

Essentials of Graduate Writing

As you begin your graduate studies, you may notice some differences between writing at the graduate level and your previous academic work. These differences stem in large part from two key characteristics of graduate studies:

1. Graduate studies require more active and engaged critical thinking.
2. Graduate students are expected to contribute productively to their field of studies.

These characteristics influence graduate writing in four main areas:

- critical thinking
- research
- academic integrity
- academic style

The following discussion of these areas assumes familiarity with the basic skills of academic writing. If you would like more information on any of the underlying concepts, ask a writing advisor about resources you can use.

Critical Thinking

By the end of your undergraduate studies, you should have demonstrated in your writing the ability to think critically: to make connections between ideas and explain the significance of the information that you provide. In graduate studies, you are asked to show an even greater degree of critical thinking.

You should seek to

- Think independently—go beneath the surface and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of others' arguments;
- Provide an original perspective on previous research;
- Synthesize ideas that have not been considered together or make connections between your work and other areas of research (cross-disciplinary or otherwise).

When you write, you show critical thinking by

- Organizing your discussion into logical points;
- Establishing clear connections between ideas;
- Citing relevant works to support your argument or ideas;
- Explaining—not just describing—examples, quotes, arguments, etc.

For more information:

Booth, W.C., Colomb, G.C., and Williams, J.M. (2003). *The Craft of Research*. Ch. 6-11.
Browne, M.N. and Keeley, S.M. (2004). *Asking the right questions: A guide to critical thinking*.
Diestler, S. (2005). *Becoming a critical thinker: A user-friendly manual*.
University of Wollongong. *Uni Learning*. <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/main.html>.

Research

In graduate studies, you will likely do a great deal of research. Although research methods vary across different disciplines, in general, research is done for two main reasons:

1. To become aware of the current knowledge in your field

As a graduate student, you are expected to join in the academic dialogue in your field. You should therefore become familiar with research in the field and know the topics of current discussion. It is important to be aware of the breadth and depth of your field.

You may be asked to write about the knowledge on a topic in your field, usually in the form of a literature review. For this you should synthesize information into a coherent presentation centered on a main idea.

2. To contribute personally to the knowledge in your field

Being familiar with the research in your field will allow you to see what research has not yet been done and what new areas or perspectives can be explored. From this, you may undertake your own original research.

Original, *creative* research means that you take what is already known and either act on it (use it to drive your own research) or add to it (do more research to provide more insight into a topic).

The type of research you do will depend on your field or topic, but whether you are presenting information in a new way, applying previous research to a new problem, or proving a hypothesis, your research will build and expand on that shared knowledge base.

You will write about your research in order to share your original results or new perspective with others. While writing, it is essential that you support your ideas by showing that you understand what you are doing, how you are doing it, and how your research ties into the larger context of your field.

Because research is so important, you should take the time to develop good research habits and skills and to become familiar with the library and its many resources.

For more information:

Booth, W.C., Colomb, G.C., and Williams, J.M. (2003). *The Craft of Research*.

Lester, J.D. (1993). *Writing research papers: A complete guide*.

Lester, J.D. & Lester, J.D., Jr. (2005). *The essential guide: Research writing across the disciplines*.

University of Ottawa Libraries. *Services for Graduate Students*. <http://www.biblio.uottawa.ca>

Veit, R. & Gould, C. (2004). *Writing, reading, and research*.

Search the subject *research methodology* in the library catalogue for many sources in your field.

Academic Integrity

As a graduate student, you are expected to maintain a high level of academic integrity, which is the respect for standards in your intellectual community and for the work done by you and others, as demonstrated in the honesty and quality of your work.

Maintaining a high level of academic integrity validates your work. Also, any work you present or publish represents your professors and the institution, so the integrity of your work affects them as well.

Academic integrity in writing concerns primarily the use of **intellectual property**. Intellectual property is any material (ideas, words, images, data, inventions, etc.) that is the original creation of one person or group. There are several things to remember with regards to intellectual property and writing:

1. Give credit for intellectual property that you borrow.

Any time you use intellectual property of others or from your own previously presented research, you need to give that source credit by referencing correctly. Referencing skills are essential as they help avoid plagiarism and emphasize your original contributions.

There are several referencing skills you should master:

- Paraphrasing and summarizing correctly.
- Using a quote correctly.
- Knowing what material needs to be cited and what does not.

Different areas of research may use different referencing styles. Be familiar with which one is commonly used in your field. Also be aware that journals usually have specific referencing and formatting styles that contributors should use.

2. Be familiar with your intellectual property rights.

As a graduate student you will have opportunities to produce original work, and as creator of that original work, you have intellectual property (IP) rights to it. Most written work (and some software) is protected by copyright laws. You should mark the copyright on work such as a thesis: © your name, year.

You also have IP rights in collaborative work that you participate in. Make sure that you and your co-researcher(s) (colleagues, professors, etc.) decide on the nature of your contributions, and how credit will be given for work done, *before* you publish your work.

To learn more about your IP rights, consult the *Guide to Intellectual Property for Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Students* published by the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies.

For more information:

Academic Writing Help Centre, University of Ottawa. (2006). *Says Who?*

Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, University of Ottawa. *Research Ethics and Intellectual Property Rights*. <http://www.etudesup.uottawa.ca>.

Canadian Association for Graduate Studies. (2005). *A Guide to Intellectual Property for Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Students*. <http://www.cags.ca/Default.aspx?tabid=1775>.

Academic Style

When writing, you should use a formal, academic style. Academic writing does not have to be elaborate or complicated. A well-structured, straightforward paper is more easily understood—and your ideas better appreciated—than one filled with complicated sentences and words.

Strong academic writing must

- Be well-organized, with ideas presented in a logical order;
- Present objective analysis that is critical without being too negative or positive;
- Use clear language that is simple without being basic;
- Avoid emotional language.

Every field has its style of writing. The best way to become familiar with the style used in your field is to read and note how effective authors write.

Writing Tips

- Do not use contractions or slang.
- Use the terminology of your field, but don't let it overpower your sentences.
- Avoid using the first person ("I" or "we") or second person ("you").
- Define key terms that you use in a particular way.
- Favour active rather than passive verb structures.
- Include only ideas that are pertinent to your subject and argument.
- Limit the number of main ideas in a sentence to one per sentence, if possible.
- Give your readers clues (transition words, summaries, etc.) to let them know where they are in your argument.
- If possible, use subtitles or section headers to break up long papers or demarcate main points.

For more information:

Lester, J.D. and Lester, J.D., Jr. (2005). *The essential guide: Research writing*. Ch. 9.

Orna, E. and Stevens, G. (1995). *Managing information for research*. Ch. 8 and p. 177-184.

Strunk, W., Jr. and White, E.B. (2000). *The elements of style*. Original edition: 1959.

The *Making Sense* series by M. Northey is an excellent resource to writing about research in the different fields.