

MINDFIRE PRESS ARTICLE

Scholarly Writing

by

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Doctoral Series

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To write at the doctoral level, you must meet high standards of communication. Both the content of your writing (i.e., your ideas *per se*) and the formatting of your document (i.e., how you present your ideas) are equally important in doctoral writing. The areas that you must pay special attention to when you write are:

- Content
- Organization
- Grammar
- Style

Let us examine each in turn.

Content

Note that the focus in this chapter is on the general characteristics of doctoral writing. In later sections, we will examine the specific content requirements of some important deliverables in your doctoral program, such as major papers and the dissertation.

Reflect Higher-Order Thinking

First and foremost, your doctoral writing must reflect the higher-order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Book report style, descriptive writing that demonstrates lower-order thinking skills, such as knowledge, comprehension, and application, is not acceptable.

In short, your writing must demonstrate your ability to read and analyze the ideas of other scholars, evaluate them, synthesize or integrate them into a meaningful whole, if necessary, and use them in support of your own arguments. “He said, she said” content, which constitutes the bulk of undergraduate and masters level writing will not suffice at the doctoral level.

Get on the BOAT

Second, your writing must be balanced, objective, accurate, and tentative. By balanced I mean that you must present both sides of an argument, not just your point of view. Many new doctoral students have very strong opinions about things

that matter to them, and, as a result, want to use their doctoral writing to “prove” that those ideas are right. While this is not a bad thing, it is also not a scientific or scholarly perspective.

Scholars know that such one-sided presentations are inherently biased. At the doctoral level, you must strive to present evidence for both sides of any position, and to demonstrate, by means of the work of other scholars and your own arguments, why your position is the stronger one.

Note the tentative nature of this last statement. This is intentional. In doctoral writing, you must reflect your basic understanding of the nature of scientific enquiry, that truth is subjective and, therefore, tentative. Early in our education, we learn about the nature of proof by experimentation, which is the hallmark of scientific investigation in the natural sciences. An object falls to earth when dropped, thus proving the existence of gravity. A chemical added to a liquid causes it to solidify, thus proving the validity of a chemical formula. It all sounds so objective and final.

As a doctoral student, you learn that proof is a much more tentative thing. For example, some people believe that the best leaders are take charge types who give orders and expect people to follow them. Others believe that the best leaders are charismatic ones who appeal to their followers’ emotions and higher level needs and who give them wide latitude in figuring out how to get the job done.

Who is right? The correct answer is that it depends on the circumstances. If I were in a fire fight, I would want my lieutenant to take charge. But back in the office, I would prefer a manager with a more democratic style.

In short, one of the things that distinguish the writing of a student from a scholar is that a student knows he or she is right while a scholar knows he or she might be wrong.

Doctoral writers use evidence from the literature, not rhetoric, to support their contentions. Shouting louder, debating better, or otherwise hammering home the courage of your convictions is unacceptable in doctoral communication. Objective evidence, as opposed to subjective opinion, is the coin of the realm in doctoral work. Do you have real, preferably hard, data from scientifically conducted research that backs up your arguments? If not, then don’t expect scholars to pay too much attention to what you have to say.

Accuracy and objectivity are closely related. In that regard, it is your responsibility to present the ideas of others from the literature as faithfully as you can, based on your own critical reading of their work. You must not distort their findings to make your point, even if you don’t agree with those findings. Instead, you must present

rational arguments for why an intelligent reader, in the situation you are dealing with, would find the arguments of those who stand with you more compelling than the arguments of those who stand against you.

Organization

Doctoral students get so involved in their research and writing and learn so much about the areas they study, that they often make the mistake of providing a great deal of information in a very condensed form without making the overall structure of their documents clear to an intelligent, but uninformed reader, and without providing clear transitions between parts of their work. This is not a good idea.

Instead, think of your readers as visitors to a National Park where you, the writer, work as a park ranger. The visitors, eager to explore the wonders of the park, do not expect you to accompany them on their journey, but they do expect you to provide them with a clearly marked trail map to help them navigate for themselves. So make sure that you have introductions and conclusions to each major section of your document and that you write smooth transitions in the middle that enable the reader to follow your train of thought easily. Also, provide headings (i.e., trail markers) to keep your readers from getting lost.

As in the next section, we are talking English 101 stuff here, nothing new or fancy.

Grammar

When it comes to grammar, there is no substitute for the fundamentals. Adhering to the tenets of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* or some other basic book of proper English grammar is a requirement of good doctoral writing.

Too often I read journal articles written by intelligent people that violate these basics, particularly when it comes to writing in the active voice. Sadly, students read these articles and erroneously infer that scholars are supposed to write in a stilted, old fashioned way. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, the best writing—whether it is academic, professional, or personal—adheres to the rules of proper grammar.

I have had many doctoral students who were taken aback when informed that, at the doctoral level, the quality of their ideas (content) was not sufficient to overcome inferior formatting in the form of poor spelling, bad grammar, and incorrect APA reference citations and headings.

To these students, and others like them, I offer the following personal anecdote, which speaks directly to the need for both quality ideas and the expectation by true scholars of a quality presentation of those ideas.

