

Visual Writing

Visual Writing

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book is dedicated to my wonderful wife, EunKyung, who has always been a rock of support. To our daughter, Sophie, who brings us joy every day. And to my parents, Peter and Kathleen, who have always been there for me.

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INTRODUCTION: TO THE TEACHER

This book is based on the writing instruction provided within the US *Freshman Composition* course, which is mandatory for all university students in the USA; as such, some of the terminology used derives from this course (e.g. thesis statement). A potential flaw, however, is that this course approaches academic writing from a generic viewpoint, in terms of largely focusing on *the basics of academic writing*, such as grammar and structure, but not always delving deeper. Moreover, it simultaneously approaches academic writing from a very *specific* perspective, in terms of a style of writing which is perhaps more commonly found within the Literature department. This might explain why so many Freshman Composition textbooks exhort students to write with a “catchy” style, to include the use of figures of speech such as metaphors and similes. While this might be more common in literary academic essays, is it perhaps not quite as relevant for science essays (but certainly not proscribed either).

Therefore, this book attempts a twofold perspective regarding academic writing; first, to indeed make students aware of the basics of academic essay writing which apply to all disciplines and secondly, to make students aware of some of the discipline-specific features. In addition, the personal essay, quite often a staple of the Freshman Composition course, is also focused on in this book and while it is acknowledged that this is not the typical essay found outside of composition classes, it is hoped that it might be used within your own writing class, either assessed or non-assessed, as a means to help “jump start” the writing process for your students.

In terms of the visual medium as a means to help teach academic writing, I begin by stating that the visual medium has been a staple of the classroom, all classes and all levels, for centuries. Arguably the most basic visual aid of all is the black (or white) board, which teachers have used in conjunction with their lesson, to explain, and illustrate, their lecture. The blackboard has seen countless mathematical equations, scientific theories and historical dates written upon it, all of which give students an understanding of the class material on a visual level. In the classrooms over the past few decades, handouts have also become a

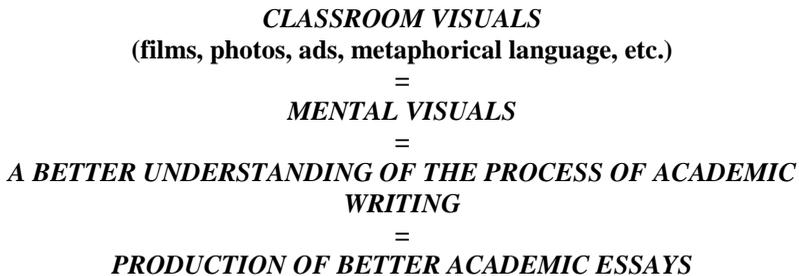
feature of the lecture, which, while not necessarily using visuals *per se* (i.e. pictures, pie charts, drawings, etc.), certainly classify as a visual aid, as they involve the students using their eyes to read and ponder the written material. Nowadays in the 21st-century, Power Point has become very commonly used as a means of helping students to understand *visually* what the teacher is explaining *orally*. Therefore, the visual medium is by no means a stranger to the classroom, be it a high school chemistry class or a graduate law course at Oxford.

I further wish to state that my book does not make reference to theories of writing or to the theorists themselves. This is because I assume that as composition teachers you are already familiar with this area, having studied the subject of academic writing from a more informed, theoretical perspective. In addition, I wanted to write a book that reads like a book and not a doctoral thesis. In other words, I wanted this book to simply “cut to the chase” as it were and focus on the subject at hand: how to use visuals in the writing classroom as a means to facilitate learning.

Based on research conducted on the use of visuals in the classroom (everything from pictures/artwork to films, and a variety of subjects, not just writing), it appears that there are indeed several advantages. A visual pedagogy obviously works best for students who themselves are visual learners and respond best to such an approach. Furthermore, a visual approach can lead to increased literacy skills, improved self-expression and increased motivation and confidence. My main justification for such an approach, however, is that using the visual medium for the teaching of academic writing can be fun for teacher and student alike. Examples of the visual medium can include audio-visual aids (perhaps a more traditional visual aid nowadays) such as Power Point; analysis of advertisements and TV commercials, discussing how all the visual elements of colour, spacing, font, etc. come together to produce a coherent whole; and motion pictures, the latter visual focused on to a great extent in this book.

