Chapter 4. Writing and Revising Academic Projects

Ponder This

What do you already know about writing and revision? How would you define these practices?

What have you learned in high school or elsewhere about writing academic essays?

Have you been taught the five-paragraph essay?

College-Level Academic Writing: Moving Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay

Just as reading is defined as the process of creating meaning (rather than hunting for it in a text), this book defines writing as an active enterprise wherein you, the writer, make inquiries into a subject. You raise questions, discover, and develop ideas rather than report ideas or knowledge you already have. This work will allow you to play a role in the academic "conversation."

You may have learned to write in the five-paragraph form wherein you choose a subject, develop a three-part thesis about it, and then devote each of the following three paragraphs to one of those ideas. Once you are expected to engage in more sophisticated thinking and writing—as you are in college—a few problems with this approach begin to emerge.

First, the one-paragraph-per-point format prohibits the writer from going into much depth about each point. Not only is there no room to develop each point, but the points keep getting repeated. In the five-paragraph format, each point gets repeated (but not developed!) several times. The points are introduced in the introduction, dealt with in a paragraph, and then repeated again in the conclusion. Instead of promoting the *development* of the idea, the five-paragraph essay format promotes the *repetition* of it. It is worth noting that nothing is inherently wrong with the five-para-

graph format, and, in fact, some standardized tests score these kinds of essays the highest. But, its strict rules—such as one paragraph per idea—prohibit more in-depth explorations of subjects. In college, you will be expected to develop more complex ideas and to elaborate on them. The five-paragraph essay format does not allow for this. Instead of letting a particular format determine what you can say about your subject, this textbook suggests that you let your subject determine how you will format your essay, including how many paragraphs you will allot to each idea.

Now that you are writing at the college level, the five-paragraph format will no longer suffice since it necessarily restricts what you can say and how you say it. In its place, this textbook encourages you to consider and reflect on which kinds of forms suit your needs as a writer and how to make decisions about form based on the context of the writing and the purpose of each writing assignment.

Ponder This

How much of what you read in your classes and for pleasure adheres to the five-paragraph format, which many instructors require students to use? See if you can locate one or more published texts that are written in the five-paragraph form. If you find an example consider why it is written in this form. If you cannot find any examples consider why not.

Moving Toward a Working Academic Argument

As you know by now, to be a strong writer you need to be a strong reader. This chapter moves into more specifics about writing, and academic writing, in particular. You have probably heard teachers talk about writing as a process. In fact, you have likely already experienced this process in some form. You may have developed an outline or taken some notes on readings before writing an essay. You may have spent some time brainstorming ideas or you may have just sat down at your computer and started writing a few body paragraphs. Everyone's writing process is different and so this textbook will not provide a formula for you to follow. Instead, it will provide steps, which are intended to be flexible, toward writing a final, polished essay.

One place to begin is to think about the three key terms in the phrase "working academic argument," the title of this chapter. Let's start with "working." The term "working" is crucial here because it reminds you that you are not committed to this argument; you are simply *working* with it for now.

In fact, you will likely need to return to it and revise it as you develop your first draft. By the final draft, you may not even recognize your working argument. For now, though, that working academic argument provides some focus.

Next is the term "academic." Think of an academic argument as one that involves joining the conversation—the academic discourse—about a subject, as is described throughout this book. Your contribution to that conversation is your argument, it's your position on the subject, and it usually comes on the first page of your piece of writing. Often it is the final sentence of the introductory paragraph, but its successful placement will, of course, depend on a range of other factors, including how much background information you need to offer in order for your argument to make sense. The most successful academic arguments are like extended syntheses (see Chapter 3 for more on writing syntheses) in which you develop your argument as you work, think, and write alongside what others have said about the subject.

British novelist E. M. Forster once said "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" In order to know what you think, you can look at what you have already said in the form of the annotations you made on your readings. Remember that your annotations serve as the bridge between your reading and writing, are a rich resource that represent your initial contribution to the academic conversation, and can ultimately help you develop a more comprehensive academic argument.

The final term, *argument* is often misunderstood because in everyday discourse it suggests a confrontation wherein there is a winner and a loser. When qualified by the term *academic*, though, argument takes on a different meaning. When you develop an *academic argument*, you are not seeking to win a debate by shooting down your opponent. In fact, academic arguments value exploration and open-endedness. How could there be a winner or loser if you are writing to explore rather than writing to prove something or resolve it?

