Ellen MacNamara arrived at college excited but also anxious. She had grown up in a small town far from the college, had not taken calculus, and had never written more than a five-paragraph essay. So when she got her first college writing assignment—in a political science class, to write a ten-page essay on how the relationship among the three branches of the U.S. government has evolved—she felt a little panic. She had read all her assignments and done some research, and she had even met with her instructor during office hours. She had quite a bit of material. But when she started to write, it just didn’t sound right. She wasn’t sure what college writing sounded like, but this wasn’t it.

Following her instructor’s advice, MacNamara studied several of the political science articles on her course reading list. Compared to her usual writing, they were much more formal, full of complicated sentences. What she eventually came up with wasn’t a particularly good paper (and she knew it), but it served its purpose: it had gotten her thinking about college-level writing. Looking back at the work she had done to get this far, she thought, “Wow, this is almost like learning a new language.”

MacNamara had a point. Many students have experiences similar to hers, especially multilingual students who’ve grown up in other cultures. One Romanian student we know put it this way:
In my country we care very much about the beauty of what we write. Even with academic and business writing, we try to make our texts poetic in some way. When I got to the U.S.A., I discovered that writing that I thought was beautiful struck my teachers as wordy and off-task. I was surprised about this.

This student, like Ellen MacNamara, needed to set about learning a new language—in this case, the language of U.S. academic writing.

**So Just What Is Academic Writing?**

Academic writing is the writing you do for school. It follows a fairly strict set of conventions, such as using standard edited English, following logical patterns of organization, and providing support for the points you make. But academic writing reaches beyond the classroom: it’s used in many journals, newspapers, and books as well as on the web, especially on blogs that address serious topics like politics, research, or cultural analysis. So “academic writing” is a broad category, one flexible enough to accommodate differences across disciplines, for example, while still remaining recognizably “academic.” This chapter considers some of the assumptions that lie behind academic writing in the United States and describes some of the most common characteristics of that writing.

We’re giving so much attention to academic writing for a couple of important reasons. First, becoming fluent in it will be of great help to you both in college and well beyond; and second, it poses challenges to both native and nonnative speakers of English. We want to acknowledge these challenges without making them seem too difficult to overcome. Instead, we want to try to demystify some of the assumptions and conventions of academic writing and get you started thinking about how to use them to your advantage.

**Joining U.S. Academic Conversations**

If you are new to college, you need to learn to “talk the talk” of academic writing as soon as possible so that you can join the conversations in progress all around you. Doing so calls for understanding some common expectations that most if not all of your instructors hold.
You're expected to respond. One important assumption underlying the kind of writing expected in American colleges is that reading and writing are active processes in which students not only absorb information but also respond to and even question it. Not all educational systems view reading and writing in this way. In some cultures, students are penalized if they attempt to read established texts critically or to disagree with authorities or insert their own views. If you are from such a background, you may find it difficult to engage in this kind of active reading and writing. It may feel rude, disrespectful, or risky, particularly if you would be reprimanded for such engagement in your home culture.

Remember, however, that the kind of engagement your instructors want is not hostile or combative; it's not about showing off by beating down the ideas of others. Rather, they expect you to demonstrate your active engagement with the texts you read—and an awareness that in doing so you are joining an academic conversation, one that has been going on for a long time and that will continue. It's fine to express strong opinions, but it's also important to remember—and acknowledge—that there is almost surely some value in perspectives other than your own.

You're expected to ask questions. Because U.S. culture emphasizes individual achievement so much, students are expected to develop authority and independence, often by asking questions. In contrast to cultures where the best students never ask questions because they have already studied the material and worked hard to learn it, in American academic contexts, students are expected and encouraged to voice their questions. In other words, don't assume you have to figure everything out by yourself. Do take responsibility for your own learning whenever possible, but it's fine to ask questions about what you don't understand, especially specific assignments.

You're expected to say what you think. American instructors expect that students will progress from relying on the thoughts of others to formulating ideas and arguments of their own. One important way to make that move is to engage in dialogue with other students and teachers. In these dialogues, teachers are not looking for you to express the “right” position; instead, they're looking for you to say what you think and provide adequate and appropriate support for that point of view.

You're expected to focus from the start. In contrast to many cultures, where writers start with fairly general background information for read-
Academic writers at work in (clockwise from top left) India, Chile, Burkina Faso, the United States, Thailand, and Italy.
ers, American academic writing immediately focuses in on the topic at hand. Thus, even in the introduction of an essay, you begin at a relatively focused level, providing even greater detail in the paragraphs that follow. The point is not to show how much you know but instead to provide as much information as your audience needs to understand the point easily.