Ultimately, the most important visual of all that the exercises in this book seek to inspire is *mental visuals* in the student’s mind regarding their academic writing. This can include students tossing an idea around in their head about a potential essay subject or visualising their essay’s structure by having first thought about essay writing in visual terms, such as the structure of a building. In this manner, the use of metaphor is arguably an effective visual aid, as it can help students to think of an abstract concept such as an essay in more concrete terms (e.g. comparing an essay’s introduction paragraph to the foundation of a building). This approach is not intended to be patronising to the students or teacher,

however. Instead, it is designed to simply take the classroom material and relate it to objects in the real world, and vice versa, as a means to help students better relate to classroom material. A simple diagram is provided below, which helps to clarify the way in which visuals of several kinds are used within this book as a learning aid:



The diagram above is not meant to oversimplify what can be, for some students at least, a very mystifying and challenging task—the production of a quality academic essay. However, for reasons already provided, it is felt that the use of a visual approach, especially in a class where it is not usually expected, can help to make the subject more tangible for students. This can subsequently lead to improved understanding and ability in essay writing. The use of visuals, it should be pointed out, is intended to be supplementary to more traditional teaching methods, such as reading, essay analysis and perhaps peer review and for the most part, this book provides information more relevant to an essay of 1500–2500 words, the kind of essay that first-year university undergraduates will encounter.

For teachers who feel that using more of the visual, in particular film clips, is not appropriate for whatever reason, I wish to restate that I am not ignoring the need for the more traditional aspects of a composition class; instead, I advocate the need for more fun ways to learn, with the emphasis on both the words *fun* and *learn*, since the two words can, and should, be placed together. In addition, besides using the visual medium as a means to make learning fun, I also suggest unique ways of making the more traditional areas of composition, such as instruction in coherence/structure, more accessible to the student body, while still using a more traditional visual medium. This can include, for example, student analysis of samples of actual writing. Therefore, whether we use visuals such as films or find more creative ways to analyse writing samples, we succeed in making composition more interesting for students while at the same time creating

a classroom atmosphere more conducive to learning, the ultimate purposes for writing this book.

Ultimately, however, I imagine that the majority of teachers who read this book are already convinced on the applicability, and need, for the visual medium to be used within the classroom. My reason, therefore, for listing the benefits of the visual medium in the classroom is not to convince skeptical teachers of its suitability, but rather to *confirm* for teachers (who already agree with use of the visual medium) its suitability. Therefore, I do not seek to try and change anyone's mind about the effectiveness of the visual medium; if that were so, I wouldn't be writing a book about how to use such a medium, since such a book already presupposes its effectiveness. Rather, I would be writing, as already mentioned, something along the lines of a PhD thesis, arguing for the use of the visual medium, but here there is no argument: I completely stand by the idea that incorporating visual teaching within the classroom helps to achieve academic success for students. If, however, there are some of you who might not be completely comfortable using a visual approach to any extent, then I can only point out the obvious: namely, that in today's world more than ever, we (especially children) are bombarded with visuals on a daily basis, such as advertisements on billboards and in magazines, Play stations, the Internet, pop-up ads, text message emoticons and much more. In fact, it can be said that today's children are growing up in a world much more visual than their parents. Therefore, if we are truly preparing students for the real world in which they will find their eventual careers, then it makes sense for us as educators to incorporate elements of that real world inside the classroom; the real world that students are exposed to in their lives *outside* the classroom. In doing so, we help to create a classroom environment that is just as real.

INTRODUCTION: TO THE STUDENT

Don't let anyone fool you: *writing is a messy business*. It takes time to develop a good essay, involving lots of planning, writing, rewriting, revising, editing and fine tuning. And just when you think you're finished, you can end up going back to the beginning and wanting to start all over again. On the other hand, you might just feel that your essay needs a bit of final polish before submitting it to your teacher. Either way, I don't want to discourage you before you even get started by telling you how much work is involved—I'm sure you already know. Instead, I want to actually encourage you from the start by destroying some myths about writing:

Writing Myths

MYTH # 1: Good writers can write in their sleep (*or at least can write well in a short time*)

Myth # 1 is probably the most problematic because it presumes that the “messy business” of writing that I mentioned is a sign of *bad* writers. To produce good academic essays, however, requires time and effort. Think about your hobbies for a moment. What are you good at? Football? Speaking a foreign language? Playing computer games? Whatever your talent might be, I'm sure you'll agree that it took time to get to the level you're at now. In other words, you didn't learn how to score goals, communicate in a foreign language or defeat computer-generated baddies *overnight*. You had to work hard to do so. Granted, working hard for something you enjoy may not *seem* like hard work, but it's hard work all the same.

The greats of the acting world were not born that way either. They had to work hard to get there. They had to spend lots of time in acting school during some pretty lean years before they got their break. The greats of the sports world were not born that way. They had to sacrifice and spend long days at the gym and long nights on the sports court to get there. The greats of the mountain climbing world were not born that way. They had to spend a lot of time climbing smaller mountains in order to then climb

much bigger mountains, all while risking their lives. Bottom line: it takes time to develop your ability in *anything*, no matter how much “natural talent” you may be blessed with. Besides, all the natural talent and ability in the world is wasted on someone who doesn’t have the motivation to work at it (more about this is discussed as part of Myth # 2).

