Writing Different Types of Essays

Before you write any essay, you must identify the **audience** you are writing to, the **voice** you want to use, and the **purpose** of the essay. In order for your writing to be effective, these three elements must complement one another.

**AUDIENCE**
In most academic writing, your instructor and/or peers will be your audience. Since you know someone else will be reading what you have written, and since you know someone will usually be evaluating your writing, it is difficult to completely ignore audience. However, there are some times when ignoring your audience is effective.

Especially in early drafts of your writing, it is beneficial to ignore your audience. Since much of your early drafts will be comprised of you attempting to work through your ideas about a particular subject, if you focus on the reaction your audience will have to what you are writing, your voice will usually not be authentic. That is, you will be writing to please your reader rather than writing to please yourself.

Some questions about audience:
- What will my audience expect from me?
- What will make my audience listen to me?
- Have I been honest with myself in my writing, regardless of what the audience will think?

**VOICE**
Different types of writing call for different authorial voices. Of course, if you are writing an academic essay, you will want to write using generally accepted academic language. This usually precludes the use of non-standard language such as slang and grammatically incorrect sentences. Keep in mind, though, that this is not always the case. For instance, if you are writing a narrative essay, you might give yourself the liberty to use slang words or words from other languages you know, as long as you don’t overwhelm your reader.

Some questions about voice:
- What image of myself do I want to project?
- How can I establish my credibility?
- What style of language will be most effective for this essay with this audience?

**PURPOSE**
When you write in an academic setting, the instructor often guides the purpose of your writing. The most common types of writing you will be asked to produce are:

1. **Informative**—in informative writing, your focus should be on the information you have gathered rather than on the audience or your own opinion. Informative writing is usually straightforward and depends on opinions other than the author’s for success. The job of the
Some types of informative writing are summaries, book reports, and research papers.

Some Questions:
- What information do I want to convey to my audience?
- How can I most effectively organize my information?
- Can I support my information with outside sources?
- Can I give examples and/or define terms?

2. **Persuasive**—in persuasive writing, your focus will be on convincing the reader that your arguments are true. Since you are attempting to persuade your readers, audience is certainly a focus of this type of writing. Some types of persuasive writing are editorials and reviews.

Some Questions:
- Why do I believe what I believe?
- How did I arrive at the conclusion I did?
- Can I cite sources to back up my argument?
- Are there terms I should define?

3. **Narrative**—in narrative (also called expressive) writing, your focus will be on conveying your feelings, attitude, or position on a certain subject or event, but your goal will not be to convince anyone of anything. Instead, you will spend time exploring your own ideas and feelings or reflecting on them. While you will probably consider audience when writing a narrative piece, you will probably not allow consideration of the reader to influence your ideas.

Some Questions:
- How will I organize my writing (chronological, order of importance, etc.)?
- Which examples will I include and why?
- Why is this even worth telling?

4. **Discovery**—Similar to narrative writing, when you write to discover, focus on audience should not dominate or guide your writing. This is because when you write to discover, you are writing to learn. You are writing to try and understand just what it is you think about a certain topic or event. While most discovery happens during prewriting, including some discovery writing in your final drafts is an effective way to complicate your writing by allowing the reader to see the complexity of your ideas and the struggle you went through to arrive at them. If your reader knows you’ve spent a great deal of time trying to work through an idea, he or she will be more likely to accept the conclusion you arrive at.

Some Questions:
- Why is the topic worth considering?
- What are my current thoughts on the subject?
- What is the common consensus on the subject?
- Does my opinion change as a result of writing about the subject?
- Are there examples from my own life that influence my opinion?