

Some basics on writing and organizing

MUCH 611: Intro to Graduate Studies

JULY 27, 2020

To-dos for Today/Tomorrow

- 1. Listen to this video**
- 2. Make sure to finish and submit your scavenger hunt and citation assignments (due tonight, 11:59pm)**
- 3. Make sure to complete your assigned readings for tomorrow**

The Abstract

Please see attached document on Moodle

It is a short piece of writing that describes research/a paper/a project or podcast script that you are GOING to write. This is in contrast to the abstract of the research/dissertation/article that you have already written.

- **Short:** usually 250-350 words. One place where word counts are usually set in stone: you will usually be rejected from a conference submission for an abstract that is too long.
- **Highly formulaic:** usually about six elements
 1. **Big picture problem or topic that is debated in your field.**
 2. **** A gap in the published scholarship on this topic, or at least something that needs further attention.**
 3. **How your project or analysis fills or begins to address the gap.**
 4. **The specific material that you examine in your paper—this might include the subject matter you'll examine and what kinds of sources you use to investigate it.**
 5. **Your argument (hopefully original)**
 6. **A strong concluding sentence**

Outlines

Please see attached example by Bellman on Moodle

- An outline can be useful, but also a nuisance (grumbles we remember about having to do this in the past, or writing the outline after the paper, etc). Some projects the outlines are more useful and detailed than others.
- **At this stage for the outline:** Know where you are going, what comes next, what material belongs where. Difficult decisions about what should be included, what should be left out, and how the material should be ordered.
- **Topic-based outline:** nouns or noun-phrases, not statements. (Introduction: computers in the classroom, II. Uses of computers in Labs and Classroom Instruction, III. Revision Studies A and B, IV. Conclusion)
- **Point-based or sentence-based outline:** Once you start drafting you need to see a series of points (your main reasons), not a series of topic. (I. Introduction—Value of classroom computers uncertain. II. Different uses have different effects, A. All uses increase flexibility and B. Networked Computer labs allow student interaction and C. Classroom instruction does not enhance learning etc.

Adapted from Booth et al, *The Craft of Research*, 187-188 and Wingell, *Writing About Music: An Introductory Guide*, 47.

Introductions

A working idea for an introduction: expect to revise and even discard it, but it helps to have this sketchily dealt with early on anyway....

- **The three elements of an introduction:** (this isn't true for all introductions, but is quite common)
- ***A contextualizing background:*** this establishes common ground, a shared understanding between reader and writer. Some stable context of a common ground, some apparently unproblematic account of research, a statement of the community's consensus on a familiar topic. The writer then disrupts it with a problem.
- ***A statement of the problem:*** This really has two parts. Some *condition* of incomplete knowledge or understanding and then the *consequences* of not fully knowing or understanding.
- ***A response to the problem:*** Once you've disrupted your readers' stable context with a problem, they will expect you to resolve it, either by explicitly stating the gist of your solution or by implicitly promising them that you will do so later on. You can either state the gist of your solution right away, or you can promise a solution in the conclusion.

How to start off an introduction?

- These are kind of clichés: the dictionary entry, starting grandly (For centuries, philosophers have wrestled...), don't just repeat the language of an assignment
- Better: Open with a striking quotation, Open with a Striking Fact, Open with a Relevant Anecdote

Body

- **Main arguments:** list first main arguments to support your thesis and then subtopics to be included under each of the main points. Probably going all the way to paragraph by paragraph level is helpful at this stage.
- **Order is essential here:** what comes first? Which deserves the final strong position?
- **Methodology:** maybe note to yourself in your outline when you will quote from secondary sources, which sections include a specific example, which points depend on analysis, etc.

Adapted from Wingell, *Writing About Music: An Introductory Guide*, 49.

Hints on Beginning

- ***Ask yourself questions:*** What is my main point? How do I set it up, or lay out the data or arguments leading to it? Why, in short, am I writing this? (because it was assigned won't help much here...)
- ***If the opening is proving to be a major hurdle, don't begin with the opening sentence or paragraph.*** It is typical for the first five versions of the opening paragraph to be discarded. Why allow a difficulty with the opening to prevent you from making any progress whatsoever? Start with the second paragraph, or the second sentence, or anything you feel confident writing about right now. Perhaps this is background, or analysis, or even conclusions; regardless, begin writing at any point in the outline. The holes can be filled in later.
- ***In the initial stages, do not be too self-critical.*** It is best for the author to complete a draft, one that covers the basic content from first to last, and then to start the revising process. Being compulsive about revising and correcting an opening paragraph or section as soon as it is written is less advisable.

Adapted from Bellman, *A Short Guide to Writing about Music*, 78-79.

Style—What is it?