Going back to childhood, did you learn to tie your shoelaces overnight or learn to ride a bike or swim in just one day? Of course not. But when you did learn these things, I’m sure you wondered why they had ever been so difficult in the first place. It’s the same with writing. You need to understand the basics first and practice writing smaller essays and develop your skills by revising. All the best writers got where they are by doing this and do you know what? They are able to remain proficient writers because they *still* take their time to develop a good finished piece of writing by planning, writing and revising. The famous image of an author hunched over a typewriter with countless scrunched up papers spilling out of a waste basket as he desperately searches for the right words is not far wrong. We don’t get to see the revision that takes place behind closed doors but trust me, it happens. In addition, the greatest speakers take time to write their speech and then may spend hours practicing it in front of friends until they are satisfied they have it right. If the “professionals” take their time to write then we can all learn from them. By the way, I honestly can’t remember how many drafts this book of mine has undergone, not to mention the imagining and pre-planning that had to take place before I had even chosen the title!

And don’t forget! You’re not being asked to read Shakespeare in front of a sold-out audience, write a book or climb Mount Everest. You’re being asked to write an academic essay. You can, and will, do it. And once you’ve written one essay the rest will get easier. You just need to *take your time* and *give it time*.

MYTH # 2: Writing is a natural talent – you either have it or you don’t

This is also a myth because it would mean that if you are not one of the “lucky few” blessed with natural ability, you can only go so far. I acknowledge of course that we all have abilities in certain areas that others may not. Perhaps you have a talent for cooking or archery and enjoy sharing your knowledge of it with others. However, can people with a “natural talent” for something simply afford to switch on the automatic pilot and not do any work? Can we simply rely on our natural abilities to do the work for us without having to do any work ourselves? The

discussion regarding Myth # 1 has hopefully made it clear that no amount of talent means that we don't have to work to develop such talent.

Though I'm sure you agree with the need for hard work, you might be saying that those with talent don't have to work quite as hard. I personally think, however, that it is a love for what we do that makes the hard work seem less like hard work, as I mentioned earlier. In other words, it's the love of our activities that fuels the hard work and subsequent improvement, more than any natural ability. Think about it. What seems easier to you? Spending two hours practicing an activity or hobby that you love or spending fifteen minutes cleaning the dishes?

Furthermore, are the students who get first class essay scores only those with talent? Can't students with less interest in essay writing also get good scores? And don't forget—all the talent in the world cannot make up for a lack of motivation. Therefore, if you truly are determined to improve and develop your academic writing (or any kind of writing), then you already have an advantage over those with talent but no motivation. And one last thing: you **do not** have to be a Stephen King for inspiration to strike! In fact, inspiration strikes when you least expect it. What I mean by inspiration is a great idea for your essay that very often comes to you out of the blue. This could include a word which you think sounds really good to help describe your subject, a really effective metaphor or even a great title for your essay.

MYTH # 3: Academic writing kills all my creativity

This is a common belief and one of the reasons why you may be resentful toward academic writing in particular. While creative writing such as poetry and fiction may give you more freedom with regard to how you write, academic writing does not mean that you have to leave your creativity and personal voice at home.

This is because of the importance of *context*. While the context of academic writing generally demands a more formal style than other kinds of writing, this does not mean that you can NEVER use slang, for example, or a few figures of speech. This is because there are other, more narrow contexts to consider as you write your essays. The subject of your academic essay, for example, and whether or not it's a personal essay are two contexts to think about, as well as the department you're writing in (e.g. Physics or Literature). And these are some considerations that can affect the way in which you should write, with a personal essay allowing for perhaps a bit more freedom in how you communicate your ideas to your reader and a good way to get started. For example, a personal

academic essay written about a childhood hobby has more freedom with regard to its style than an academic argument essay which focuses on the subject of abortion. More about this will be discussed later but for now, consider the fact that you don't have to say goodbye to your personal voice when you put pen to paper for what will eventually become a completed academic essay.

