



At a Glance: Articulate ideas and knowledge effectively in writing for specific audiences and purposes. Develop strategies for dealing with "writer's block."

Understanding Writing

Writing is a method of imparting knowledge (e.g., research, journalism), communicating thoughts and emotions (e.g., reflective writing), telling a story (e.g., creative writing), or working out your thoughts to reach a conclusion (e.g., critical writing).

Why does it matter?

While a written text (e.g., article, thesis) is used to communicate the results of critical thinking, writing is a learning tool that, in itself, fosters critical thinking.^{1 2} When you write, you dissect and organize information, articulate ideas, and integrate prior knowledge with new concepts.³ Like most communication skills, Writing is a fundamental skill required for your success as a graduate student and your long term professional development.

Employers identified Writing as one of the most frequently needed skills.⁴ In a survey, major American business leaders employing nearly eight million people considered Writing a "threshold skill" for both the recruitment and the promotion of their employees, two-thirds of whom have writing responsibilities.⁵ From an economic standpoint, large corporations are spending as much as three billion dollars annually on employees' professional training programs to remedy the deficiencies in reading and writing skills (e.g., business and technical writing).⁶

Additionally, Writing improves verbal communication skills. For instance, writing the main points of your upcoming presentation allows you to organize information in a logical sequence and to articulate your ideas and arguments with clarity to ultimately respect the allocated presentation time.

Reflective writing allows you to deconstruct and visualize your ideas in order to synthesize information and reach informed conclusions and decisions. For instance, writing your goals and the steps needed for their completion creates a sense of commitment and a medium through which you can analyze and find solutions to potential barriers.⁷ Additionally, writing your thoughts and feelings (expressive writing) has been shown to reduce depression and anxiety.⁸

Cultivating Writing Skills

Think of Writing as a craft; the more you practice, the better you get at it. Regardless of your writing proficiency, aim to write regularly to develop more confidence and improve the quality of your work.⁹ You do not need to publish a book to practice writing. In order to improve as a writer, learn about the writing stages: 1) Brainstorming, 2) Outlining, 3) Drafting, 4) Revising and Editing, and 5) Polishing (i.e., going over your work one last time to correct missed mistakes in grammar, spelling, etc...).¹⁰

Develop the essential knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, grammatical functions and styles in a primary or secondary language. Explore the four main writing styles and use the appropriate one: 1) **Expository (textbooks)**, 2) **descriptive (poetry)**, 3) **persuasive (research proposal)**, and 4) **narrative (novel)**. As a complement to courses and workshops, you can further improve your writing skills by reading. In addition to deepening your knowledge in a given subject, reading expands your vocabulary and exposes you to various writing styles. Many studies support the relationship between reading and writing as two inextricable sets of skills that share similar cognitive elements such as knowledge (e.g., knowledge of syntax and punctuation) and mental processes (e.g., meaning construction).¹¹

Graduate school promotes critical writing and reading in course assignments, exams, and research. Critical writing is the presentation of evidence and arguments in support of your conclusions as a result of critical reading - the rigorous evaluation and interpretation of written facts.¹² In other terms, critical writing is critical thinking translated into words. Therefore, developing critical reading abilities is a prerequisite for mastering critical writing.¹³ Check [Analytical and Critical Reasoning](#) handout for strategies to develop critical reading.

In their book about academic argumentative writing, Graff and Birkenstein¹⁴ offer strategies and templates for writing an argument in various disciplines (e.g., sciences, social sciences) and contexts (e.g., agreeing or disagreeing with others' conclusions).¹⁵ Practice applying some of these templates to your work to hone your critical writing.

Quick Guide to Being a Stronger Writer

- **Commit to the practice of writing:** Attend writing retreats, workshops, or courses where participants are expected to submit written assignments. In addition to a formal commitment, you will experience a sense of community. You are not alone in your writing struggles. (see “Taking Action” for suggestions)
- **Reflect on your work:** self-edit and ask for feedback from experienced writers, tutors, or a writing service. It is a learning experience that will enhance your writing skills.
- **Set your writing goals, create a reasonable plan** based on your pace and potential external stressors (e.g., distractions, deadlines), and experiment with different writing schedules and environments to learn about what works best for you. It may take some trial and error before finding your writing flow!
 - Consider the following questions: Will a writing buddy help you commit and stick to your schedule? Are you a Starbucks or a Redpath type of writer? Are you a morning person?
- **Identify your writing strengths and work on your weaknesses:** For example, if you have trouble with the Oxford Comma or when to add a semicolon, consider learning about proper punctuation.