- You **CAN** use “I” in most instances.
- **Passive voice:** renders the object of an action, or the effect of a verb, into the subject of a sentence. (We made mistakes versus mistakes were made). Passive voice causes an eerie, unpopulated world where things happen without cause and responsibility for actions belongs elsewhere.
- **Fashioning clear sentences:** ‘Less is more,’ a familiar saying, holds true in the formulation of sentences. While complex syntax can be a positive style trait, academic authors (student and professional alike) too often get lost in tangents and elaborations.
- **Taste:** Elegance is also a matter of taste, and it is the responsibility of every author to exercise restraint in the choice of language and metaphor, and wisdom in the consideration of what readers will appreciate, or *not* appreciate, seeing in print.
- **Transitions:** Words and phrases that lead from one idea to another, relating the new idea to the idea preceding it in a particular way, guiding the reader through the author’s line of thought. Examples include amplification (might use furthermore, moreover, in addition); contrast or qualification (but, however, on, the other hand); illustration (for example, for instance, as an example).

Style—What is it?

- **Parallel constructions:** When you want to emphasize the relationship between parallel elements or ideas, or the contrast between them, keep the sentence structure parallel. (“Typical examples of the symphonic poem are *Les Préludes* by Liszt and *Ein Heldenleben* by Strauss, and *Ma Vlast* by Smetana). When using parallel constructions, all elements must match grammatically—if the first element consists of a verb and its object, all the later elements must be the same. (Incorrect: His favorite pastimes are listening to music, chess, and to go on hikes. Correct: His favorite pastimes are listening to music, playing chess, and hiking.)
- **Effective paragraphs:** A paragraph focuses on a single thought; the chief quality it must have is coherence. The paragraph must have a topic sentence that clearly states the single idea the paragraph will develop, and the rest of the paragraph must be closely related to that single idea. When editing your prose, check the paragraphs for unity. If a paragraph begins by discussing one idea and then moves into an extended discussion of a second idea, make that discussion of the second idea a new paragraph with its own topic sentence. **This is one of the biggest problems in most people’s writing.****

Adapted from Wingell, *Writing About Music: An Introductory Guide*, 130-133.

Style—What is it?

■ Variety:

#1: Music of Native Americans is of increasing interest today. Serious study of Native American musics is a relatively recent phenomenon. Some nineteenth-century composers sought to incorporate indigenous elements in their compositions. The twentieth century saw a fully developed school of “Indianist” composition. The resulting works were *about* Native Americans rather than being in any way musically authentic. Most American listeners remained largely ignorant of true Native American music. Current research seeks to fill this gap in American musical understanding.

#2: Music of Native Americans is of increasing interest today. Serious study of actual Native American musics is, however, a relatively recent phenomenon. While some nineteenth-century composers sought, tentatively, to incorporate indigenous elements in their compositions, it wasn’t until the twentieth century that a fully developed school of “Indianist” composition evolved. The resulting works were *about* Native Americans rather than being in any way musically authentic, and as a result most American listeners remained largely ignorant of true Native American music. One of the central goals of current research, then, is filling this gap in American musical understanding.

- The passage is greatly improved simply by combining some sentences and adding transitions to others.

Style—What is it?

- **Punctuation:** Governs rhythm and flow. Ideas are separated from each other by periods, commas, semicolons, colons and dashes for clarification, much as we clarify our meaning when we speak with pauses of different lengths for breathing and dramatic effect. Read your writing aloud! it helps....
- **Colon:** temporarily stops a sentence and announces that a quotation, a list of items, an explanation or an example will follow. (also numerical ratios and times of day)
- **Semicolon:** fairly length pause that separates independent clauses (clauses that can stand as complete sentences). Semicolons also separate elements in a list.
- **Comma:** Briefest pause (just a breath). Pair of commas often used to enclose a parenthetical or explanatory clause.
- **Em Dash:** provides an interruptive pause and often used for authorial asides.

Adapted from Bellman, *A Short Guide to Writing about Music*, 146-148.

Style—Common whoopsies

- **Incomplete sentences:** check for the subject and the predicate
- **Run-on sentences**
- **Agreement of subject and verb:** need to agree in number (this can sometimes get messy with plural or collective nouns....)
- **Relative pronouns problems:** The thorny who/which/that/what problems. (Who is usually a person, which and that are usually things or groups of people as collective units, which is usually used to give more information about the first clause).
- **Misplaced modifiers:** (Think about the adverb “only” and the difference in: Only I attended rehearsal yesterday *versus* I only attended rehearsal yesterday *versus* I attended the rehearsal only yesterday).
- **Dangling participles:** Pacing nervously in the wings, the orchestra began the overture.....
- **Split infinitives:** “to as vividly as possible describe” versus “to describe as vividly as possible” (this rule is in flux....)
- **Mixed metaphors:** Be sure any metaphorical comparison is helpful rather than distracting, stay with the single comparison, be sure it does not get out of control :)

Adapted from Wingell, *Writing About Music: An Introductory Guide*, 136-147.