You will want to use your argument to take a *position* in response to others who have written on the subject. You are situating yourself in terms of what others have said and exploring the subject in a particular way, from a specific perspective. But remember that it's not about proving them wrong or winning, but rather about entering the conversation that is already in progress about the subject, and creating a space for yourself and your views by indicating where you stand—your position—on the subject.

The Role of Reading in Developing and Refining a Working Academic Argument

It is important to keep in mind that reading and re-reading play important roles in your writing process. As you seek to refine your working academic argument, and as you write your essays, you

will want to return to whatever text you are writing about and re-read it, applying different reading strategies depending on the purpose of the assignment (see Chapter 2 for more on the importance of purpose). As you do so, annotate it appropriately. When all is said and done you will have multiple layers of annotations on your text. Re-read those, too. Use those annotations to help you develop and refine your working academic argument and begin writing your essay. Ask yourself the following related questions: What initial contributions do your annotations make to the "conversation?" How can you develop those now that you have more space to do so in your essay?

Elements of an Academic Essay

Once you have a working academic argument, which will bring some focus to your writing even if you end up **editing** or totally **revising** it, you need to develop the various aspects of the argument. Academic arguments largely depend on logical appeals, which include claims that are supported by evidence and reason. Still, that does not mean that there is not a place for ethos and pathos in academic writing. In order to determine the extent to which you will use these appeals in your academic writing you will need to think about the purpose for your writing and how important it is to establish your credibility (ethos) and to emotionally affect (pathos) your reader. First and foremost, though, your academic arguments will need to be supported by and developed through claims. Those claims will need to be supported by evidence and reasons.

The So What? question

In addition to exploring and supporting your academic arguments, you will need to indicate to your readers why your argument is important, why it matters. This is where the *So What?* question comes in. At first glance, this question may sound a little flip to you, and students have been taken aback when I write *So What*? in the margins of their paper, as if I am trying to demean their ideas. Asking writers *So What?,* though, pushes them to consider the **implications** of their arguments, or the implied effects or results of the argument. When writers become aware of the implications of their arguments they become aware of why their argument matters and for whom. Indicating the implications of your argument is an important step toward connecting to your readers who will likely want to know why they should care about what you have written. Consider the following revision of a working academic argument.

> This essay will argue that climate change and beach erosion are negatively affecting the beaches in Connecticut.

Revision

Many proposals outline steps to address the effects of erosion and climate change on beaches. This essay aims to uncover the aspects of these proposals that are most relevant to Connecticut beaches and considers to what extent these steps are plausible within this context. Without such considerations, Connecticut beaches are at serious risk of major damage, which will have larger ecological impacts, as well.

Notice that in the second example the student answers the following question: "*So What* that climate change and erosion are affecting Connecticut beaches?" The answer is that final sentence, which outlines why this matters: Without such considerations, Connecticut beaches are at serious risk of major damage, which will have larger ecological impacts, as well. This is an important aspect of the writer's argument because it clarifies for readers why this matters and why they should care.

Additional Examples of Revised Working Academic Arguments

Instructors should teach novels that students can relate to.

Revision

Although it seems to be a good idea for instructors to only teach novels that students can relate to, this essay addresses the false assumption on which this idea depends—namely that all students have the same interests and that all students in any given class will be able to relate to the same novels. If instructors believe that they can find novels that all students can relate to they are missing the opportunity to recognize the individuality of students and their interests.

Notice that in the second example the student answers the following question: "*So What* that instructors are making a mistake by trying to find novels that all students can relate to?" The answer is that final sentence, which outlines why this matters: If instructors believe that they can find novels that all students can relate to they are missing the opportunity to recognize the individuality of students and their interests.

Globalism is a positive force in our world.

Revision

> Although globalism is generally thought of as a positive force, when looked at closely it becomes clear that globalism may not be working for everyone. It is important to understand precisely who is benefiting most from globalism in order to find ways to address these inequities.

Notice that in the second example the student answers the following question: "*So What* that globalism may not be working for everyone?" The answer is that final sentence, which outlines why this matters: It is important to understand precisely who is benefiting most from globalism in order to find ways to address these inequities.

As all of the revised examples indicate, asking the *So What*? question as you lay out your argument lets readers know right away why your argument is important and why they should keep reading.