Because American academic writers generally open their discussions at a fairly specific level, you wouldn't want to begin with a sentence like "All over the world and in many places, there are families," a thesis statement in an essay one of us once received from a native speaker of Arabic. (Translated into Arabic, this would make a beautiful sentence and an appropriate opening statement for a student essay.) Students educated in Spanish or Portuguese and, to an even greater extent, those educated in Arabic are accustomed to providing a great deal more background information than those educated in English. If you are from one of these cultural backgrounds, do not be surprised if your instructor encourages you to delete most of the first few pages of a draft, for example, and to begin instead by addressing your topic more directly and specifically.

You're expected to state your point explicitly. In U.S. academic English, writers are expected to provide direct and explicit statements that lead readers, step by step, through the text—in contrast to cultures that value indirectness, circling around the topic rather than addressing it head-on. A Brazilian student we knew found it especially hard to state the point of an essay up front and explicitly. From his cultural perspective, it made more sense to develop an argument by building suspense and stating his position only at the end of the essay. As he said, “It took a lot of practice for me to learn how to write the very direct way that professors in the U.S.A. want.”

All these expectations suggest that American academic discourse puts much of the burden for successful communication on the author rather than on members of the audience. So with these expectations in mind, let's take a close look at seven common characteristics of U.S. academic writing.

**CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES**

No list of characteristics can describe all the kinds of texts you'll be expected to write in college, particularly given the differences among disciplines. But there are certain things you're expected to do in college writing:
• Use standard edited English.
• Use clear and recognizable patterns of organization.
• Mark logical relationships between ideas.
• State claims explicitly and provide appropriate support.
• Present your ideas as a response to others.
• Express your ideas clearly and directly.
• Be aware of how genres and conventions vary across disciplines.
• Document sources using the appropriate citation style.

Use Standard Edited English

Academic writing almost always follows the conventions of standard edited English in terms of spelling, grammar, and punctuation. In addition, it is more rather than less formal. Thus, the kinds of abbreviations and other shortcuts you use all the time in text messaging or posting to social media sites usually aren’t appropriate in academic writing: you’ll have to write out “with respect to” rather than “wrt,” and you’ll also want to avoid 😊 and other emoticons. Likewise, slang isn’t usually appropriate. In some contexts, you’ll discover that even contractions aren’t appropriate—although we use them in this book because we’re aiming for a conversational tone, one that is formal to some degree but not stuffy. As you can probably tell, defining standard edited English is in many ways a matter of cataloging things you shouldn’t do.

Additionally, however, thinking about the label itself—standard edited English—will give you some insights into the goal you are trying to accomplish. In general, the “standard” variety of any language is the one used in formal contexts, including academic ones, by people who are well educated; thus, the ability to use the standard variety of a language marks its user as educated.

The logic behind a standard language is simple and useful: if everyone can agree on and follow the same basic conventions, whether for spelling or subject-verb agreement, we’ll be able to communicate successfully with a broad range of people. It’s a good principle in theory, but as you know if you have been to Canada or the United Kingdom, “standard” English varies from country to country. Moreover, standards change over time. So while having a “standard” set of conventions is valuable in many ways, it can’t guarantee perfect communication.
“Edited,” the second term of the label “standard edited English,” reminds you that this variety of English is one that has been looked at very carefully. Many writers, especially those who grew up speaking a variety of English other than the standard and those whose first language is not English, reread their writing several times with great care before submitting it to ensure, for example, that every verb agrees with its subject. This is, of course, the role that good editors play: they read someone else’s work and make suggestions about how to improve the quality, whether at the level of the sentence, the paragraph, or the text as a whole. Few of us pay such careful attention to our writing when we tweet, text, or email—but we all need to do so with our academic writing.

Use Clear and Recognizable Patterns of Organization

Academic writing is organized in a way that’s clear and easy for readers to recognize. In fact, writers generally describe the pattern explicitly early in a text by including a **thesis** sentence that states the main point and says how the text is structured.

At the level of the paragraph, the opening sentence generally serves as a **topic sentence**, which announces what the paragraph is about. Readers of academic writing expect such signals for the text as a whole and for each paragraph, even within shorter texts like essay exams. Sometimes you’ll want to include headings to make it easy for readers to locate sections of text.

