



Writing at Princeton

by Kerry Walk, Director of the Princeton Writing Program

Princeton students write more than perhaps any other college students in the world, from numerous lab reports and short papers to several longer research projects, such as the Junior Paper (JP) and Senior Thesis. Writing can be said to define a Princeton education—including a Princeton education in the sciences and engineering.

Learning to write well takes hard work, even for students who were the best writers in their high school class. That's because writing at Princeton is in many ways different from writing in high school: papers are typically longer, and students are usually expected to formulate their own ideas and take them to a deeper level. Here are some tips for writing at Princeton, divided into three sections: Papers, Research Papers, and Lab Reports.

Papers

- Start early. Some of your fellow students will sit down to write their papers the night before the due date, but if you want to write well, begin with enough time to put away your draft for at least a day and return to it with “fresh eyes.” How early is early enough? A good guideline is five days for every five pages you expect to write. You probably won't begin the actual drafting until midway through your allotted time-frame, but you'll have given yourself time to *plan* your draft (by taking notes, gathering materials, running your initial ideas by your professor or preceptor, etc.) and *revise* your draft (by turning a late-breaking idea into your thesis, moving parts around, straightening out confusing sentences, etc.). Everyone has a unique writing process. Some writers, for example, outline before the draft; others, after it. The crucial thing is not to short-circuit your process. Allow time for it to unfold.
- Give your readers what they want. All of your professors and preceptors value *clarity*—clear sentences and an easy-to-follow structure (not to be confused with simple sentences and a simple structure). Many also want to see a strong *thesis*—an interesting, arguable idea of your own—that you explore and substantiate through reference to one or more sources. Note that most of your papers will be far more complex in both conception and structure than the traditional “five-paragraph essay,” with its introduction, three supporting paragraphs, and conclusion.
- Use a style appropriate to the discipline. Conventions for writing vary from discipline to discipline. When writing about literature, for example, the convention is to quote sources directly; when writing in a science class, the convention is to use few quotations, if any. Ask your professor or preceptor to explain the elements of writing in his or her discipline. Also, skim through a few relevant articles or books to see how writers in the discipline handle structure, sources, citations, and so on.

- Get feedback. Unless you're writing a take-home exam or have explicit instructions not to share your drafts with other people, get feedback before you submit your writing for a grade. Good prospects for readers are tutors from the Writing Center, someone in your class, a roommate, or a friend. Are you concerned that your thesis isn't clear or that your paper doesn't flow? Ask! Once you have your readers' feedback, look at your draft through their eyes, and revise accordingly. Just keep in mind that, while readers are permitted to tell you what they find confusing or unconvincing, and even to make suggestions for revision, they may not edit or re-write your drafts. You should acknowledge their substantive ideas in a friendly footnote, in keeping with common scholarly practice.

Research Papers

Here are a few additional tips for writing a research paper:

- Visit a librarian. Librarians are eager to work with you. After doing some initial research (online and in the library), go see a reference librarian in Firestone or, if appropriate, one of Princeton's many specialty libraries. A librarian can help you develop a research strategy and introduce you to the key research tools in your field of inquiry.
- Make your own point. The goal of most research papers isn't merely to report what's been said on a particular topic; it's to make your *own* point, using what's been said to advance your thesis. Note that while every source should advance your thesis, not every source will support it: you'll use some sources to show how your idea differs from or expands on prevailing ideas on the topic, and you'll use other sources for background information and key concepts or terms.
- Acknowledge your sources. Borrowing someone else's words or ideas without acknowledgment—even if done unintentionally (through sloppy note-taking, for example)—is plagiarism, the most serious of all academic offenses. Check out *Academic Integrity at Princeton*, available at www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity, for guidance on using sources properly.

Lab Reports

- Follow the accepted structure. Here are the elements of most formal lab reports:
 - **Title** - usually technical and rarely clever
 - **Abstract** - a concise summary (~200 words) of the purpose of the experiment and your conclusions
 - **Introduction** - a longer explanation of the experiment's purpose, sometimes including a review of the relevant literature (articles about related experiments, etc.)
 - **Methods** - a detailed explanation of the experiment, usually written in the passive voice ("The frog was dissected...").
 - **Results** - the presentation of any results or data, often including graphs or figures
 - **Discussion** - the interpretation of these results and your conclusions
 - **References** - a list of sources referred to in the report, with bibliographic information

- Use a clear and concise style. Your writing should be so clear and concise as to be practically unnoticeable. Achieving such a style takes work, but your readers will be grateful!