

How to Write Like a Pro

Most writing advice consists of platitudes:

- Omit needless words
- Avoid clichés
- Choose words carefully.
- Revise often
- Use ordinary rather than fancy words.
- Write in the active voice

Everyone knows the platitudes. The challenge is to put this advice into practice. If it were easy, we'd all do this already.

Writing like a pro requires you to work on two levels:

-- **The Micro:** You must ensure that each sentence and paragraph reads clearly.

-- **The Macro:** You must ensure that your essay or chapter is compellingly argued and logically organized.

The Micro Level: Writing Clearly

Write with flare

- Vary sentence openings and structure
- Alternate long and short sentences
- Combine sentences by using transition words: because, although, after.

Make topic sentences more forceful

- Ditto for the sentences that conclude each paragraph.

Avoid the passive voice

- Avoid such words is, are, was, and were.

The Macro Level: Arguing Convincingly

1. Every article or chapter must have a controlling idea—a theme, or argument that conveys your distinct perspective on a topic.

Identify the central, novel point that you wish to make.

Distill this central contribution into language that is succinct, clear, and forceful.

Explain the idea or finding's significance.

2. Organize your essay or chapter newspaper style.

- Start with a lede to grab the reader's attention.
- Follow with your most important point--your punchline.
- Make sure your distinctive contribution is upfront.
- Only then should you provide the background, using a clear logical organizing structure.
- Conclude with a bang.



Columbia University
Graduate School of Arts &
Sciences Teaching Center

Advancing teaching and learning

The Teaching Center is the go-to place for practical advice about teaching. We can help you:

- Successfully market your teaching
- Deal with anxiety, challenges to your authority, and other classroom issues
- Design innovative courses, deliver scintillating, substantive lectures, and lead stimulating discussions and labs.
- Respond appropriately to shy, withdrawn, or disruptive students.
- Use technology more effectively.

The Teaching Center offers:

- Weekly workshops
- Individual consultations
- Certification in pedagogy
- Observations on your teaching
- A library of teaching, job search, and publishing resources

A catalyst for innovation, The Teaching Center

- Promotes interdisciplinary
- Sponsors research in the science of learning
- Supports improvements in the assessment of learning outcomes
- Works collaboratively to improve public education through community and school partnerships

To arrange a one-on-one consultation, contact:

Steven Mintz
smintz@columbia.edu
212-854-1066

3. Don't discuss your "journey," that is, your research process.

- This is not the Oprah Winfrey Show.
- Instead, explain why this topic hasn't been studied before or why earlier approaches are inadequate.

4. Anticipate objections and counterarguments.

Identifying a Topic

1. Close a gap in the scholarship: There are gaps in the scholarship, and I will close them.
2. Debunk a myth: There is a "traditional" or popular interpretation of this issue that I will debunk.
3. Complicate a topic: The existing interpretation of this topic is far too simple
4. Take sides in a debate: There is a debate on this topic, and I will demonstrate that one side is right and the other wrong.
5. Recast a debate: There is a debate on this topic, and I will demonstrate that the debate must be recast, because previous scholars have asked the wrong questions, or viewed the topic in the wrong way.
6. Refine or rebut a generalization: I will use a case study to refine or rebut a generalization.

Making a Compelling Argument

1. Translate your topic into a problem

Then ask yourself: Why should the reader care? "So what?"

2. Offer a solution to the problem

3. Offer evidence to support your solution

4. Identify alternatives or objections to your solution.

"To be sure..."

"Admittedly..."

"Some have claimed..."

Follow with a rebuttal:

"But..."

"However..."

"On the other hand..."

5. Show the value of your solution

Edit Your Work Like a Pro

Wait--and re-read your work with a fresh eye

Get rid of redundancies

Delete unnecessary words

Revise paragraph order