# The Essay: Expectations and Tips

## Answer the Prompt

One of the central things instructors look for when evaluating essays is the ability to follow directions. Let's face it; college is usually a place for conformity and following the rules. Being able to answer the prompt as given is a testament to your ability to understand expectations and apply directions. Therefore, it is essential that you answer the prompt as it is—stay on topic.

## Have a Central Claim/Idea/Focus

Many essay prompts ask multiple questions centered around a focal theme. It is not typically acceptable to present your essay as a list of the questions answered. Although you will want to address all parts of the prompt in some way, it is your responsibility to come up with a central claim that will give your essay coherence. In other words, you need to have a main point which every paragraph, sentence, detail, and example supports.

Also, you must have a viewpoint. I do not want a wishy-washy or journalistic-style essay that presents both sides of the issue and does not make clear what your opinion is.

## Paragraphing

Every paragraph should contain at least five sentences, and contain a topic sentence or guiding idea that supports the essay's central claim.

## Choose the Best Voice

Some students have had instructors dictate, "Never use $1^{st}$ person" or "Never use $2^{nd}$ person." I don't have such clear regulations, but here's my breakdown of point of view and purpose:

| Point of view | | Purpose | Problems |
|---|---|---|---|
| $1^{st}$ person | I, Me, My, Myself | Used when **relating a personal anecdote or experience** that supports your central claim. | Tends to be **overused**, and sometimes **undermines credibility** |
| $2^{nd}$ person | You, Your, Yourself | Used when giving **advice, commands, or directions.** That's it! (This is why many instructors say: don't use it. How often are you giving advice or bossing the professors you write for?) | VERY commonly, **students use "you" to mean people in general.** Although this works in conversation, it is not acceptable in academic essays. |

| 1st/2nd person | We, Us, Our, Ourselves | Used when appealing to the **common goals, purposes, or beliefs** of writers and their readers. | Commonly used to establish commonality between writers/readers where it does not exist. |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 3rd person | He, She, They, His/Her, People, Students, Citizens, etc. | This is **usually the best choice** for creating an academic, confident, and persuasive tone. Be careful to make sure subjects match pronouns. | Sometimes sounds unnatural or stilted— this is due to discomfort or inexperience using 3rd person. |

| | **Strong example** | **Weak example** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1st | As a union member, **I** have dealt with corruption in all its forms. | In **my** opinion, **I** think that unions are corrupt sometimes. |
| 2nd | If **you** care about animals, and seals especially, do not buy seafood from Canada until the government changes its policies. | When **you** whack a seal over the head with a hammer to keep up the fish population, it's just not right. |
| 1st/2nd | Clearly, **we** all want the best for **our** communities and **ourselves**; therefore, it's essential that **we** vote. | **We**'re all lazy and don't like to do it, but voting's still important for **us**. |
| 3rd | **Party-goers** should never discuss politics with **their** hosts—it's a recipe for disaster. | When **one** goes to a party, **one** should avoid discussing politics with **his or her** host.<br><br>*Note: Use of "their" as a singular non-binary pronoun is gaining popularity. Language is fluid and changes through time!* |

All points of view have their own purposes; otherwise, they wouldn't exist. The two things to remember are: choose your point of view with purpose, and stay consistent once you've chosen it.

## Proofread/Edit
**Proofreading for errors is the last step in the writing process, and is best done by printing the paper, putting it in a drawer for at least a day (or three), and then reading it OUT LOUD to someone.** (When I was an undergraduate, I read papers on linguistics and Victorian fiction to my spaniel. He was a great audience.)

Grammarly is an awesome app that can help with grammar and sentence structure.  It's not perfect, but it usually helps!

## Final Notes:

Writing for an audience is frustrating, challenging, exasperating, annoying, and very, very hard. Professional writers have described the agony of their craft for centuries; Flaubert, a renowned novelist, would spend days on a single sentence.  My goal as your instructor is to guide you, but the work is your own.

I will challenge you this semester, and my hope is that you will share the ultimately worthwhile feeling I got from academic writing; I hope that when you submit your papers to your instructors, as I did to mine, that you feel proud of yourself.

## Good Writers Need:

**Creativity:** We all have it, but some of us have to dig a bit deeper to find it.

**Curiosity:** Good writers want to know who, what, where, when, and why.

**Confidence:** Some of us have it; some don't. If you don't, fake it 'til you make it!

**Context:** This refers to the event of writing--who will be reading the final product? When? Why?

**Commitment:** The writer is the one who stays in the room!   *Write something NEW and explain it well--always remember to SHOW, not tell!*