

RAZA STUDIES WRITING GUIDE
SPRING 2006

Start with the right tools.

These are the basic tools every writer needs. Buy the best dictionary you can afford, but one with at least 100,000 words. Check the front cover or title page to see if it will fit this requirement.

Also—the best bilingual dictionary you can afford. Test it first with a few words to see if they have a good definition for them, such as: *bachata*, *batey*, *cutara*, *lunfardo*, or any other Spanish word that intrigues you.

And a good thesaurus will help too.

Have these handy by your desk when you write.

You will also need a computer and your own printer.

These are wise investments that will allow you to work at your own pace, whatever hour of the day or night it strikes you.

Carry a pencil or pen and a small notepad to write down ideas as they occur.

Sharpen your bilingual skills.

Since California is a bilingual or even multilingual state, the use of Spanish, for example, crops up quite frequently in mainstream writing and literature. But a word of caution: if you're going to use Spanish, learn to use it right. You should be competent with accents and other diacritical marks that go with the language. After all, there is a difference between a *pena* and a *peña*. If you don't know the difference, ask your abuelita. Or—use your bilingual dictionary.

Formatting your paper.

Follow this format unless your instructor tells you otherwise.

Paper: 20 lb stock. Avoid any sort of colored paper, as well as beige, or very bright white.

Black ink only.

12 point font: this is 12 point font. Please no fancy fonts, such as *scripted fonts*, etc.

Double space between lines. Do not quadruple space between paragraphs.

Here's what your front page should look like:

Your name
Professor's name
Course Title
Date

Your Own Original Title

Indent each paragraph five spaces. If numbering of pages is required, you can start on the second page, a half inch from the upper right hand corner, include your last name and page number. With the exception of the numbers (running head), the page should be formatted with one inch (1") margins all the way around, top, bottom and sides.

Titles.

Titles are important.

Help the reader by shaping your title in a way that indicates what your essay is about. So if your report is on *Heartbreak Tango* by Manuel Puig, is the title of your essay going to be "Heartbreak Tango"? You better be more original than that, or you are going to break your professor's heart. Even without the tango.

The Zen of Writing.

Figure out when and where you work best. Some writers like to work first thing in the morning; others work late at night. Some like to write in a noisy café; others prefer the quiet of solitude. Whatever suits you.

Develop a world-view. What's a world-view? Basically it is your knowledge and opinion about what goes on around you, whether it is school, family, current events, music, literature, etc. Are you one of those students without an opinion on war, peace, the death penalty, affirmative action, the environment, the best burrito in town? You've never been to an art gallery? Never been to a museum? Never read a novel all the way through? Then you might not have any ideas in your head, which means you will have nothing to write about.

How do you develop a world-view? Stay informed. Be curious about the world. Seek alternative news sources. Form your own opinion on current events by evaluating the evidence. Become involved in your community. Travel or study abroad. You need something to write about, experiences that will enrich not only your writing, but your life as well.

If there's one truism about writing it is this: No thinking, no writing.

Frequently asked questions.

Can I use I in my writing? I just did—thrice. Unless you are writing a scientific paper based on laboratory research, in which case the data is presented without any personal involvement. Otherwise, it's fine to put yourself in the essay, in the center of it as it were by using the first person.

Can a sentence start with a conjunction like and? Or? But?

Every now and then, as long as you don't overdo it. Or when it is necessary because of phrasing or emphasis of some sort. Also applies to starting a sentence with because.

Same with ending a sentence on a preposition like for. Or about. Notice: I ended on about when writing about titles.

But the power of a sentence lies in its ending. So think about it. You might want to rephrase a weak sentence so that you end on a noun.

The first draft.

All writers will tell you that they are never happy with the first draft. It tends to be poorly written, not clearly thought out, more or less a sketch of what the final essay will be. That's logical: your first draft will always be weak. For that reason never turn in a first draft unless that's what the professor requires.

A good standard is to make at least five revisions of your essay, more if you have the time. But you will not achieve anything worth reading without 3-4 revisions minimum.

Working it through.

A competent essay will have the thesis clearly stated at the end of the first paragraph; each paragraph thereafter will help confirm the thesis; the conclusion will be fully developed and emphatic.

What is a thesis?

The thesis is the main idea that you are arguing in your essay, in other words, the reason the essay exists. Don't be afraid of a provocative thesis, something a bit out there will give you more to argue than something safe and obvious.

Without a good clear thesis to argue, what will the second paragraph be about? Who knows? An essay without a thesis will have no direction, no reason to exist; since you won't know what you are arguing the essay will bounce all over the place. An essay without a thesis is held together with nothing but hope.

What's a good conclusion?

It restates the thesis, adds perhaps another point to the argument, and ends with a strong emphatic sentence.

In your revisions, try to dedicate at least one revision session to the conclusion.

Supporting your argument.

When you write an essay think of yourself as an attorney presenting a case. What's going to be your evidence? What proof are you going to offer to back up your statements?

Without evidence/proof how can you convince the reader?

