

Introduction to Graduate School Writing

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Graduate Writing Center
Naval Postgraduate School

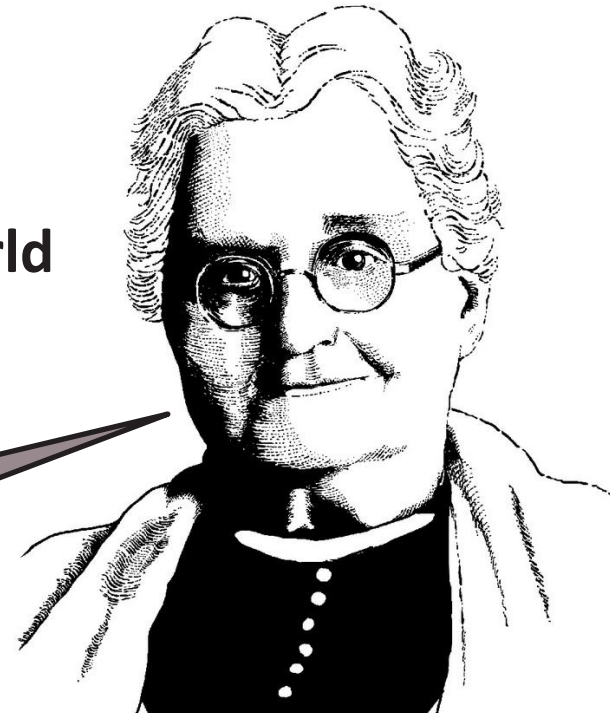


**who loves to
write?**

The Ideal Reader Reaction

- I understood your purpose
- I knew how your argument was organized
 - You delivered on that promise
- I found your evidence sufficient
- Your logic convinced me
- Maybe even:
 - I learned something
 - You changed the way I look at the world

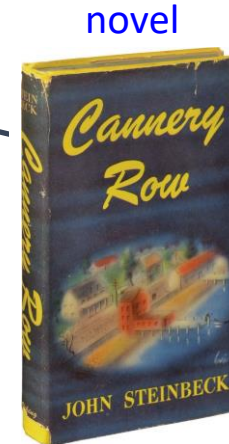
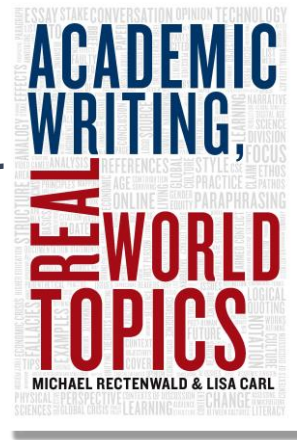
Your writing is *adorable*!



Overview

- **What's the point? Looking at the big picture of academic writing**
 - **What's different about it?**
 - **Keeping goals realistic**
 - **Serving the reader**
 - **Grad-school expectations**

Writing addresses many different needs



Each type has a **unique objective** which dictates:

- rules
- methods
- standards
- styles
- formats
- best practices



U.S. Constitution



news story



field manual

What's the objective of academic writing?

- Primarily, to share new knowledge
 - Research:
 - Creates new knowledge.
 - Explains how the world works.
 - Academic publishing (journal articles, academic books, conference papers, etc.) provides a formal record of research.
 - *Coursework is generally a learning exercise that models academic conventions.*
 - Theses and dissertations form the bridge.
 - A thesis is like a class paper, only longer. *False!*

Our basic problem . . . is the immensity of existing knowledge.

Knowledge goes to infinity in every direction

Published knowledge all-time:

130 million books (600,000+ in the U.S. every year).

50 million journal articles published all-time.

Academic inquiry is theoretically unbounded.

- Practical considerations
 - Relevance . . . who cares?
 - Significance . . . does it have value?
 - Who pays the bills?

Even with those allowances, our problem is still immense!

The Virtues of Narrowness

How do mere mortals deal with this immensity?

- Keep the topic narrow.
 - Drive toward the specific, away from the general.
- Use the topic definition as a boundary.
 - Avoid the trap of wandering into fascinating, but irrelevant, blind allies.
- Stay within that space, but be thorough.
- *In your reading, observe the narrow focus of academic articles, and even books.*



The Reader's Dilemma

Writing would be *so easy* if there was no reader.
—no rules for writing a personal diary.

The *academic reader* knows that the topic can go anywhere, and is specialized enough not to care about most of the destinations.

What about this
commonplace
object?

*Why am I
discussing it?
What's the
issue?*



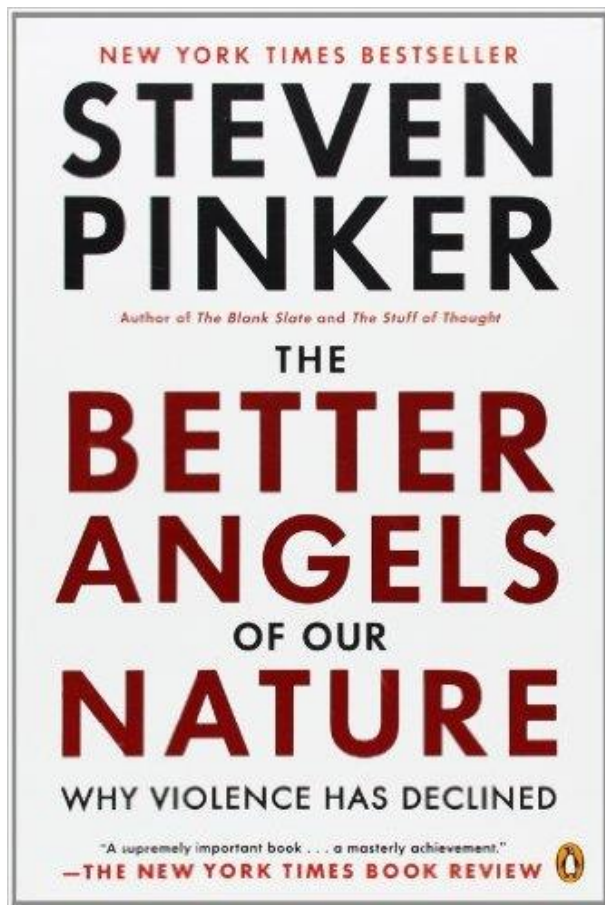
- This *specific* shirt?
- Materials
- Manufacturing
- Style
- Marketing
- History of shirts
- History of word “shirt”