Anticipating and Addressing Disagreements: Inserting the Naysayer

Sometimes we can't imagine why someone would disagree with us. But the most sophisticated writers not only imagine that some readers will disagree, they also 1) anticipate those disagreements 2) address them and 3) use them to make their own arguments stronger and more nuanced. In college-level writing you'll be expected to do the same. While it's sometimes tempting to pretend that you never came across someone who challenges your argument or that such challenges or disagreements may not exist, addressing these "naysayers" in your essays will make your arguments even stronger because you have already anticipated objections and have adjusted your argument accordingly. In other words, you won't appear close-minded since you are willing to address arguments that oppose yours.

It is best to address challenges to your argument once you have taken the time to develop your argument and offer evidence for your claims. Beginning with or concluding by addressing those who might challenge your argument might confuse your reader. You can address *naysayers* in various ways.

You may address a general naysayer with a sentence such as the following:

> "Some readers may disagree that . . . ."

You may address a more specific naysayer (in this case, environmentalists) with a sentence such as the following:

> "Environmentalists would likely challenge . . . ."

You may pose questions that are intended to represent the doubts a naysayer may have about your argument:

> "Is this really possible?" the reader may wonder.

The point is that addressing naysayers should be seen as an opportunity to further develop and refine your argument so that it anticipates and addresses those who may challenge it. Pushing opposing arguments under the rug, so to speak, will make you seem short-sighted and incapable of considering and addressing other viewpoints. This, in turn, harms your credibility as a writer and thinker. Finally, keep in mind that you should not just insert the naysayer for the sake of doing so, but you should use other points of view, like the naysayer, to help you refine your own ideas and arguments.

Practice Playing the Naysayer

One of the best ways to anticipate how someone might challenge your argument is to either find people who actually disagree and incorporate their viewpoints into your writing or to pose questions that start with "But what about . . . ." Read the following arguments and respond to them by completing the question "But what about . . . " to see how a naysayer may respond to these arguments.

Obesity puts a great strain on healthcare costs because it costs so much more to conduct tests on obese patients; therefore obese patients should not be entitled to the same insurance coverage as other patients.

**Play the naysayer: "But what about . . . ."*

Olympic athletes should be held to especially high standards of conduct because they represent their country and are role models for young children.

*Play the naysayer: "But what about . . . ."

Multimodal Composing

Up until this point, this chapter has largely assumed that you will be composing your essays in

the more traditional way by using alphabetic text or words. But, there are other forms of composition in which your instructor may expect you to engage. The word "multimodal" means more than one mode. As such, multimodal composing invites you to use various forms—beyond typographic essays—to develop and communicate your ideas. Print-based multimodal texts include comics, graphic novels, posters, and brochures. Digital multimodal texts include webpages, blogs, films, videos, animation, and social media. As you can tell by these lists of some familiar kinds of multimodal texts, you engage multimodality on a daily basis. As a student, you may be encouraged to use all of these modes. Multimodal composing allows *you* to create these texts rather than just consume them. As you do so, you will need to consider all of the elements you consider as you compose a more traditional typographic essay, but multimodal projects also give you the freedom to bring in other modes to help you develop and communicate your arguments. Additionally, multimodal projects give you opportunities to explore different rhetorical considerations than those you consider when composing strictly printed texts. For example, although the rhetorical appeals described in this book remain relevant, issues of design are often more important when composing multimodal projects than when writing a traditional print-based essay.

Because the expectations of multimodal projects vary so much, this section will not attempt to teach you how to complete every multimodal project you may be assigned. It is impossible to anticipate such a thing. Instead, the remainder of this chapter will address those considerations worth keeping in mind as you complete the multimodal assignments included in Part Two of this textbook, which are representative of different kinds of multimodal projects you may encounter in your classes.

Considerations for Multimodal Composing

Choose mode(s). If it is up to you to choose which modes you will use to compose, choose modes that lend themselves to the goals of the assignment, as well as to your specific goals for your project. You will also need to be able to justify your choice in an accompanying reflective piece, which many multimodal assignments require. For example, if you are asked to develop a project about a specific geographic location intended for potential tourists, don't just rush to compose a podcast wherein you lecture about the place. A photographic essay, brochure, or webpage could make a more persuasive argument as to why people should visit this location. Seeing pictures of the beaches of Bermuda, pictures of the local seafood, or exploring links to local boat tours, for example, may be more compelling for a potential tourist than simply hearing about these in a podcast.

