

Mastering the Essay

Lesson 14 - Essay Synthesis, Part 3

Readings (*Review Week 11*)

- **"How to Write with Style"** (Kurt Vonnegut)
- **"The Elements of Style"** (William Strunk)
- **Revision Checklist 1** (Writing Centre at UNC Chapel Hill)
- **Revision Checklist 2** (Centre for Writing, University of Minnesota)

Writing Lesson/Discussion

- It is generally considered acceptable to exceed or fall short of the assigned word count by 10%. For example, if you are assigned a 1,000-word paper, your essay should fall between 900 and 1,100 words. Any more or less breaks academic expectations and etiquette.
- If you need to trim your word count down:
 - Remember that generally speaking, cover pages, bibliographies, and foot or endnotes do not count as part of the word count—you may not be as over count as you believe.
 - Check your essay against your thesis—have you included any information that does not strengthen the thesis in some way? If so, cut it out.
 - Do you reiterate the same points redundantly, even if you are using different words? Cut out the redundancies. (If reminding the reader of a point is necessary to the argument, however, it is not redundant.)
 - If you are not sure about cutting a sentence, read the paragraph minus the sentence. Does it still make sense? Is it as effective, or even more so? If so, cut it.
 - Check whether your sentences could be more concise. Have you included any flabby adjectives or adverbs? Have you used two words where one would be better? (For example, a *big, fat bear* could be a *big bear* or a *fat bear*, but it needn't be both.) Could you find a punchier word that means all you have been saying in several words? (For example, you can tear a piece of paper into many pieces, or you can shred it. You could say "She is going to be attending nursing school," or "She will attend nursing school.")
 - Check whether you're unnecessarily using the passive voice—it is often more wordy. Switching to active voice may cut down words.
 - Don't hedge too much. Where possible, cut out phrases like "I think that," "Probably," and so on. If they are necessary for accuracy, keep them. But if you are only putting them in out of lack of confidence in your argument, or for fear of taking a definite position, they not only make your essay wordier but also weaken the impact of your essay.
 - Cut meaningless words. "Actually," "really," "basically," and so on seldom add much to your point.
- If you need to increase your word count:
 - Never write something just for the sake of adding words, or use cheap tricks! They just dilute your essay's effectiveness. Throwing in a string of

unnecessary adjectives or definitions of words everyone knows will not help. Instead, think about ways you can develop your paper and make it stronger.

- Clarify your arguments with follow-up sentences. You could back up an existing sentence with an example, an analogy, further analysis, or an enlightening rephrasing that adds to the meaning.
- Add a relevant quotation.
- Look for quotations that you haven't followed up with your own analysis of the other author's words. A great way to add words that is truly needed!
- Anticipate an opponent's argument—phrase it in the most effective way you can, and tear it down. It beefs up your argument and it beefs up word count.
- Sometimes you'll be assigned a page count rather than word count. If you are, do not try to trick your instructor by changing the font size, margin size, or line spacing. The instructor knows exactly what the paper is supposed to look like, and can see these old tricks from a mile away. Add rather than pad, as they say.
- If you find yourself down to the wire and your word count is not quite perfect, don't despair. Do your absolute best to get it right, and turn it in. It is far better for the instructor to receive a complete essay with beginning, middle, and end that is little too short or long than to receive nothing or an incomplete essay.
- When revising, preserve your "fresh eyes" as much as you can. With a longer project, it can be easy to reread what you have written so many times you can no longer judge it as objectively as when it was fresh. Reread only when you need to.
- Read your work out loud slowly. The ear and eye working together often pick up errors that elude the eye alone.
- Some find it helpful to print the work off and mark the page up with a pen, so that rather than revising as they go, they can read through the paper first and change it afterwards. By noting errors as you read, you ensure you don't forget them.

Assignment

Please **complete your 1,000-word persuasive essay project, and turn in your final draft.** It should be a polished essay with a strong and well-supported argument. It is all right if it deviates from the outline you turned in, but it should be the same subject, general approach, etc. The bibliography does not count towards word count.

Make sure that you use MLA style, unless you have been given permission to use a different style from your instructor. Proofread well, and double-space. Make sure to include page numbers. **Turn in your very best work. Don't let end-of-semester stress keep you from excelling.**