Readers of academic writing expect the organization not only to be clear but also to follow some kind of logical progression. For example:

- Beginning with the simplest ideas and then moving step by step to the most complex ideas
- Starting with the weakest claims or evidence and progressing to the strongest ones
- Treating some topics early in the text because readers must have them as background to understand ideas introduced later
- Arranging the text chronologically, starting with the earliest events and ending with the latest ones

Some academic documents in the sciences and social sciences require a specific organization known as **IMRAD** for its specific headings: introduction,
methods, results, and discussion. Although there are many possible logical patterns to use, readers will expect to be able to see that pattern with little or no difficulty. Likewise, they generally expect the **TRANSITIONS** between sections and ideas to be indicated in some way, whether with words like *first, next, or finally,* or even with full sentences like “Having considered three reasons to support this position, here are some alternative positions.”

Finally, remember that you need to conclude your text by somehow reminding your readers of the main point(s) you want them to take away. Often, these reminders explicitly link the conclusion back to the thesis statement or introduction.

**Mark Logical Relationships between Ideas**

Academic writers are expected to make clear how the ideas they present relate to one another. Thus, in addition to marking the structure of the text, you need to mark the links between ideas and to do so explicitly. If you say in casual conversation, “It was raining, and we didn’t go on the picnic,” listeners will interpret *and* to mean *so or therefore.* In academic writing, however, you have to help readers understand how your ideas are related to one another. For this reason, you’ll want to use **TRANSITIONS** like *therefore, however, or in addition.* Marking the relationships among your ideas clearly and explicitly helps readers recognize and appreciate the logic of your arguments.

**State Claims Explicitly and Provide Appropriate Support**

One of the most important conventions of academic writing is to present **CLAIMS** explicitly and support them with **EVIDENCE,** such as examples or statistics, or by citing authorities of various kinds. Notice the two distinct parts: presenting claims clearly and supporting them appropriately. In academic writing, authors don’t generally give hints; instead, they state what is on their minds, often in a **THESIS** statement. If you are from a culture that values indirection and communicates by hinting or by repeating proverbs or telling stories to make a point, you’ll need to check to be sure that you have stated your claims explicitly. Don’t assume that readers will be able to understand what you’re saying, especially if they do not have the same cultural background knowledge that you do.
Qualify your statements. It's important to note that being clear and explicit doesn't mean being dogmatic or stubborn. You'll generally want to moderate your claims by using qualifying words like frequently, often, generally, sometimes, or rarely to indicate how strong a claim you are making. Note as well that it is much easier to provide adequate support for a qualified claim than it is to provide support for a broad unqualified claim.

Choose evidence your audience will trust. Whatever your claim, you'll need to look for EVIDENCE that will be considered trustworthy and persuasive by your audience. And keep in mind that what counts as acceptable and appropriate evidence in academic writing often differs from what works in other contexts. Generally, for example, you wouldn't cite sacred religious texts as a primary source for academic arguments.

Consider multiple perspectives. Similarly, you should be aware that your readers may have a range of opinions on any topic, and you should write accordingly. Thus, citing only sources that reflect one perspective won't be sufficient in most academic contexts. Be sure to consider and acknowledge COUNTERARGUMENTS and viewpoints other than your own.

Organize information strategically. One common way of supporting a claim is by moving from a general statement to more specific information. When you see words like for example or for instance, the author is moving from a more general statement to a more specific example.

In considering what kind of evidence to use in supporting your claims, remember that the goal is not to amass and present large quantities of evidence but instead to sift through all the available evidence, choose the evidence that will be most persuasive to your audience, and arrange and present it all strategically. Resist the temptation to include information or ANECDOTES that are not directly relevant to your topic or that do not contribute to your argument. Your instructor will likely refer to these as digressions or as "getting off topic" and encourage you to delete them.

Present Your Ideas as a Response to Others

The best academic writers do more than just make well-supported claims. They present their ideas as a response to what else has been said (or might
be said) about their topic. One common pattern, introduced by professors Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, is to start with what others are saying and then to present your ideas as a response. If, as noted earlier in this chapter, academic writing is a way of entering a conversation—of engaging with the ideas of others—you need to include their ideas with your own.

In fact, providing support for your claims will often involve **synthesis**: weaving the ideas and even the words of others into the argument you are making. And since academic arguments are part of a larger conversation, all of us in some important ways are always responding to and borrowing from others, even as we are developing our own individual ideas.

**Express Your Ideas Clearly and Directly**

Another characteristic of academic writing is clarity. You want to be sure that readers can understand exactly what you are writing about. Have you ever begun a sentence by writing “This shows …” only to have your teacher ask, “What does this refer to?” Such a comment is evidence that the teacher, as reader, isn’t sure what the author—you—are referring to: this argument? this evidence? this analysis? this figure? this claim? Be careful and specific in your language. You’ll also want to **define** terms you use, both to be sure readers will not be confused and to clarify your own positions—much as we defined “standard edited English” earlier in this chapter.