Develop a plan. Once you know which modes you will use, develop a plan for producing your project. You might brainstorm ideas, develop an outline, or construct a working argument. You

need to imagine how you are going to execute your project including what you want to communicate, as well as how you are going to do so. For example, make sure you have access to and feel comfortable with whatever technology you would like to use. You may not totally stick to your plan, but you should have one in place to get you heading in the direction of the goals of the assignment.

Consider the rhetorical elements of your project. If you are trying to make a particular kind of rhetorical appeal (see Chapter 2 for more on rhetorical appeals) consider whether this appeal will be effective for the intended audience for your piece. Think about whether the design and the arrangement of the elements of your project underscore and support your central idea or argument. Be sure that the purpose of your project is clear.

Compose ethically. Just as you must abide by the rules of academic integrity when you write a traditional essay, you need to do the same when developing multimodal projects. Many images, videos, and other elements you may want to include in your projects are under copyright law and you can't simply use them. That said, if you look a little harder, you will be able to find items that are under what is called creative commons licensing, which means that you can reproduce these as long as you are not doing so for commercial purposes (i.e. to make money). Just as you are expected to avoid plagiarizing when composing in the traditional sense, you will want to avoid infringing on copyright laws when you engage in multimodal composition.

Reflect Regularly. Many multimodal projects are accompanied by a reflection in which you have the opportunity to describe your process for composing the project and the rationale for the choices you made while doing so. This is important work to complete once you have finished your project because you become more aware of what you have learned while composing, how well you accomplished your personal goals for the project, and how well you have met the goals of the assignment. It is also helpful to reflect along the way, though. Waiting until you are totally finished your project in order to reflect on it means that if you have not met your personal goals or those of the assignment you won't know until it's too late. That's why it is important to check-in with yourself, so to speak, during the composing process to make sure that you are meeting these goals and that the decisions you are making are having a positive effect on your vision for your project.

Mindfully Reading to Revise Your Writing and Multimodal Projects

Once you have completed your project (or think you have!)—you may be asked to revise it. Revising is different from editing. Think of revising as re-vising or re-seeing, which is much more involved than simply editing for grammar, word choice, or spelling. Those things are important, but revising is an altogether different process that involves re-viewing the larger, conceptual issues that

affect your project such as its argument, focus, design, and organization.

You may be asked to revise something on your own or you may have the benefit of readers, including your peers, a tutor in the writing center on your campus, or your professor. Revising on your own without feedback is perhaps more difficult because you need to be able to separate yourself from the piece so you can see where it needs work. That's why it is important to wait as long as you can before returning to your project in order to revise it. That time will give you a fresh way of seeing the piece and will help you more objectively determine the aspects that need additional work.

When you return to your project, use some of the reading strategies you have been applying to published texts to help you re-see your project (see Chapter 2 for the reading strategies). Two strategies that will help you think more deeply about the strength of your argument, the piece's organization, and its focus are the Says/Does Approach and the Mapping Strategy. These strategies, in particular, make visible the connections among the various parts of a project. In addition to relying on the reading strategies and your annotations, you can ask yourself the following questions:

1. How strong is the argument I'm advancing in my project? Is it supported by claims and are those claims supported by reasons and evidence?
2. How well is my project organized? Do paragraphs and/or other elements, for example, transition smoothly and logically?
3. How focused is my project? Do I digress into irrelevant points and ideas? Are my ideas and arguments developed throughout rather than just repeated?

Two Ways to Test the Strength of your Argument

1. Check it for binary thinking
2. Review the relationship between your evidence/reasons and claims

Potential Pitfall: Binary Thinking

It is easy to fall into the trap of binary thinking. We all do it now and then, but it does not have a place in complex, academic thought and writing. Binary thinking is a type of thinking wherein you believe that there are only two sides to every issue. For example, someone who participates in binary thinking would think that either you are for or against video games; for or against animal rights; for or against stem-cell research. The problem with this type of thinking is that it oversimplifies complicated issues. In other words, you might not be for *violent* video games but you might support the use of

video games in classrooms to encourage certain types of learning. You might not believe that people should wear fur or test cosmetics on animals, but you might believe that testing *medication* on animals is okay. Or maybe you believe that testing medication on *certain* animals is okay. Or that testing *certain medications* on *certain animals* is okay. See how potentially complex issues can be? This point, however, often raises the question: Is finding the middle ground an appropriate intellectual response? The short answer is no. While it may be tempting to take on a position such as "playing video games in moderation is okay" or "using technology in moderation is okay" consider how vague those responses are. We could say anything in moderation is ok—everything from alcohol use to humor or everything from video games to animal testing. Your intellectual contribution—whether in writing or in the form of a multimodal project—should be more specific by drawing on what you have read in order to help you develop your own ideas through writing. Compare the following arguments.

