

Fundamentals of Graduate-Level Writing

Writing at the graduate level requires a professional level of style, tone, and substance. The writing must demonstrate that you have done extensive research and that you know your subject matter. Graduate-level writing reflects clarity, fluency, and concision in phrasing, sentence structure, and paragraph development.

What is considered “good writing” at the graduate level of study? The qualities of good writing, at any level, find their basis in error-free mechanical skills (grammar, spelling, and punctuation) and in being well organized. **The writing should be coherent, unified, free from filler phrases, and aware of its audience.** This awareness of the reader will impact the style and tone of the writing to assure that the intended message is received in the form of “good writing.” In transitioning from the undergraduate to graduate-level study, the expectation of what is considered good writing rises with the course number. As you compare the characteristics expected at these levels of writing, consider those areas where your writing would benefit from the services and resources available at the Writing Center.

Undergraduate Writing

- ✓ Is mechanically correct
- ✓ Is concise
- ✓ Is clear though not necessarily interesting
- ✓ May or may not demonstrate new ideas
- ✓ Contains citations when required
- ✓ Uses transition words
- ✓ Conforms to outside models of argumentation, such as the Toulmin method of argumentation or classical rhetorical theory
- ✓ Is written for a general audience or for the teacher
- ✓ With revision, can be presentable at an undergraduate conference or in a general-interest publication

Graduate Writing

- ✓ Is mechanically skillful
- ✓ Is concise, though also nuanced
- ✓ Is engaging, stylish, interesting, and speaks with the writer’s own voice
- ✓ Explores a topic or research question in an original way
- ✓ Demonstrates extensive research
- ✓ Has a strong organizational frame
- ✓ The paper moves from point to point in the way you want the target audience’s thoughts to move; structure grows out of content.
- ✓ Is written for a professional audience
- ✓ With revision, can be publishable in a professional journal or presentable at a scholarly conference

Sample Graduate-Level Introduction Paragraph

Observe the qualities of “good writing” at the graduate level in the sample introduction paragraph below on the impact of parental attachment on fear of crime.

Despite recent reports that the crime rate has decreased, even among juveniles (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000), the general public has the impression that violence is rampant. Until very recently, the study of fear of criminal victimization, and the subsequent discussion of causes of this fear, had been limited to adults (see Hale, 1996). However, there has been an effort to expand fear of crime research to adolescent populations (May, 2001; May & Dunaway, 2000a, 2000b). This initial work suggests that though adolescent and adult fear of crime share many of the same predictors, some significant differences remain as to which factors contribute to fear of crime. This is particularly true in the areas of race and class, which appear to predict fear of criminal victimization in a much more consistent way among adults than among adolescents (May, 2001). Using a sample of 318 adolescent males incarcerated by the Department of Corrections from a state in the Midwest, the present study borrows further from the fields of delinquency theory and developmental psychology to assess the relationship between adolescent fear of crime and two known insulators from delinquency: parental attachment and parental supervision.

Checklist for Writing at the Graduate Level

- ✓ Confirm during proofreading that your grammar and mechanics are correct.
- ✓ Make sure you eliminate any undergrad errors (underdeveloped paragraphs, weak transitions, etc.).
- ✓ Format your paper correctly according to the style guide required for your discipline.
- ✓ Be willing to revise through many drafts.
- ✓ Get to the main point in support of your thesis (but don't oversimplify!).
- ✓ Learn from and refer to enough authorities to demonstrate that you have done extensive research and know your subject matter.
- ✓ Refine your “writerly voice” by eliminating any verbal tics, conversational or informal tone, and any personal opinions outside of an assigned reflection section.
- ✓ Make your prose as clear, concise, and engaging as possible.
- ✓ Remember as you draft your paper that you are a professional writing for other professionals.
- ✓ Confer with your professors to clarify requirements.
- ✓ Reach out to the Writing Center for assistance when needed.