantment, but the fact is that neither humankind nor the diamond has been around since the beginning of time, and beyond the lofty tone of the language lies nonsense. The pen of a good professor would bleed over such a sentence in a student’s paper. So simply ask yourself, What do words mean?

Now, suppose you have this essay to write, and you’re afraid what you have to say won’t sound smart enough — won’t sound like much of anything in fact. (Countless students have confessed as much to me.) So after three hours of smoking cigarettes (you quit two years ago) and flapping your hands around, feeling really stupid, you finally resort to (what I can only call here) the bovine school of rhetoric. The assignment is to discuss O'Connor's treatment of depravity and grace in “Revelation,” and you write three pages of sentences like “Throughout the ages, writers have struggled mightily with many important questions having to do with the
The worst move you can make in trying to win your professor’s approval is to string together a bunch of her favorite phrases about a topic, with little or no logically developed connection.
For your other classes' sake, constructing an argument is probably the most useful thing you can learn in freshman English.

characters (the narrator even tries to pretend Bartleby isn't there, but fails), in short, that considering the context of the discussion, the sense of not having much of a life might find a more appropriate expression than the phrase "does not exist." Still, the student resisted on the grounds that, in her own mind, her original words expressed perfectly her feelings about Bartleby.

It's like the warden says in Cool Hand Luke: "What we got here is a failure to communicate."

My purpose so far has been to concentrate on what can go wrong in writing. In trying to show why some approaches are bad, I hope not to have sounded too hostile. The idea is to prevent any of this from becoming a reality for you. Let me add that if you recognize all this potential trouble for what it is, it should be easy to avoid. And after all the mean talk about what not to do, let me close with a brief mention of an important positive aspect professors look for in many writing assignments.

The purpose of a great deal of college-level writing is to make a point; that is, you want to explain an idea and/or convince the reader of its truth. In the latter case, your writing is an argument. In either case, your crucial responsibility lies in substantiation. Substance here means hard facts, data, or anything relatively not subject to question. In writing an argument, for example, you must supply or refer to raw information or more basic ideas which the reader accepts in their own rights. This could be statistics in a political, economic, or sociological argument, citations in a literary argument, or any type of "givens" in a philosophical argument. Your task is thus to show how your idea (your claim, your conclusion, your thesis) is implied by this information (these grounds, these premises). For instance, if your thesis is that the trickle-down theory of economics does not work, you might point to a specific time in history in which the theory was applied and the working class failed to benefit. And be careful to anticipate any counter argument based on extenuating circumstances surrounding your example; that is, be sure your grounds really do support your claim.

For your other classes' sake, constructing an argument is probably the most useful thing you can learn in freshman English. The same basic principles apply in almost any writing with the purpose of explaining a concept. You explain (thus demonstrating, for your professor, your grasp of the idea) by applying the concept in specific examples. Say you've just defined the psychological principle of rationalization as a line of reasoning one fabricates to justify something one would have done anyway. You then substantiate this definition with a typical and therefore believable example of such reasoning. (A girl lies to her boyfriend about where she was and who she was with last night on the grounds that he'd be needlessly upset, and it's really his feelings she's concerned about.) In effect, you substantiate your definition in the same way you substantiate a claim: you back it up with the granted or familiar.

State your point in the first paragraph. Everything that follows should serve directly or indirectly to support what you've said at the outset. If the essay is long, you might also say in the first paragraph how you have divided the supporting material into subtopics. Of course, each subtopic will follow the same organization as the overall essay, perhaps containing its own little argument in the service of the big one. The classic paragraph structure (topic sentence followed by several supporting sentences) is a convention for accommodating just such organization of thought. It's the way the western mind works.

In summary, be careful and precise in your terminology, straightforward in your presentation, honest in your style, objective in your judgement, and solid in your content. You are responsible.
Nine students who graduated in the 1990 December commencement were given certificates of completion at an OMS reception held December 7, 1990. Above, Dr. Carolyn White, associate vice president for academic affairs, congratulates graduate Ardis Morton on receiving her degree as she presents her with her certificate. (Photo by Jack Alsdurf)

The UAH Library: Your Source for Finding Information
by Susan Herring
Assistant Professor of Library Science

"Knowledge is of two kinds," wrote Samuel Johnson, "We know a subject ourselves or we know where we can find information upon it." Learning how and where to find information is an important part of your college education, and that means learning how to use the library. This article is the first in a series designed to help you use the UAH Library efficiently.

The UAH Library is a vital part of the campus. It is in the library that students and faculty do much of their studying and research. The library also is your source for information on almost any topic, from English literature to materials science, ancient history to space exploration.

One of the major services the library offers is reference assistance. We have an expert staff of reference librarians available to help you with your research questions. The reference desk, located near the entrance stairway, is staffed during all the hours the library is open, and reference librarians are always ready to assist students, faculty, and other library users with suggestions, explanations, and directions for using library materials and services.

Many students are first introduced to the library though a tour during an EH 101 or EH 102 class. However, students interested in using the library more effectively can register for library classes. BIB 100, Introduction to Library Research, is an elective course which covers all facets of general library research. BIB 230, Bibliography of Business and Economics, focuses on business research and is required for all students majoring in business administration or economics. These courses are offered every quarter. Also, a half-day workshop on using the library is offered periodically through Continuing Education, usually in the fall and spring.

A certain amount of your research can be done in the library, but to take materials out of the library you must have a library card. To get a card, you must have proof of registration, preferably a validated UAH photo I.D. Books can be checked out for a period of four weeks by undergraduates, 12 weeks by graduate students, and 24 weeks by faculty members. Journals and newspapers cannot be checked out, but the library has copiers on each floor for your convenience. The copiers use vend-a-cards, which can be purchased at the circulation desk or at the University Bookstore.

In future issues of Notes to Students, you will read about other features of the library, including using the online card catalog; finding and using information in areas such as business, literary criticism, engineering, and sociology; using governments documents; using interlibrary loan to get books and articles from other libraries; and documenting your sources. We hope this information will be useful to you.

Remember, the UAH Library is YOUR library. Your ideas for making it better and more useful are welcome. Share them!

The UAH Library contains

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- current subscriptions to around 3,000 journals
- reference books such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, handbooks, atlases, and directories
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- Macintosh computers for student use
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