

Writing for the Public

Public writing is a broad category that includes a wide variety of genres: opinion pieces, letters to the editor, blogs, newspaper reports, magazine features, letters to elected officials, memoirs, obituaries, and much more. All of these genres share common features. In particular, public writing aims to be accessible. It is not for specialists. And public writing usually aims to be relevant, even when it engages with the past. Still, each of the different genres has its own conventions. It is always a good idea, but especially if you are writing in an unfamiliar genre for a course, to rely on good examples of that genre as models.

Know your audience.

The specific genre you're writing in will help you to form an image of your audience. Are you writing a feature article for a newspaper or magazine? Think as specifically as possible about who your readers are. Consider what they already know, need to know, or might want to know about your topic. The genre will also determine your manner of address. If you're delivering a speech, don't hesitate to speak directly to your audience by using the second-person plural, "you." Referring to the occasion for your speech is another way of connecting to your audience.

Fellow citizens, pardon me, and allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I or those I represent to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?

—Frederick Douglass, "The Hypocrisy of American Slavery"

Provide context, and be concrete.

Even though you may be completing a course assignment, remember to frame your piece in terms of the real-world situation, actual or hypothetical, that you've been asked to address. Take the time you need at the outset to establish the context for your piece. Draw on the concrete specifics of the situation to support your ideas throughout your paper.

Mind your language.

Choose appropriate diction. Avoid jargon at almost all costs. Prefer simple, straightforward, direct language. Public writing is generally less formal than academic writing. Contractions (e.g., "it's" for "it is") are acceptable. Sentence fragments can be, too, but don't overuse them. The occasional one-sentence paragraph or two can also be perfectly acceptable.

Everyone here is keyed up for the Big One.

The One that's going to finally bring Donald Trump down.

—Maureen Dowd, "Trump Walks a Crooked Mile," *New York Times*

Introducing an unfamiliar term is occasionally justifiable—if, for example, the term captures in a single word or phrase a complex idea you'll need to invoke at multiple points in your paper. Be sure, then, to define the term, but do so in as few words as possible. Reciting from the dictionary can be cumbersome and rarely adds anything of value.

Topological quantum computing exploits the field of geometry known as topology, hence its name. Topologists study properties of objects that stay the same despite deformation.

—Sophia Chen, "Two Physicists Bet Over a Quantum Computing Moon Shot," *Wired*

Don't shy away from short sentences. Varying the length of your sentences will help make for a livelier style.

Do research if necessary, but don't write a research paper.

You may rely on appropriately chosen factual material (e.g., a telling statistic) to help make an argument, or you may provide historical context as necessary. But the more immediate the

context, the better. Public writing usually focuses on the present. Often the past does inform the present, but rely where possible on the more recent past.

What your audience doesn't want to read is a literature review. Insofar as you engage with what others have written, it is better to rely on other writing from the public sphere. If you want to bring any scholars into your discussion, look first to see whether they have explained their ideas in a public forum. If not, make sure to translate those ideas into non-academic prose.

Be prepared to set aside many of the conventions you've learned about academic essays.

A conventional academic introduction or conclusion will be conspicuously out of place in most forms of public writing. If you're writing an opinion piece or a blog, you can often get right into your argument. You can even state your position in the first sentence.

Whatever else you might think about Sidewalk Labs (SWL), the controversial smart city proposal has made one undeniably positive contribution to Toronto's civic discourse: it forced a discussion about sustainable construction materials out of the architecture journals and into the political mainstream.

—John Lorinc, "Embodied Carbon and the Problem of Concrete Toronto," *Spacing Toronto*

If you're writing a magazine or an in-depth news article, you might start off with an anecdote.

One chilly October morning, Beth Cheever hopped out of an aluminum boat. In rubber boots, a life jacket, and a knit hat pulled down over her ears, she walked the portage trail, beneath denuded alders and paper birches damp with the previous night's rain, to the granite shoreline. She had never poisoned a lake before.

—Peter Andrey Smith, "Troubled Waters," *The Walrus*

The anecdote can also be personal. While personal experience is generally discouraged as source material in academic essays, it can figure much more prominently in public writing.

Whatever you do, don't identify a research question, and don't provide a road map. Similarly, don't waste your time or that of your readers by summarizing your key points in a conclusion. Nor will it make much sense to point to avenues for future research. You can often end with your last point. Just be sure to give that point a sense of finality. Or you might choose a strategy that academic writers avoid but journalists use to advantage: closing with an apt quotation.

Though much public writing is argumentative, the notion of a thesis statement doesn't translate neatly from academic to non-academic genres. You aren't obliged to state your argument explicitly. Some writers choose to make their point indirectly.

Regarding the purported rules of English syntax, we tend to divide into mutually hostile camps. Hip, open-minded types relish the never-ending transformations of the way we speak and write. They care about the integrity of our language only insofar as to ensure that we can still roughly understand one another. In the opposite corner glower the curmudgeons. These joyless, uptight authoritarians are forever muttering about clunky concepts such as "the unreal conditional" that nobody's ever heard of.

I've thrown in my lot with the pedants.

—Lionel Shriver, "Semantic Drift," *Harper's*

If you do choose to make an explicit statement, you don't need to single it out as the central point of your paper. Definitely don't write, "In this paper I will argue that . . ."

References are another feature of academic writing that you will almost never find in public writing. But in the context of a course assignment, your course instructor may still ask you to cite your sources using one of the standard systems of documentation.

If you're writing an opinion piece, one good habit in essay writing that can carry over nicely to public writing is to engage with opposing points of view. Addressing the opposition can help you do justice to the complexity of an issue. The ability to convey complex ideas *and* avoid the specialized language of the academy is a mark of the finest public writing.