Solving the Reader's Dilemma

- Conclusions come first, proof follows.
 - Define the box . . . immediately!
 - The introduction is the conclusion.
 - The details that follow fit in that narrow space.
 - Especially important for abstract, hard to visualize, ideas.
- But doesn't that ruin the suspense?
 - **Yes! Spoiler alert!**
 - *Suspense, mystery, and surprise belong to other forms of writing.*
 - *We're explainers, not entertainers.*
 - *Doubt frustrates the academic reader.*
- Still, a kind of suspense remains.
 - *The introduction is just a claim; the proof is in the body of the paper.*
 - *If the specialized reader is interested in the topic, they'll want to know the reasoning behind it.*



A Large-Scale Example



- The issue
 - The widespread perception that we live in violent times
- The puzzle
 - Is it true? What is the trend of violence in human history?
 - *Why* violence has declined
- Features
 - Broad “meaning of life” question
 - Large-scale study
 - ~4 years to write
 - 15 major themes
 - 700 pages of text
 - + 42 pages of endnotes
 - + 34-page bibliography

A Small-Scale Example

The Better Angels of Our Nature, page 68:

. . . the oddest journal article I have ever read is “Losing Face, Saving Face: Noses and Honour in the Late Medieval Town.”* Here the [German] historian Valentin Groebner **documents dozens of accounts from medieval Europe in which one person cut off the nose of another**. Sometimes it was an official punishment for heresy, treason, prostitution, or sodomy, but more often it was an act of private vengeance. . . . These mutilations were so common that, according to Groebner, “the authors of late-medieval surgical textbooks also devote particular attention to nasal injuries, discussing whether a nose once cut off can grow back . . .”

* Valentin Groebner, “Losing Face, Saving Face...” (15 pages), *History Workshop Journal*, Fall 1995.



Chinatown (1974)

- Features
 - **Small-scale**
 - **Narrow scope**
 - Groebner's main point
 - Pinker's data point

Groebner is building a brick. Pinker is building a mansion. Think brick.

Knowledge and Ideas

- Knowledge is not a monolithic entity. It's in a constant state of growth and destruction. A giant, endless debate about everything.
- Your voice is important. Knowledge benefits when many take part in the conversation.
- Is the military ethic of following orders compatible with how conventional wisdom is challenged in academia? How can these worlds be merged?



Growth and Destruction

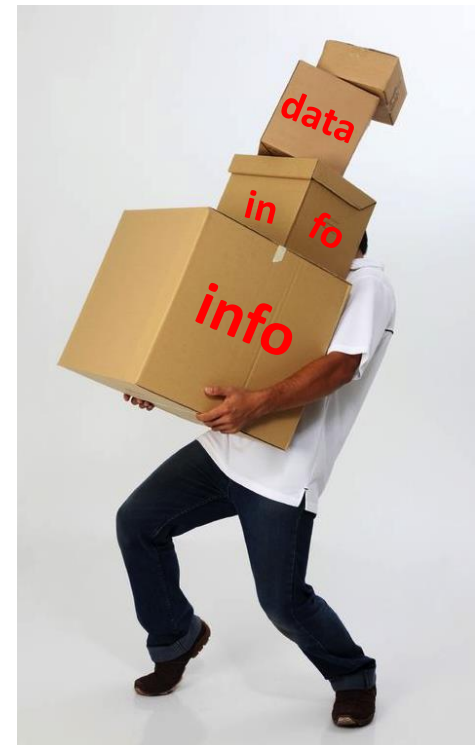
Expectations: The Internet

Friend or Foe?

It's both, of course!

The good: Massive amounts of data; ease of access.

The bad: It is an evil swamp of temptation. From a research perspective, it gives the illusion of having everything that matters at one's fingertips.



Research means more than moving information from one place to another.

Expectations: Wikipedia

Friend or Foe?

Both, of course!

The good

- Comprehensive on major topics
- Usually well-sourced
- A fantastic resource for getting a quick-start on a new topic, or
- Looking up commonplace info

The not-so-good

- Variable quality-control
- No peer review
- Pages can change at any time

Therefore, Wikipedia is generally not approved as a source for academic work.



WIKIPEDIA

The Free Encyclopedia

(6,168,853 English-language articles)

Organization: The Secret to Academic Writing

Topics covered:

- What do these ideas look like on the page?
- How and why of academic writing technique
- Practical matters
- Reliable writing practices

Wednesday, October 7, 1000-1100

Tuesday, October 13, 1300-1400

Sign up at GWC website:

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The **BLUE** button

WOnline:

Pick Workshops Calendar

Zoom login info in sign-up form



"I used the framing and outlining method, which saved me about 40-50 hours on another final paper (that ended up being 17 pages)!"

—NSA student