

Writing in the Disciplines

Many of RISD's Liberal Arts classes, especially in the first year, are writing intensive, meaning you will be asked to write a series of papers throughout the semester. The writing varies greatly from one class to the next because all Liberal Arts assignments are rooted in specific disciplinary conventions that you will learn along the way.

Engaging in these modes of thinking and writing allows us to diversify and deepen our learning and communication skills. Using the distinct vocabularies and stylistic conventions of a disciplinary discourse also allows you to both acquire knowledge and produce it.

Your professors will address the writing conventions of their specific disciplines in class. Here, we list general disciplinary conventions to help you to notice differences and commonalities and transfer skills you've gained along the way.

Literature

Writing in literature is about learning to write as a reader. Good practice starts with "active reading" — annotating the text, recording first responses, and re-reading for new observations.

Being a writer in literature also means being a critic, both of the text you're reading and of your own writing. Your personal connection to a work or conjecture about the author's intent is usually left out or at least not relied on in your conclusions. Instead, literary analysis seeks to understand a text's meaning and significance. Analysis comes from reading a piece with careful attention to specific characters, events, or dialogue, looking for repetition, patterns, disruptions, and anything that stands out. From this, you can find symbols, metaphors, or themes that change or enhance your understanding of the piece as a whole. You might choose one or two points for close reading: focusing on the precise details of syntax, structure, tone, or other features of the text. Specific lenses may also be applied — like feminist, historical, post-structural, or queer theory — depending on the focus of the course and/or the text itself. Analytical essays can follow a variety of rhetorical modes, like compare and contrast or cause and effect.

Tips for writing about literature:

- identify intended readers, particularly their familiarity with the text
- identify and analyze specific details
- quote the text to exemplify your points
- write in present tense (the text, including all events and actions, exists now)

Art History

In art-historical writing, looking closely at the work of art is often the first step. Close observation supports both the translation of the visual into the verbal (written description) and the crafting of an argument based on that observation. Art-historical writing is not merely a description of what you see but an expression of how you see, of how you interpret meaning from what you see, and of the significance of your point of view.

A common form of writing in art history — one assigned in all H101 sections — is formal analysis, which describes the formal elements of a work of art to support an interpretation of its meaning. A strong formal analysis is illuminating, original, and convincing, combining

insightful interpretation with apt formal evidence. Other art-historical writing conventions include sociological or biographical essays that explore the context around an artist, artwork, or art movement; iconographic essays or “image writing,” which explores the meaning of symbols in an artwork; and iconological essays or “image study,” which uses literary and other outside texts to interpret a work. These conventions require not only looking and analysis but careful research, critical reading, and effective incorporation of sources.

Tips for writing in art history:

- discuss artworks in present tense (while made in the past, they exist now)
- analyze as you describe; describe as you analyze (meaning and form are integral)
- experiment with topical, spatial, or chronological organization
- avoid the subjective “I” (the writer’s interpretation of the work is individual, but she seeks to convince all readers of its truth)
- avoid attributing intention to the artist (NOT “Picasso was distraught when he painted Guernica”; instead, “Guernica evokes the tragedy of war”)

History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences

While housed in one department at RISD, History, Philosophy, and Social Science (HPSS) papers will cover a wide array of styles, formats, and rhetorical modes. Most HPSS professors, in keeping with the writing practices of their fields, emphasize the importance of making a clear argument backed by well-chosen evidence.

History

History writing constructs arguments, based on evidence, as the basis for an interpretation of the past — to describe what happened, and why. History does not simply exist, it is constructed by historians through careful selection and orchestration of documents, artifacts, and other relics of the past. Some historical writing relies on primary sources, reconstructing and interpreting a historical event using materials from its time period. History papers utilizing primary sources often follow a narrative, chronological structure. Historical writing that relies on secondary sources interprets history through the analysis and synthesis of texts written “after the fact.” After carefully identifying and evaluating the differing views and arguments presented in these secondary texts, the writer generates a new interpretation that may support or challenge those views and arguments. Historical analyses and syntheses typically follow an expository model that appeals to logic.

Tips for writing about history:

- write in the past tense
- integrate argument and narration
- give the reader an appropriate amount of context
- address evidence that opposes your argument
- understand and respect the integrity of the culture or time period
- be mindful of and seek to eliminate your biases while avoiding the subjective “I”

Philosophy

Philosophy papers, like most academic writing, present a thesis, provide reasoned support for that thesis, and arrive at a conclusion. Unlike in other disciplines, however, clear, logical, elegant argument is especially essential in philosophical writing. Writing in philosophy is not so much reporting facts or presenting research, nor is it summaries of other points of view or simple statements of opinion. Central arguments and subsidiary arguments, or “claims,” are defended using methodically presented supporting reasons, or “premises,” that lend to the development of a strong conclusion. In other words, how you argue your point is just as important as the point you make.

Potential approaches to a philosophical argument:

- make a claim and offer plausible reasons or examples to support it
- make a claim and refute counterarguments, proving them to be unfounded
- revise a claim in response to counterarguments
- criticize an argument by disproving arguments for it
- contrast two or more views on a given issue and argue for one over the other

Social Sciences

Writing in the social sciences largely depends on the production and presentation of discoveries through evidence. This evidence can be either quantitative (based on numbers and statistics) or qualitative (based on observation and experimentation). Social science research and writing differs from other humanities in that there are no outside “texts” to refer to. Instead, the writer devises a method for acquiring the necessary evidence and presents their findings. Some methods for creating and documenting discoveries in the social sciences are:

- field work and notes
- interviews
- surveys and questionnaires
- controlled experiments
- controlled observations

Social science writing seeks to be as objective, scholarly, and trustworthy as possible. It often takes on a concise, passive voice. Papers in the social sciences are often written after the preliminary research is completed, the data collected and documented.

Writing in the social sciences follows a fairly fixed format:

1. Abstract (100–200 word summary delineating the purpose of the study, methods, and results)
2. Introduction (definition of the issue to be explored, contextualization of other sources/studies on the issue, identification of gaps in the existing literature, and explanation of how the study addresses those gaps)
3. Description of methods
4. Declaration of results
5. Discussion of results
6. Conclusion