> Testing on animals is wrong.
>
> The practice of testing certain medications on dogs, like those medications that speed up dogs' heart rates and put them in danger of dying, needs to be reexamined and ultimately rethought in order to protect against unnecessary deaths in animals who cannot protect themselves.

You probably noticed that *argument #1* is vague and general. It leaves so much unexplained like which kind of testing? Which kind of animals? "Wrong" according to whose morals? *Argument #2* collapses the binary implied by *argument #1,* namely that testing on animals is either right or wrong by being far more specific and answering the questions the first version doesn't. Moreover, rather than offering a judgment (sometimes the result of binary thinking), the second version takes a more inquiry-driven approach by calling for a reexamination and rethinking of the testing of certain medications on certain animals.

Practice Avoiding Binary Thinking by Revising the Following Arguments So They Are More Complex and Nuanced.

1. Reading books is better than watching television.
2. The literature of today is not original; it just recycles Shakespeare's own writing.
3. You are either anti-capital punishment or you are for criminals.

Potential Pitfall: Your Evidence Doesn't Support Your Claims

It may sound a bit silly that your evidence wouldn't support your claims, but this gap occurs both in students' writing and published writing more than you might think. The first step to ensuring that your evidence supports your claims is to separate them from each other as is done with the examples that follow:

Author John Gafe notes, "Technology is creating an environment in which people are so distracted from what is going on around them that they don't even realize they have become consumed by these technological advances, and they remain unaware of how they are changing as human beings." This quote proves that because of technology everyone just goes ahead with their lives without an awareness of what is happening around them.

> Claim: This quote proves that because of technology everyone just goes ahead with their lives without an awareness of what is happening around them.
>
> Evidence: Author John Gafe notes, "Technology is creating an environment in which people are so distracted from what is going on around them that they don't even realize they have become consumed by these advances and they remain unaware of how they are changing as human beings."

In this case, the claim is that the quote from author John Gafe *proves* that people are oblivious to what is happening around them. One quote from one source cannot prove anything. As such, the evidence does not support the claim because the claim goes too far based on the evidence. It overstates the case. Revising the claim so that it doesn't describe the quote as proving anything will be important for this student.

Practice Separating Claims from Evidence and Revising Accordingly:

Technology has overtaken our minds. We are surrounded by new computers, phones, and all kinds of fancy gadgets.

1. Which sentence is the claim?
2. Which sentence is the evidence?
3. How might you revise the claim so that it is better reflects the evidence provided?

Revising Based on Feedback

You may have the opportunity to receive feedback from your peers, your instructor, or even a writing center tutor prior to revising. Consider yourself lucky! Their feedback will give you insight into how others respond to your writing and multimodal projects. These people will (perhaps more objectively than you are able to) let you know what needs work. They may address aspects of your argument that need to be explained, developed, or even re-thought. They may suggest that you use different images or technologies, an alternate design, or organize the piece differently.

You may even receive more than one set of responses to each project, which can be confusing. Whose advice do you follow? Your peer's or your instructor's? Your instructor's or the peer tutor's? While your instructor's comments may ultimately take precedence, it is up to you to weigh those responses and determine which you will address and which you will ignore. Remember that you ultimately make the decisions. Generally speaking, when more than one person has made the same comment it is probably worth addressing. Some comments are simply idiosyncratic, though, and may not offer productive routes. As you go through each comment, think about what is at stake—both the potential positive and negative consequences of revising according to the feedback you received. The following questions can help guide you through the feedback you receive. If you make the suggested changes:

- Might you sacrifice the focus of the project?
- Might you confuse other readers/viewers?
- Might you create a more complex argument?
- Might you open up a productive space for analysis in addition to summary?

Ask yourself these and other questions as you consider making the revisions suggested by those who have engaged with your project.