6.0 Writing in Area E

Defined as the “scientific study of human society and social relationships” (“Social Sciences”), Social Sciences is the study of humankind’s workings in groups. At Gordon State College, the Social Sciences are composed of the departments of Anthropology, History, Political Science, Economics, Business, Psychology, and Sociology. Writing-based assignments form a considerable part of the work in the study of the Social Sciences.

6.1 Types of Area E writing assignments

While taking Area E classes, students will sharpen their writing skills while completing essay examinations, group projects, short papers, expository papers, and analyses and other assignments.

6.1.1 Essay examinations

One of the most common Area E writing venues is a test or examination. When faced with an essay examination question, students should read the question carefully, determine what exactly the question is asking, map out an answer, compose carefully, and leave time to proofread.

6.1.2 Group projects

Although some students enjoy working as a team, others vehemently dislike the concept of group work. Nevertheless, working as a part of a team is a “real world” skill that all students will need as they enter the working world after graduation. The challenges and rewards of group work are many. Students must strive to “bring something to the party,” that is, contribute in a meaningful way, without becoming the “Bossy Boots” who dominates every meeting and insists on micro-managing or controlling the process. A good group project is a gumbo pot of ideas and benefits from everyone’s input.

6.1.3 Short papers

A hallmark of Business/Accounting classes and a staple in other classes as well is the short paper (one-thousand to fifteen-hundred words, or about four or five pages). Students working on the short paper assignment should make certain that they understand the assignment thoroughly, start early on the project, see the professor or Student Success Center tutor for help if necessary and proofread their papers carefully.

6.1.4 Understanding the assignment: expository, analysis, and arguments

Regardless of whether the student is alone or working with a group, regardless of whether the paper is long or short, the student must be absolutely sure he or she knows what the assignment is asking and how the assignment is arranged. There are many
modes of writing in college, but three of the most common are: exposition, analysis, and argument.

6.1.4.1 Expository papers

Several decades ago, a popular TV police detective would chasten chatty crime witnesses with the request, “Just the facts, ma’am.” By that the detective, Sergeant Joe Friday, meant that he was not interested in hearing long digressions, opinions, or any other sort of “side” information. Though he did not use the term, what Sergeant Friday wanted was an **expository** tale—just the story of what happened—not **why** it happened, not a defense of choices made—just the facts. That is what an expository piece of writing does: it presents the appropriate facts to the reader. We read expository writing all the time—an encyclopedia article, most newspaper articles, or an automobile owner’s manual are all examples of expository writing.

6.1.5 Analysis papers

If an expository piece looks at the topic, an analysis essay pulls the topic apart and begins to look at its components one by one. Whereas an expository essay answers the question, “What is it?” an analysis essay asks, “How does it work?”. Analysis essays are concerned with things such as key moments, momentum changes, shifts, and root causes. An analysis of a football game might look closely at a key interception in the third quarter. An analysis of a presidential election might look at a candidate’s perceived failure in a debate or a mis-statement for which a candidate was ridiculed. Analysis of historical events, such as World War II, might conclude that the Allies were victorious in large part due to the United States’ superior industrial production.

6.1.6 Argumentative papers

An argumentative paper seeks to use reasons and evidence to change the mind of one who feels differently from the writer. Whereas expository writing is going to be mainly concerned with “just the facts,” argumentative writing is going to be filled with opinions—how those “facts” should be interpreted. It is important to remember that even though argumentative writing relies on opinions, those opinions need to be backed up by reliable reasons and concrete evidence.

6.1.7 Mode and topics

“Expository,” “analysis” and “argumentative” essays are all modes of writing—they’re “customary ways of doing something” (“Mode”). Modes shouldn’t be confused with **topics**. Topics are what the student writer is writing about; modes are how the student approaches the topic. A single topic can yield very different essays when its mode changes. For example, a student could write an **expository** paper about spring break options in the southeastern United States; a student could analyze all the various spring break options for things such as price of accommodations, number of students present, and nightlife options; or a student could argue that one particular destination is the
“perfect” spring break locale for the readership. Though the topic remains the same in all these essays, the essays themselves are very different as the mode changed.

Similarly, if a student were writing about World War II in a history class and had the topic “the Battle of Midway Island,” an expository essay (which simply tells the story of the battle) would look different from an analysis essay (which would look at the role of one or more key elements; say, “weather”), and they would both look very different from an argumentative essays, (which might argue that without a victory at Midway, the United States would have lost the war in Pacific to the Empire of Japan). One topic yields three very different essays.