A Grand Master's View of my Thesis

To satisfy the thesis requirements for my master of science in management degree, I chose to analyze marketing data and report my findings in what turned out to be a substantial paper. In this document, I went to great pains to demonstrate my newly acquired knowledge of marketing and statistical data analysis techniques, primarily regression analysis. I succeeded in doing this fairly easily to the satisfaction of my thesis advisor, a world-renowned scholar in the field of Operations Research.

However, to my surprise, he was not satisfied with my thesis. In fact, he asked me to meet with him at his home to discuss it.

At that meeting, we reviewed every single word in my thesis to determine the quality of my analysis and the quality of my writing. Since, he was pretty much convinced of the former, my thesis advisor concentrated on helping me to say precisely what I wanted to say in the best possible English. That meant, among other things, writing in the active voice exclusively, avoiding repetition, and choosing the right word to say what I really meant.

What an eye opener this was. One of the world's greatest experts in quantitative methods spent an entire afternoon of his valuable time working with me on the qualitative aspects of my thesis. Needless to say, this episode dispelled the myth of the scholar as a peddler of pompous, flowery, passive prose.

So, write in the strong, direct manner of a professional and people will happily read what you have to say. Adhere to a lesser, more amateurish standard and be prepared to spend considerable time revising your work to enhance its clarity and grammatical correctness.

Style

Class, panache, and flair are words that come immediately to mind when I think about style. However, we are talking about a different type of style here; namely American Psychological Association (APA) style.

The APA publication manual spells out in great detail the requirements one of the most frequently followed sets of guidelines for scholarly writing. Topics covered include the content and organization of a manuscript, grammar, bias in language, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, the use of italics and abbreviations, bibliographic and in-text reference citations.

You must adhere to the style guidelines specified by your institution, whether APA, Turabian, or some other, in all of your doctoral work.

For most students, learning APA is like learning a foreign language. While this is not necessarily an easy thing to do, you have no choice but to buckle down and learn APA style if you want to become a scholar. The sooner you do, the faster you will get through your doctoral program.

A Comment on Formatting

Every university has its own rules for formatting doctoral papers, particularly the dissertation. Like APA, these are non-negotiable. So the sooner you learn and apply them, the faster you will progress in your doctoral program.

Examples of the formatting requirements of one university are (a) using one, size-12 font throughout, (b) double spacing text, (c) indenting the first line of paragraphs by one-half inch, (d) not bolding or underlining, (e) using APA style headings, in-text citations, and bibliographic reference citations, and (f) writing in the third person exclusively. Be sure to enquire about the guidelines for your university and apply them from the outset.

Finding Your Voice

Before we conclude this section on critical writing, it is important to discuss how you as a student can express your opinions in a way that meets these guidelines and still allows readers to hear your voice. This becomes especially important to new doctoral students when they discover, sometimes to their chagrin, that they must write their major papers and dissertation exclusively in the third person.

That's right. Not only do you have to avoid the passive voice, but you also have to avoid the use of first and second person pronouns. That means that you can no longer simply say "I" think this or "you" should do that.

So, if a student or other writer cannot use the first or second person, how does a doctoral reader distinguish the ideas and research findings of other scholars from those of the writer?

In practice, this is not as difficult as students believe. The reason is that doctoral writers have to support their arguments with evidence from the literature, properly cited, to avoid charges of plagiarism. Anything not cited as the work of another is, by convention, ipso facto the work of the writer.

The following contrast between an improperly cited and a properly cited work will illustrate the difference. Keep in mind that the latter writing sample, while acceptable, does not necessarily represent the ideal.

Sample A [Unacceptable]

Some say that money is a universal motivator. It is argued by others that it depends on the needs of the individual. I think the others are right, as I will explain in this essay.

Sample B [Acceptable]

Some say that money is a universal motivator. Others argue that it depends on the needs of the individual (Maslow, 1954). In this essay, the author will critically evaluate the arguments for and against money as a universal motivator, and provide a rationale based on personal experience and empirical research evidence in support of Maslow's hierarchy-of-needs theory.

Note that the in-text reference citation (Maslow, 1954) refers to an original book by Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*. The correct, APA-style reference citation for this work is:

Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper and Row.

It is clear from Sample B that the writer intends to use one of the major works of Abraham Maslow as evidence to support his or her point of view (i.e., that money is not a universal motivator). This is not clear from Sample A.

In addition, the provision of an in-text reference citation in proper APA style not only clarifies and strengthens the writer's argument, it also gives credit where credit is due (i.e., to Maslow).

As a result, the reader is easily able to distinguish between the opinions of the writer (sentences one and three) and those of other scholars (sentence two). Hence, the writer's voice emerges loudly and clearly and he or she avoids any hint of plagiarism.

Now, as an aside, note that the writer could make an even stronger case by citing in the first sentence the work of one or more published authors who believe that money is a universal motivator. Surely a little online research project could unearth several such useful references.

Finally, before moving on, note the clarity and power of the second sentence in Sample B, which is in the active voice, in comparison to the same sentence in Sample A, which is in the passive voice. This is why good writers strive to write exclusively in the active voice.

If you enjoyed this article, be sure to share it with other doctoral students.

Finally, to learn more about scholarly writing and other important aspects of doctoral study, go to www.mindfirepress.com or www.Amazon.com and order a copy of *Student to Scholar: The Guide for Doctoral Students* by Robert E. Levasseur, Ph.D., the book from which this excerpt on scholarly writing came.

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