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CONVENTIONS OF THE ACADEMIC PAPER

The following originated in Writing & Thinking 2, spring 1996. A student in my class wrote a very idiosyncratic (and intelligent) piece about the book we were reading, creatively framed as a letter from one character to another. Having finished that piece, she wrote me a note which said "I would like to know how to make this into a 'real' paper." I therefore created this handout:

* The paper will be expected to have an introduction that establishes what the subject is, what your issue or question is, why this issue or question is in some way interesting (challenging, puzzling, in need of resolution).

* The intro may be expected to establish what method or procedure your paper will follow in trying to resolve the issue (for example, a statistical analysis of a social situation). On the other hand, this may be unnecessary or taken for granted in many cases, because you're writing in the context of a course and an assignment.

* The intro may be expected to hint at or even summarize the points you intend to make -- though I DO NOT recommend summary of the conclusion in advance (because it tends to lessen the reader's involvement) unless: a) the paper is going to be so long and complicated that the reader might lose sight of the unifying thread part of the way through, or b) the points you intend to make are so remarkable and surprising that the reader will immediately want to read on in order to find out how you can possibly arrive at such a conclusion.

* In writing the paper you will be expected to present yourself as you, not a fictitious character, a historical figure, or an anonymous reader. The unstated rhetoric of the typical paper is that you step up on the podium and speak up for yourself. No created persona is involved. You claim your ownership of certain ideas and state them without masks.

* You will be expected to argue for the validity of your assertions by methodically quoting from or otherwise making careful and overt use of the materials you're working on, and by making explicit connections between the given materials and the inferences or insights you draw from those materials. You need to nail down a series of steps that the reader can climb, following your thought step by step from the evidence to your conclusions. The reader will be asking (not necessarily in a hostile way) "How do I know this is true?" Even if you are asserting something that you know the professor already believes, you will be expected to show how you support that assertion.

* The paper will be expected to have an idea as its center. In most cases, the expected paper will appear to come exclusively from the intellectual center, rather than the emotional.

(I can't resist using the word "appear" because I am convinced that intellectual work always rests on an emotional commitment to something -- even if that something is as lowly as fear of a bad grade).

IMPORTANT QUALIFICATION: It depends a lot on what field you're writing about. In English or Art History (for example), your emotional response to a book or a painting can be a valid factor in criticizing it.

* Though the paper will generally be about things that are verifiable by the reader, one exception comes to mind: in some contexts it is considered acceptable to use hypothetical situations (thought-experiments) in order to advance an argument.

* The paper will be about an idea that applies to people in general. It may or may not be arguing that this idea is progressive, redeeming, morally admirable. (For example, a paper could carefully analyze the racial ideas of the Ku Klux Klan without supporting those ideas.)

* You will be expected to cite the sources of quotations, or of other people's ideas, in a form appropriate to the field you're writing about.

* The paper will be expected to arrive more or less free of errors in word usage, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling. Some people will be much more demanding in this area than others. Some professors will probably invoke various "rules" of punctuation or word usage as if they were decreed in Heaven, while others will not necessarily see them as rules at all.

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BUT REMEMBER

Real professors might depart from these expectations in some contexts.

I didn't mention style in the above guidelines, because there is not one monolithic ideal of "good writing" that applies across all disciplines. Every professor tends to believe that his or her own version of "good writing" is Universal Truth, but it isn't so, as students always realize even if professors may not. Nothing can remove the necessity of figuring out what "good writing" is in the context of a particular course or a particular field of study. In the English Department, the use of metaphor, suggestion, and multiple meanings is good; in the Physics Department, that kind of writing is a mistake. "GOOD WRITING" IS DISCIPLINE-BASED.

I believe a paper can meet all of the above expectations and be personally meaningful to both writer and reader, written with voice and grace, satisfying in a soulful way. I also believe that one should aim that high. Write something that matters whenever possible.