

PART 10

Writing in the Academic Disciplines

CHAPTER 49

**Working with the Goals
and Requirements of the Disciplines**

CHAPTER 50

**Reading and Writing
About Literature**

CHAPTER 51

**Writing in Other
Humanities**

CHAPTER 52

**Writing in the Social
Sciences**

CHAPTER 53

**Writing in the Natural
and Applied Sciences**

CHAPTER 49

Working with the Goals and Requirements of the Disciplines

Chapter 6 outlines the general concerns of subject, purpose, and audience that figure in most academic writing situations. The disciplines have more in common as well: methods of gathering evidence, kinds of assignments, scholarly tools, language conventions, and styles for source citations and document formats. This chapter introduces these common goals and requirements. The following chapters then distinguish the disciplines along the same lines, focusing on literature (Chapter 50), other humanities (51), the social sciences (52), and the natural and applied sciences (53).

49a Using methods and evidence

The **methodology** of a discipline is the way its practitioners study their subjects—that is, how they proceed when investigating the answers to questions. Methodology relates to the way practitioners analyze evidence and ideas. For instance, a literary critic and a social historian would probably approach Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* quite differently: the literary critic might study the play for a theme among its poetic images; the historian might examine the play’s relation to Shakespeare’s context—England at the turn of the seventeenth century.

Whatever their approach, academic writers do not compose entirely out of their personal experience. Rather, they combine the evidence of their experience with that appropriate to the discipline, drawing well-supported conclusions about their subjects. The evidence of the discipline comes from research like that described in Chapters 42–44—from primary or secondary sources.

- ▼ **Primary sources** are firsthand or original accounts, such as historical documents, works of art, and reports on experiments that the writer has conducted. When you use primary sources, you conduct original research, generating your own evidence. You might use your analysis of a painting as evidence for an interpretation of the painting. Or you might use data from your own survey of students to support your conclusions about students’ attitudes.
- ▼ **Secondary sources** are books and articles written *about* primary sources. Much academic writing requires that you use such sources to spark, extend, or support your own ideas, as when you review the published opinions on your subject before contributing conclusions from your original research.

49b Understanding writing assignments

For most academic writing, your primary purpose will be either to explain something to your readers or to persuade them to accept your conclusions. To achieve your purpose, you will adapt your writing process to the writing situation, particularly to your readers’ likely expectations for evidence and how you use it. Most assignments will contain key words that imply some of these expectations—words such as *compare*, *define*, *analyze*, and *illustrate* that express customary ways of thinking about and organizing a vast range of subjects. Pages 91–100 and 145 explore these so-called patterns of development. You should be aware of them and alert to the wording in assignments that directs you to use them.

49c Using tools and language

When you write in an academic discipline, you use the scholarly tools of that discipline, particularly its periodical indexes. In addition, you may use the aids developed by practitioners of the discipline for efficiently and effectively approaching research, conducting it, and recording the findings. Many of these aids, such as a system for recording evidence from sources, are discussed in Chapters 42–44 and can be adapted to any discipline. Other aids are discussed in the following chapters.

Pay close attention to the texts assigned in a course and any materials given out in class, for these items may introduce you to valuable references and other research aids, and they will use the specialized language of the discipline. This specialized language allows practitioners to write to each other both efficiently and precisely. It also furthers certain concerns of the discipline, such as accuracy and objectivity. Scientists, for example, try to interpret their data objectively, so they avoid *undoubtedly*, *obviously*, and other words that slant conclusions. Some of the language conventions like this one are discussed in the following chapters. As you gain experience in a particular discipline, keep alert for such conventions and train yourself to follow them.

49d Following styles for source citations and document format

Most disciplines publish journals that require authors to use a certain style for source citations and a certain format for documents. In turn, most instructors in a discipline require the same of students writing papers for their courses.

When you cite your sources, you tell readers which ideas and information you borrowed and where they can find your sources. Thus source citations indicate how much knowledge you have and how broad and deep your research was. They also help you avoid **plagiarism**, the serious offense of presenting the words, ideas, and data of others as if they were your own. (See Chapter 45 on avoiding plagiarism.)

Document format includes such features as margins and the placement of the title. But it also extends to special elements of the manuscript, such as tables or an abstract, that may be required by the discipline.

Chapters 51–53 direct you to the style guides published by different disciplines and outline the requirements of the ones used most often. If your instructor does not require a particular style, use that of the Modern Language Association, which is described and illustrated at length in Chapter 47.

<http://www.ablongman.com/littlebrown>

Visit the companion Web site for more help with writing in the academic disciplines.

Guidelines for academic writers

- √ **Become familiar with the methodology and the kinds of evidence for the discipline in which you are writing.**
- √ **Analyze the special demands of each assignment.** The questions you set out to answer, the assertions you wish to support, will govern how you choose your sources and evidence.
- √ **Become familiar with the discipline's specialized tools and language.**
- √ **Use the discipline's style for source citations and document format.**