

## Some Key Elements of College Writing



As different as writing can seem when you move from one field of study to another, most instructors acknowledge that certain elements of writing are relatively constant. That is, they can apply to different courses and different writing situations.

English instructors at GCC emphasize several writing features that are valued in disciplines across the campus, at transfer institutions, and in the workplace.

- **Awareness of Writing Conventions:** In most scholarly settings, writers are expected to understand that they are entering a conversation with others who have written on the same assigned topic or issue. Because of that, writers need to keep in mind both what others have said, as well as their own audience—what readers might or might not know about a subject. This awareness helps to establish the tone of a piece of writing and also what information will or will not be included. Awareness of writing conventions also guides how a piece of writing should be formatted and presented.
- **Thesis:** Any piece of scholarly writing is expected to advance a main idea that guides the writing as a whole. Some instructors may require that your thesis be stated in the opening paragraph and supported throughout the rest of the paper. Others may believe it is appropriate for the thesis to evolve and change as you develop and explore your ideas. In either case, the thesis is the underlying principle that should unify and organize your writing.
- **Argumentation:** Opinions are not sufficient to advance a scholarly argument, even if an assignment asks for your own opinions or views. Although opinions might suggest the beginning of an argument, a strong argument (or idea/theory) can't rest on opinion alone. Scholarly arguments need to be supported and deepened by logical reasoning, by reliable research and evidence, by what others (experts, instructors, or peers) have said, and by anticipating the response readers might have to the ideas you are putting forward. Effective argumentation, at its core, is all about acknowledging multiple perspectives and making visible, on the page, the critical thinking that got you to the claim or argument you're making.



### Isn't an "argument" a heated exchange that you try to win?

Not in the scholarly or "classical" sense. In a writing course, we define *argument* as a pursuit of knowledge and constructing understanding - both for you and your audience. Usually, a victory or a final answer is not the goal. Instead, an *argument* is a formula that clarifies not just what you think, but *why* you think so. That means any *claim* is explained, developed, or supported with appropriate *evidence* and sound *reasoning* (explanation).

- **Use of Evidence:** While all scholarly writing requires evidence to support and develop an argument, different disciplines have evolved to value some forms of evidence over others. Even within the same discipline, one instructor may require that you use only one type of evidence, while another may suggest that you use a combination of different forms. Types of evidence include scientific data, charts, facts, statistics, images, quotations or summaries from course texts, or evidence based on personal knowledge or experience. Instructors will generally specify which forms of evidence are appropriate for a particular assignment.

- **Relationships Between Reading and Writing:** Many of the writing assignments that you will encounter in college—both in English and in other disciplines—will be based on your class readings. These readings might include primarily verbal text (as in textbooks or novels), but they might also include non-verbal texts, such as images, charts and graphs, or even music and mathematics. Because much of your writing at GCC will be “text-based,” your instructors will place high value on your careful reading and re-reading. You may often be asked to re-read the same text, or portions of the same text, multiple times in order to see what may not have been apparent on first reading. Not to worry! This focused reading will pay off when it comes to your writing. Writers can’t write about what they haven’t yet seen or understood, so the more you see in a text, the more depth and originality your writing will reflect.



- **Critical Thinking:** In any discipline, thinking critically is one of the most valued features of writing because it represents your input, your intellectual perspective, and your sustained thinking about an argument—both your own argument and the arguments of others. Critical thinking is also what enables writers to generate new knowledge and ideas about a subject. Instructors might refer to critical thinking as “interpretation,” “analysis,” or “commentary.” But in any case, critical thinking extends beyond the clear and logical statement of an idea to include an attempt to come to grips with the *complexities* of an idea or argument—to actively engage the ideas of the authors and texts under consideration. Paradoxically, active engagement requires that you *accept* the ideas of others (in order to understand them fully) but also be willing to question and criticize those ideas (in order to identify potential flaws, biases, or implications). In some writing assignments, you may also be prompted to add to the ideas/theories started by another writer or to use their ideas as a lens to examine something else (in a different context).
- **Citing Sources:** Although citing sources is part of the “writing conventions” mentioned above, we’ve made it a separate section here because not all cultures require writers to clarify their use of others’ ideas. For some of you this may be a new requirement with which you haven’t had much practice. Making careful distinctions between your own ideas and those of others is basically a matter of acknowledging “intellectual property.” The assumption is that ideas (just like houses or cars) *belong* to those who first created and introduced them into the public sphere.



In practical terms, this means that while you will be expected to make use of others’ ideas as you write, you cannot “steal” them or use them without giving proper credit to the author(s). Your composition courses will help to ensure your understanding of correct citation; and instructors will also *insist* that you employ standards of citation carefully, since this practice is widely valued in scholarly writing and other forms of writing in the workplace.