Quick Guide to Being a Stronger Writer

- When unsure where to start, **consider the big picture**, start with the part that interests you most, outline your ideas, or ask probing questions¹⁶
- **Manage stress and anxiety during the writing phase:**¹⁷
 - Develop [self-awareness](#) of what works for you and what doesn't. “Find your happy place.”
 - Use effective [time management](#) and productivity strategies, allowing yourself to take breaks.
 - [Stay healthy](#): Use physical and mental relaxation methods such as: breathing exercises, stretching, talking to a friend, or listening to music.
- **Follow standard guidelines** (e.g., for thesis writing: consult [McGill Thesis Guidelines](#) and the [McGill Supervision](#) thesis writing tips), and review similar work written by experienced writers to find inspiration (e.g., skim through a select peer thesis)
- Try some [writing exercises](#).¹⁸

Taking Action

Professional Development & Training

- Courses - [McGill Writing Centre - Writing Courses](#): The Writing Centre offers both credit and non-credit courses for both native and non-native English speakers.
- Workshop - [McGill Writing Centre - Graphos](#)
- Courses - [School of Continuing Studies - Professional Writing in Business](#).
- Course - [McGill Executive Institute - Business Writing Course](#): One day course to improve professionalism and quality of your writing.
- Workshops - [Mitacts Training Workshops](#): Training workshops including business writing, effective email writing and strategic business report writing workshops for advanced degree graduates.
- Check [myInvolvement](#) for upcoming workshops and programs under “Communicate: Writing”

Gaining Experience

- Become a blogger for [Campus Life & Future Careers Blog](#) (Contact [CaPS](#) for this opportunity).
- Become a blogger for [GradLife](#).
- Write for the McGill community: [McGill Daily](#) | [McGill Tribune](#).

Resources

Websites

- [Paradigm - Online Writing Assistant](#): provides Writing tips and guidelines
- [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#): houses writing resources and reference materials for different types of writing - general, research and citation, subject-specific, job search, etc.
- [Writing Tools](#) - McGill Library: A comprehensive list of reference materials and tools, from general writing to thesis writing.
- [Writing Advice](#) - University of Toronto: A comprehensive list of downloadable PDF handouts covering topics of prewriting stages, to grammar and types of writing.
- [McGill Graphos](#): Graphos offers different ways for graduate students to become more efficient, precise and effective scholarly communicators.
- [Access Technology Resources](#) - McGill Office of Students with Disabilities.
- [McGill Thesis Preparation Guidelines](#) - McGill Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

Video Clips & Podcasts

- [Reading and Writing Skills](#) (McGill OSD): This video clip and the resources listed on this webpage are to help you improve academic reading and writing skills.
- [Grammar Girl \(Mignon Fogarty\)](#): Writing tips from multi-award winning website and podcast.

Groups & Associations

- [Graduate Student Writers' Group](#)
- [Peer Writing Groups](#) (Graphos)
- [Quebec Writers' Federation](#)

Articles of Interest

- Writing Tips: [Strategies for Overcoming Writer's Block](#) (University of Illinois)
- Writing Tips: [Op-ed writing tips](#) (McGill Newsroom)
- Writing Tips: [Inclusive writing](#) (University of Leicester)

Books

- Williams, J. M., & Bizup, J. (2017). *Style: Lessons in clarity and grace*. <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/919068263>
- Graff, G., & Birkenstein, C. (2017). *"They say / I say": The moves that matter in academic writing*. <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/957747941>
- Zinsser, W. (2006). *On writing well: The classic guide to writing nonfiction*. New York: HarperCollins. <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/62421288>
- Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process*. New York: Oxford University Press. <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/191952969>
- Pinker, S. (2014). *The sense of style: The thinking person's guide to writing in the 21st century!*. <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/870919633>
- Clark, R. P. (2008). *Writing tools: 50 essential strategies for every writer*. <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/154694504>
- Maggio, R. (2009). *How to say it: Choice words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs for every situation*. New York: Prentice Hall Press. <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/233549465>
- Mack, K., & Skjei, E. W. (1979). *Overcoming writing blocks*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher. <http://mcgill.worldcat.org/oclc/5510812>

References

- ¹ How To Create High-Impact Writing Assignments That Enhance Learning and Development and Reinvigorate WAC/WID Programs: What Almost 72,000 Undergraduates Taught Us. Anderson, P. (2009).
- ² Engaging ideas: the professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom. Bean, J.C. (2011).
- ³ Engaging ideas: the professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom. Bean, J.C. (2011).
- ⁴ Professional Development: Shaping Effective Programs for STEM Graduate Students. Denecke, D. (2017).
- ⁵ Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . Or a Ticket Out. National Writing Project. (2004).
- ⁶ Work in Progress: How CEOs are Helping Close America's Skills Gap. Business Roundtable (2017).
- ⁷ Setting, Elaborating, and Reflecting on Personal Goals Improves Academic Performance. Morisano, D. (2010).
- ⁸ Expressive Writing: Connections to Physical and Mental Health. Pennebaker & Chung (2003).
- ⁹ Develop Your Writing - Writing Skills and Technique. University of Leicester.
- ¹⁰ Kwon 2017
- ¹¹ Reading and Writing Relationships and their Development. Fitzgerald, J. & Shanahan, T. (2000).
- ¹² Develop Your Writing - Writing Skills and Technique. University of Leicester.
- ¹³ Critical Reading Toward Critical Writing. Deborah Knott.
- ¹⁴ The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing. Graff, G. & Birkenstein, C. (2010).
- ¹⁵ (p. 221)
- ¹⁶ Brizee (2011).
- ¹⁷ Conrey & Brizee. (2011).
- ¹⁸ Conrey & Brizee. (2018).