Clarity of expression in academic writing also means being direct and concise. Academic writers in the United States, for example, avoid highly elaborate sentence structures or flowery language, and they don’t let the metaphors and similes they use get the best of them either, as this author did:

Cheryl’s mind turned like the vanes of a wind-powered turbine, chopping her sparrowlike thoughts into bloody pieces that fell onto a growing pile of forgotten memories.

In fact, this sentence was the winner of an annual “bad writing” contest in which writers try to write the worst sentence they can. It’s easy to see why this one was a winner: it has way too much figurative language—chopping wind turbines, bleeding sparrows, thoughts in a pile, forgotten memories—and the metaphors get in the way of one another. Use metaphors carefully in academic writing, making sure they add to what you’re trying to say.
Here's one way the prize-winning sentence might be revised to be clearer and more direct: "Cheryl's mind worked incessantly, thought after thought piling up until she couldn't keep track of them all."

Be Aware of How Genres and Conventions Vary across Disciplines

While we can identify common characteristics of all academic writing, it is important to note that some genres and conventions vary across disciplines. Thus, an analytic essay in psychology is similar to one in a literature class, but it is also different in crucial ways. The same will be true for lab reports or position papers in various fields. In this regard, different disciplines are like different cultures, sharing many things but unique in specific ways. Therefore, part of becoming a biologist or an engineer—or even an electrical engineer instead of a civil engineer—is learning the discipline's particular rules and rituals as well as its preferred ways of presenting, organizing, and documenting information.

You'll also find that some rhetorical moves vary across genres. In the humanities, for example, writers often use a quotation to open an essay, as a way of launching an argument—or to close one, as a way of inspiring the audience. Such a move occurs far less often, if at all, in the sciences or social sciences.

Despite these differences in genres across academic disciplines, you'll also find there are some common rhetorical moves you'll make in much of the academic writing you do. You'll find that short essays and research articles generally open with three such moves:

- First, you give the **context** or general topic of whatever you are writing; frequently, you will do this by discussing the existing research or commentary on the topic you are writing about.
- Second, you point out some aspect of this topic that merits additional attention, often because it is poorly understood or because there is a problem that needs to be solved—that is, you'll show there is a problem or gap of some kind in our understanding.
- Finally, you'll explain how your text addresses that problem or fills that gap. Notice that this often happens within the first paragraph or two of the text.
By contrast, in writing a response to a question on a timed exam, you might restate the question in some way, using it as the opening line of your response and a thesis statement or topic sentence. For example, if you get an essay exam question asking “How are West African influences evident in coastal southeastern areas of the United States today?” you might begin your response by turning the question into a statement like this: “West African influences on language, music, and food are still very visible in coastal areas of the southeastern United States.” You should not spend several sentences introducing your topic while the clock ticks; to do so would be to waste valuable time.

With experience, you will learn the genres and conventions you need to know, especially within your major.

Document Sources Using the Appropriate Citation Style

Finally, academic writers credit and DOCUMENT all sources carefully. If becoming fluent in academic discourse is a challenge for all of us, understanding how Western academic culture defines intellectual property and PLAGIARISM is even more complicated. Although you will never need to provide a source for historical events that no one disputes (for example, that the U.S. Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776, in Philadelphia), you will need to provide documentation for words, information, or ideas that you get from others, including any content (words or images) you find on the internet.

What else do you need to learn about academic writing? While we hope this brief list gives you a good idea of the major features of academic writing in the United States, you’ll likely still find yourself asking questions. Just what does a direct and concise style look like? How much and what kinds of evidence are necessary to support a claim sufficiently? How much documentation is needed? Should a review of literature primarily describe and summarize existing research, or should it go one step further and critique this research? You will begin to learn the answers to these questions in time, as you advance through college, and especially when you choose your major. But don’t be surprised that the immediate answer to all these questions will very often be “It depends.” And “it” will always depend on what your purpose is in writing and on the audience you wish to reach.
In the meantime, even as you work to become fluent in U.S. academic writing, it's worth returning to a note we have sounded frequently in this chapter: the U.S. way of writing academically is not the only way. Nor is it a better way. Rather, it is a different way. As you learn about and experience other cultures and languages, you may have an opportunity to learn and practice the conventions those cultures use to guide their own forms of academic writing. When you do so, you'll be learning yet another "new" language, just as you have learned the "academic writing" language of the United States.