6.2 Skills developed in writing for area e

Writing in Area E classes will help students cultivate a number of skills, including collaboration, careful reading, critical thinking, “owning” their own prose, developing a historical imagination, and following directions.

6.2.1 Collaboration

As mentioned above (see Section 6.1.2), a hallmark of many Business and Accounting classes is the group project. One of the skills that a group project will encourage is collaboration. In fact, “collaboration” is not a single skill; it involves a range of skills and practices: knowing when to speak and when to listen, active listening, tact, expanding on other’s ideas, patience, giving appropriate feedback, and supporting the group, among others. Being a good “team player” is one of the key attributes modern employers are looking for.

6.2.2 Careful reading

Being able to locate a text’s main idea, being able to differentiate between what is stated outright by a text and what is implied, and being able to comment effectively on a text’s style and an author’s tone are all part of reading college-level material effectively. Careful reading, sometimes known as “active reading,” is a vital piece in the student writer’s toolbox. In fact, many professors believe that a substantial percentage of students’ writing problems are actually reading problems in disguise. Area E assignments will give students ample opportunity to improve their reading skills.

6.2.3 Critical thinking

“Critical thinking” is a much bandied-about term. At the risk of over-simplification, critical thinking refers to the practice of basing conclusions on observable phenomenon and empirical observation. In this way, we can look at “critical thinking” as something that is almost diametrically opposed to “gut instinct” or “hunches.” Critical thinking is relentless in asking us questions such as, “WHAT makes you think so?” (For a more detailed discussion of critical thinking, see Section 3 of this work.)
6.2.4 “Owning” it

Sometimes students—especially struggling students—think of a research paper as if it were a quilt. Just as a quilt takes different fabric swatches and sews them together, some students think that they can take “swatches” of quotation and “sew” them together with appropriate documentation and transitions to make a research paper. In fact, a research paper needs to be much more than that. For starters, students must really understand the passages they are quoting—in short, the student writer must “own” the material he or she is using.

6.2.5 Developing a good historical imagination

One of the characteristics of good writing in the discipline of history is development of historical imagination. It is all well and good to know what the political leaders said or what the generals thought, but such information only tells part of the story. What would it have been like to be a soldier at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415? What would the battlefield have looked like? What sounds would the soldiers hear? What would it have smelled like? The ability to take oneself out of one’s own surroundings and imagine life in a completely different world is key to developing a strong historical imagination.

6.2.6 Following directions

Encouraging students to follow directions carefully is so obvious that it seems self-evident, and there seems little reason to include it in a text like this one. However, many professors report that failure to closely follow directions is responsible for many of the D’s and F’s students receive in Area E classes. A good tip is to re-examine the assignment sheet after a strong first draft has been executed. It is amazing how often students—even strong students—can “drift” away from the ostensible purpose of a given assignment and write something vastly different.

6.3 Pitfalls to be avoided in writing for Area E

Students should avoid compartmentalizing, vague writing, failing to address the question, writing with little evidence, confusing facts with opinions, confusing expository and analysis assignments, dumbing down complicated issues, and failing to take grammar, usage, and mechanical issues seriously when writing in Area E.

6.3.1 Compartmentalizing

For students who are struggling with various classes and adapting to various professors’ teaching styles, it is perhaps understandable to think that classes have little to do with one another. Assuming good writing practices are something only for English class is an example of this compartmentalizing. Rest assured, professors in Area E and the other areas as well care just as much about sound writing practice as English professors do.
6.3.2 Vague writing

Somewhere along the line, students got the idea that by holding back specifics and keeping their comments general, they could avoid making mistakes. The result has been a virtual epidemic of vague writing. For example, imagine a writing prompt such as, “describe the weather on last Tuesday.” If the student researched the prompt thoroughly, he or she could have replied, “Last Tuesday, the twenty-fourth, the weather was partly cloudy with a slight chance of thunderstorms in the afternoon and a high of eighty-eight degrees. The low temperature was sixty-four degrees.” A vague writer might settle for, “It was OK,” confident that the short and vague sentence contained no mistakes. Such a position might be free of mechanical error, but it is not a strong response to the question. For the record, not saying something—to most professors—is akin to saying something wrong.

