

RTW Plus: Six Characteristics of a Well-Written Essay

Improving your writing skills doesn't happen by accident. Nor does it happen overnight. It takes time, work, and you could say it even takes courage: courage to struggle, courage to be wrong, courage to put your ideas out there. And while the process of becoming a better writer is definitely more art than science, there are some concrete things we can keep in mind as we write that will aid us in the process. In order to demystify what it looks like to have succeeded in writing something, let's identify six traits of a well-written piece. Regardless of where your writing skills are right now, being mindful of these traits will help you improve them. Think of it like this: if the RTW method helps us on the front-end by giving us a basic pattern to follow in the formation of a solid paragraph, these six traits can help us reverse-engineer the writing process by providing objective criteria for what a well-written piece will look and feel like upon completion.

Clarity

Arguably, the most important mark of something well-written is *clarity*. Does it make sense? Is it easy to read? Will the reader get a sense that the author knows what they're talking about? Clarity begins with a solid topic sentence. Clarity ends with editing and proofreading—Hemingway famously said that the first draft of anything is “crap.” If you aren't clear about your point, don't expect your reader to be. If you can't state the point of a paper (or even one of its paragraphs) in one or two simple sentences, don't expect your reader to be able to. It doesn't matter how clever or brilliant an idea is, if it isn't communicated clearly in a way that can be understood by the reader, then game over.

Flow

Another important characteristic is *flow*. Does the piece take the reader on some sort of a journey? Is there a clear beginning, middle, and end? Writing down the first thing that comes to mind is easy. Writing something that really flows takes work—Hemingway's aphorism on first drafts would apply here as well. Flow has to do with the way a point or thesis develops over the course of a piece. Flow has to do with the way one sentence leads into another, the way one paragraph leads into another. Writing with flow is about taking those intuitive connections between ideas that exist in our mind and making them clear to the reader. Flow isn't about doing the work for the reader, but rather writing in such a way that a sincere reader will be able to do the work themselves. In sum, flow is about telling a story. Practically speaking, in terms of forming paragraphs with the RTW method, think of your conclusion sentence as your “flow” sentence: a

solid conclusion sentence should not only give a paragraph closure, but it should segue the reader into the following paragraph, into the next idea.

Interesting

Nobody wants to read something that is boring. If you aren't interested in what you're writing, then your reader won't be either. If you don't believe you're saying something interesting, something worth saying, then your reader won't either. Interestingness isn't about crazy outlandish ideas, big fancy words, or trying to be completely original at every turn. Rather, it's about honoring the subject matter, the reader, and yourself as the writer. On the one hand, interestingness is about the quality of an idea or claim. But on the other, it's about the way an idea or claim is communicated. Just to be clear, one doesn't have to be enamored with the subject matter of a given assignment in order to write about it in an interesting fashion. To write something interesting about a topic you don't love doesn't require you to pretend it's your favorite thing. It simply requires you to have conviction about what you're writing, and that you write in such a way that someone who may not share your position would have a positive experience reading it. Don't underestimate the importance of saying something interesting in an interesting fashion.

Personal

Especially when you're writing in the manner of persuasion and critical reflection, it's important to make it personal. The basic idea here is that if what you're writing doesn't have some humanity to it, then don't expect it to connect with another human. If it doesn't impact you in some meaningful way, then don't expect it to make an impact on your reader. To write in a personal way doesn't mean you need to make everything about you and your own story. Rather, it is to remember that you bring a unique perspective to the subject matter, and that the reader does as well. Regardless of whether you're writing a cover letter for a potential job or a reflection paper on a theology text, your writing should in some way be a faithful representation of who you are.

Relevant If you open the newspaper to the sports section, you don't expect to read an article on cooking. Even if the cooking article is fantastic, it doesn't belong there, and it's not relevant to someone looking for a sports story. The idea here is that while most types of writing do have a certain open-endedness to them (summative writing being a notable exception), your essay nevertheless needs to deal primarily with the subject matter at hand. Tangents are okay provided that they somehow relate back to the thesis/claim being developed. If something from the other assigned material of the course leads you to discuss your position on global warming or tell a story from your childhood, great—as long as you make explicit its relevance for the assignment. If the reader wonders what a paragraph or particular sentence has to do with assignment at hand, then you either haven't been clear enough as to how the idea fits in terms of flow or content, or it's just not relevant. The relevance of each and every sentence should be more or less crystal clear in a well-written piece.

Mistake-free

Finally, and this trait is not to be underestimated either, a well-written piece will be free of spelling, grammar, formatting, and other such errors. Now, mistakes happen, of course, but there is simply no excuse for not pushing the 'spell check' button, there is no excuse for not proofreading, and there is no excuse for not asking questions if you don't know how to format something (e.g., a footnote, a film title, etc.). A modest argument that is clearly communicated in a mistake free fashion is far more compelling than a brilliant idea riddled with grammatical, syntactical, and punctuation errors.

Keep these traits in mind both during and after the writing process by using them as questions: is this sentence/paragraph clear? does the paper flow? is it interesting? etc.



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