Most likely the evidence/proof will be quotes or citations from published sources.

Using quotes.

Here's some general guidelines for using quotes.

First make your statement then bring in the quote to back it up.

It is smoother to place the quote at the end of your sentence, as opposed to the beginning or middle of the sentence. In general, stay away from using the quote at the beginning of the sentence.

Quotes should always be a part of a sentence, therefore don't make the quote its own separate sentence.

The citation is part of the sentence, therefore, the period closing the sentence comes after the citation.

Here's what a typical sentence using a quote and a citation will look like.

In the novel, *Mother Tongue*, the main character, María, points out the biased nature of our media: "Because your skin is brown, what you say will be followed by words like Romero claimed. Whereas if you were white, it would read Romero said" (Martínez, 33).

Note: the placement of the closing quotation marks and the final period.

Plagiarism.

The word derives from the Latin *plagiarius* which means to plunder. In the modern sense it means to pass off someone else's work as your own, without giving them proper credit. What it means in plain language is that you have stolen (plundered) someone's ideas or writings, but claim them as your own. Don't do it. Don't even think about it. It's like cheating in an exam.

Therefore, always give credit to the original source—that's the purpose of citations, footnotes, bibliographies, etc.

Master the basics.

Without being competent in the basics of the English language, it's darn hard to write a good sentence. All sentences need a noun (subject) and a verb (predicate).

Try to use concrete nouns as the subject of your sentences. What's a concrete noun?

Something you can picture in your mind. A palm tree for example.

An abstract noun you cannot picture it in your mind.

Since the verb is the engine of the sentence (the action) go for strong verbs, powerful verbs that will give your sentence energy.

Every time you write an essay make an effort to improve one small part of your writing skills. Writing is a cumulative skill. You need to keep adding to it. Otherwise your skill as a writer will go away.

Those funky semi-colons and other punctuation puzzles.

The colon [:] and the semi-colon [;] are two punctuation marks that confound many students, but they are no big deal.

The colon for instance means—I will now explain further what I just said. Here's an example.

We came upon the remains of a savage meal:

Can you predict what will follow the colon? If you said—a description of the savage meal, you are absolutely right.

The semi-colon is completely different: it holds together two complete thoughts. Why hold together two complete thoughts instead of making them two sentences? Because sometimes the two thoughts are closely related; or they contrast each other, so the writer wants them considered one idea.

The semi-colon also neatly separates items in a series. See for example the sentence that follows.

If you look over this writing guide you will find examples of different kinds of punctuation: semi-colons and colons; dashes and parentheses; quotation marks and italics. They are placed in the guide deliberately so you can see concrete examples of them in use.

Did you notice these punctuation marks? Do you know what they mean? Do you know how to use them?

It's not a bad idea to get in the habit of using the occasional colon or semi-colon. They allow you different ways to phrase sentences; as well as to condense thoughts, and in general add some variety to your writing.

All competent writers know how to use this sort of punctuation.

Revision, revision, revision.

Writing is like the Big Bang Theory of the universe. Your first draft expands and goes everywhere. Once you let it cool down, you see where you can condense it, make it tighter, and eliminate ideas or sentences that are not working.

By doing this, you should be able to see where you can expand again; let it cool, a day or two, then go back and see where you can tighten your ideas, clarify sentences, make sure the topic sentences are working with each paragraph.

So the process is you first expand the essay, then condense it; expand; condense. Until your final draft is so solid it appears to be one of those white dwarf stars, so dense that one teaspoonful weighs a ton.

But to let the essay cool down after the heat of writing, you need to give yourself plenty of time. A day or two between each draft is good.

That's why staying up all night writing an essay that's due in the morning is not a good idea. It doesn't give the essay enough time to cool down so you can see clearly what you are writing.

When you think you are done, have another pair of eyes look over your essay. Just think of that song by Ruben Blades and Willie Colon, "Ojos." It's all about what you see—so a fresh pair of eyes are going to see obvious errors that you have missed.

What are deadlines?

As the word implies, you are dead if you don't meet it (figuratively anyway, or academically). But also out of respect for your professors, who sometimes have stacks of essays from three or four classes to grade, never turn in a late paper. If for some reason beyond your control your essay will be late, notify your professor as soon as possible.

Read more.

To be a competent writer you must be a competent reader. How else are you going to know what is good writing—the standard you are trying to achieve?

Being a student implies that you are an intellectual—meaning that you get your knowledge from books. Therefore, you should develop your own private library of books that you consider classics. Ten, twenty or thirty books in your private library would be a fine start for a student. A good place to find classics at a cheap price is used book stores. Have you ever been to one? You should have a favorite bookstore, used or otherwise, where you can browse and just feel close to books. It is part of the ritual of being a student.

A speed reading and comprehension course though not required will certainly help improve your reading skills.

Take pride in your writing.

Always give the best effort you can when you sit down to write. Nothing says more about who you are than your writing. Sloppy or neat, clear-headed or muddy—you are what you write.

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