6.3.3 Failure to completely address the question

Another similar problem is failure to completely answer the question. Writing, which is essentially the process of putting our non-linear thoughts into the linear shape of sentences and paragraphs, is vulnerable to “drift”—we start about writing about one issue and we “drift” into another. For example, a student could receive a prompt asking the how the completion of the Transcontinental Railway in 1869 changed Americans’ perceptions about the frontier. The student could start with an introductory paragraph about a railway trip she took from Dallas to Santa Fe in 2012. Then instead of turning back to the Transcontinental Railway, she could talk about other memorable family vacations: Disney World in 2009, the Grand Canyon in 2011, New York in 2013. Such an essay might be interesting and might be well-written, but it would not answer the question very well. A good way to guard against this “drift” is to re-read the question or prompt after completing an initial draft.

6.3.4 Lack of evidence

The saying “everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion” is well-known. But the saying should not be interpreted to mean that all opinions should be given equal consideration. In fact, opinions based upon and supported by facts have to be given more weight than opinions based on whim. Area E writing assignments, like most other writing assignments in the academic world, will privilege writing that backs up its contentions with evidence—not just with the author’s say-so. For example, a student writer could contend, “Everyone knows that the most inexpensive place to buy gasoline in Barnesville is at the Ingles on Highway 41.” Such a thought is all well and good, but it is much more convincing when the student writer brings evidence to bear. Consider the following: “weekly collection of data indicates that the regular unleaded gasoline at the Ingles on Highway 41 averaged six cents a gallon less than its closest competitor between the period of February 12 and April 13, 2014.” Students in Area E classes should strive to support their contentions with evidence.

6.3.5 Differentiating between facts and opinions
We have become a nation of very opinionated people. What is more, we are strongly committed to our opinions. Sometimes, we are so committed to our opinions that we think of them as uncontestable; that is, we think of them as facts. Differentiating between facts and opinions is an important element in Area E writing assignments. One way to think about it is like this: opinions are what a person thinks, facts are why that person thinks that way. Facts tend to be those things that come from the library; therefore, they are verifiable and can be cited. If something’s source is just you, then it is probably an opinion.

For example, “Breaking Bad was television’s best show” is an opinion. “Breaking Bad has a user rating of 9.5 out of 10 possible according to Internet Movie Database” (“Breaking Bad”) is a fact. Breaking Bad was nominated for one hundred ninety-two major industry awards and won one hundred eighteen of them, including Best Dramatic Series, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Actor” is another fact. The opinion (TV’s best show) can rely on the facts (IMBd ratings, number of awards) for support.

Savvy students are aware of when writing assignments are asking for facts, when assignments are asking for opinions, and when assignments are asking for opinions backed up by facts.

6.3.6 Differentiating between narrative and analysis

Earlier in this work, the difference between expository writing and analysis was discussed (see Sections 6.1.4 and 6.1.5). To be successful in Area E, students should avoid confusing expository writing (or narration) with analysis. At the risk of oversimplification narrative asks, “What happened?”. Analysis, on the other hand, asks, “Why did it happen?”. Students should always differentiate between the two and plan their responses accordingly.

6.3.7 “Dumbing down”

A cousin to “Failure to completely answer the question” (see Section 6.3.3) “dumbing down” occurs when a student writer strips a complicated question of its nuance and fine distinctions in an effort to avoid mistakes. For example, an essay question such as “Describe in detail why Germany lost the Second World War” could be answered by something like “Germany lost the Second World War because it was unable to fight successfully on two fronts.” This response might technically be correct, but would not be a very strong essay examination answer because it leaves much unsaid—American industrial output, Allied bombing of major German cities, ability of the Red Army to withstand unthinkable losses, Italy’s early exit from the war, etc.

6.3.8 Grammar, mechanics, usage and the ‘ten strike’ rule

Sometimes students think that worrying over issues such as proper comma use, subject-verb agreement, and pronoun referents is something only for English 1101 and
English 1102. Such students are often very disappointed when their papers are returned splashed liberally with professorial red ink. For the record, grammar, mechanics, and usage “count” in Area E classes just as much as they do in English classes. How many errors are too many? That’s hard to say, but one Area E professor reports that he feels he cannot in good conscience pass any paper with more than ten serious mechanical errors. He calls this his “ten strike” rule.

6.4 Works Cited

