

# Forms of Academic Writing

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## From Appetizer to Entrée: Expand Your Writing Appetite

During their first year of college, many students discover that writing expectations at the university level differ vastly from those at the high school level. Writing a research paper and responding to literary works in written form, via questions, short answer or essays, typically define the high school writing experience. Having practiced these two forms of writing in high school English classes causes many students to develop a cookie cutter approach to writing that does not suit the college classroom. Consequently, many new students approach writing assignments in the same fashion, which does not reliably produce work that meets the requirements of academic writing.

If students view the five paragraph essay model and research paper given in high school as appetizers rather than the main entrees on the menu of higher education writing, they open themselves to crafting an exciting array of written works during their college tenure. While students have ample time to sample numerous items on the college writing assignment menu, producing solid academic writing also results from understanding three writing forms that permeate academic assignments.

Before delving into these three forms of writing, a review of fundamental communication concepts will supply the proper context for understanding the range and depth of academic writing. Writing should be recognized as one form of communication that occurs naturally and frequently in a literate society. For instance, most people engage in assorted modes of communication each day, from texting a friend to reading a sign to talking on the phone. Most people unconsciously adjust aspects of their speech, like inflection and tone, to fit a particular communication situation. While written and oral communication demand a different set of skills, adopting a fluid approach when engaged in both forms the written work or speech appropriately reflects its communication context. In fact, effective writing and speaking share a common foundation: a consideration of purpose and audience.

Most composition and public speaking textbooks explain that every form of communication has one of three objectives: to inform, to persuade or to entertain. While informative or entertaining elements may surface in a persuasive piece, the primary objective of persuasion is distinct from the primary objective of informing or entertaining. Once writers and speakers identify a central reason for communicating, they can determine which strategies allow them to accomplish their objective.

Secondly, writers and speakers must pinpoint the audience who will benefit from their communication. For example, the type of writing information provided to a group of first year graduate students with four years of college writing experience differs from the information given to a group of undergraduate students who lack even one year of college level writing experience.

Understanding the fluid nature of writing allows for an examination of three writing modes (writing as invention, writing as discovery and writing as knowledge-making) that actively exist when composing academic assignments. A section of this textbook ([“Section 2: Crafting Arguments”](#)) provides specific strategies for conducting these three types of academic writing (i.e., how to write to invent, how to write to discover and how to write to make knowledge); however, the following section highlights each form.

## Writing to Create, Uncover and Produce

When you write to invent, you write with the goal of creating or producing. You write to document original angles, perspectives, thoughts or information you have about a topic; writing to invent can take place in an informal or formal manner. Imagine writing a research paper on the controversial issue of abortion. Your paper would not be effective by simply restating arguments about women's rights or the point at which a human being forms in the womb; instead, your goal would be to note new considerations, questions or answers to the topic. For example, a recent legal battle could spark an innovative idea or approach that becomes the central or marginal content for your paper.

In many instances, writing to discover and writing to invent converge with one another. Typically, when you write to invent, you have composed unique ideas, notions and information prior to conducting research. Several years ago, the decades-long debate on abortion revived because of a woman's right to request a "late-term" abortion. Medically, late-term abortions were not a novelty because doctors performed them to preserve the health and life of at-risk pregnant woman. However, the procedure became a viable option for women wanting to terminate a pregnancy, which resurrected the topic. While some responded quickly with interesting perspectives, others withheld their written reactions until gathering additional information.

By definition, when you write to discover, you open yourself to ideas and insights about a topic that have yet to be considered by writers or scholars, and even yourself at times. Therefore, writing to discover often results from exploring, unearthing and exposing all aspects of a topic, especially opposing viewpoints. When you write to discover, the result may be invention, more discovery or the production of new knowledge.

When you write to generate knowledge, you write from a confident position to relay information that you have acquired. Returning to the late-term abortion paper, once you have conducted adequate research, stated your original ideas and included other perspectives in a manner that supports what you have discovered and invented about "late term" abortions, you have written to produce knowledge about abortion, whether in the form of a solution, call to action, theory or stance.

## A Writing Challenge

Now, you have the opportunity to read how writing to invent, writing to discover and writing to make knowledge work together to complete an academic writing assignment. The paragraphs below detail a writing assignment that requires students to address aspects of one of the most controversial films in history, *The Passion of the Christ*. Writing about a subject for which you possesses strong beliefs, such as religion, can be challenging; however, college requires you to exercise critical thinking skills, which involves a willingness to challenge, prove or dismiss information based upon your personal values. Within the academic world, opinions, beliefs and values only become valid written arguments once they are supported sufficiently.

The film *The Passion of the Christ* chronicles the last 12 hours of the life of Jesus Christ; though a commercial success, people of varying religious beliefs as well as scholars and film reviewers criticized it heavily. Therefore, strong written reactions from both supporters and opponents of the film exist.

Some students recall being banned from watching the film, encouraged to watch it or too young to view it upon its 2004 release; they share what they have heard and know about the film with classmates who

have never watched or heard of the film. Initial reactions to the assignment range from apathy to excitement to intrigue to disbelief regarding what could possibly be controversial about a film about Jesus Christ.

Regardless of their knowledge level of the film, students recognize the contrasting thoughts, perspectives and beliefs about the film. Noting their thoughts, they begin to initiate the writing as invention and writing as discovery processes. Then, students move from an awareness of the general praises and criticisms of the film to an intimate knowledge of the staunch opposition as well as mass support of the film. With nearly 10 years of dialogue, articles, interviews, blogs and reactions to investigate, students quickly realize they know very little about the rich and dynamic conversation about the controversial film, thus continuing the process of writing to discover and writing to invent.

The details of the conversation emerge as students scour newspaper articles and movie critiques, from both the pre- and post-film release period. Students dissect perspectives, opinions and commentary from Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, American, Muslim and International communities as well as blogs, organizational websites, editorials and journal articles by religious leaders, historians, devout Jews, faithful Christians, experienced movie critics, church leaders, teenagers, bible scholars and the general movie-going public. The students locate interviews and a website devoted to the film where the director, Mel Gibson, repeatedly defends and explains his artistic and cinematic choices.

With a fuller understanding of the controversies surrounding *The Passion of the Christ*, students unearth other issues, like agreements between Christian and Jewish leaders over the representation of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, and the role they played in the crucifixion of Jesus. Other tangential subjects located include real-life violence depictions that contemporary movie-goers expect, the role of technology in visual presentations and the “passion play” genre of theatre and film.

Once they complete their research, students focus on aspects of the controversies that appeal to them, confuse them, engage them, cause them to reflect, etc. Armed with knowledge, support and personal engagement, students watch the film to assess their sources, form their own conclusions and contribute to the body of written knowledge about controversies surrounding *The Passion of the Christ*. As you can see from this detailed description, the three forms of writing repeatedly occur while completing this academic paper.

The journey of writing at the college level encompasses a range of activities, from thinking to fact gathering to researching. However, embracing your responsibility to utilize writing in order to invent, to discover and to make knowledge will equip you to explore all that the college writing menu has to offer.