MYTH # 4: I have to write about something my teacher will like or agree with

This is not true at all for two important reasons. First, it can be fairly common to be assigned a personal essay for one of your writing assignments. The personal essay is a good choice to begin with as it can help to loosen up your "writing muscles" in preparation for other essays. The point here is that with a personal essay *you* are in charge of the subject. *You* decide. *You* do the talking. With this in mind, a teacher expects to read about something that he or she may not have knowledge of and rather than being put off by this, is usually intrigued. Over the years, I have read many personal essays, and very often, they read more like private essays, as they have dealt with very emotional subjects for the students. One essay dealt with the death of a student's friend in a car accident and another focused on a student's back injuries which prevented him from pursuing his love of basketball. Even if you don't enjoy writing, the freedom of expression that a personal essay can bring can help you to vent your inner emotions and feelings. I believe that this can help you by "getting it off your chest", whatever "it" may be, as was the case with several of my own students. It's up to you of course how personal a personal essay is, but this is something to think about.

At the end of the day, there is no subject that has to be off limits within academic writing, more so if you choose the subject as part of a personal essay. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you have to write about something "academic", such as the discovery of penicillin or a solution to the depletion of the Ozone layer. This is simply not true. Don't forget—you are being scored on your ability to write an academic essay based on the necessary components of good academic writing, which will be described in Chapter 2. You are *not* being graded on your ability to choose a subject that your teacher thinks is the best thing since sliced bread or a subject that some stuffy PhD committee thinks is suitably "academic". As a matter of fact, one of the best academic essays I ever read in my life was an essay about how to make apple pie. It doesn't get much simpler than that!

Secondly, the world of academia is one which is objective in nature and this applies to the scoring of essays. So even when you have written a more *impersonal* essay, perhaps an argument essay for which you conducted research, the teacher's job is to read it like a doctor, with emotions held back and simply mark and score your essay based on how well you have attended to the suggested "pillars" of academic writing: unity (i.e. maintaining a single main focus throughout your essay); coherence (i.e. creating a structure that is easy for your reader to follow); using Standard English grammar; providing ample support; and maintaining an appropriate overall style. It doesn't matter, then, whether I or any teacher agrees with your opinions or assertions, or likes your essay's subject. All that matters is that you have provided adequate support for your beliefs within your essay, because support is one of the fundamental pillars of academic writing; making sure your teachers agree with your opinions, however, is not.

It is based on these considerations that I can honestly say, as a teacher, that I have sometimes read essays which I found personally interesting based on the subject matter (such as an essay discussing the work of Al Pacino), but had to deduct points because of problems with grammar and/or other items; on the other hand, I have read essays many times whose subjects I did not find interesting on a personal level but because the essays displayed strength in all the relevant areas, the student(s) received a first class score. This is what objectivity is all about.

Before beginning Chapter 1, I wish to first discuss my hope in writing this book: to make learning within the writing classroom more accessible and therefore more fun, in preparation for your future academic writing requirements. The composition class is one in which the students sometimes arrive with minimum enthusiasm and maximum fear, thereby raising the question as to how the class can be made more conducive to learning, by taking away some of the fear, even resentment, and replacing it with more interest. One way to accomplish this and make the class more accessible is to create a class that is relevant to students' lives, and my book will describe how the visual medium, be it films, recipes or advertisements, can achieve this goal. What my book cannot promise, however, is that it will help you enjoy writing more, but perhaps it can help you hate it less!

Second, besides students, the other group for whom my book is written is of course your composition teachers, who all strive to create a classroom environment more conducive to learning and help their students to become better writers. In order to achieve this objective, I am of the opinion, as already mentioned, that the visual medium is one that is most attractive to

students for the simple reason that we are all exposed to visuals on a daily basis, with previous examples provided, so it makes sense to bring the real world into the classroom, to include visuals from that world. To help both you and your teacher get the most out of my book, it certainly helps to have a good knowledge, and appreciation, of films, and preferably to have a few favourites of your own to use. If not, don't worry as many examples are provided.

Now that I have hopefully destroyed some myths, please read on. There are many visual exercises which will follow and I hope you will use these as a means to develop your academic writing and have fun as you do so. The point is that I don't simply want to tell you how to be a good writer. Instead, I want to *show* you how to be a good writer.

CHAPTER ONE

ESSAY GENRE

The genre of your essay, as the term is specifically applied in this chapter, refers to the main purpose of your essay. While Chapter 3 will expand on this more in relation to creating a main point for your essay (known as a “thesis”), I start now by providing you with an overview. Broadly, there are four academic essay genres—exposition, description, narration and argumentation:

- **Exposition**—You seek to **inform your reader about a given subject** and explain what it’s all about. An expository essay sample is provided below:

The behaviour of water when it drops below 3° is regarded as ‘anomalous’ precisely because it defies expectation. Rather than continue to contract, it suddenly expands. This explains why the water levels are raised in an ice cube tray – it is due to the fact that the water, having reached a certain temperature, begins to rise, not continue to contract. This behaviour might imply that.....

The sample above helps to explain a property of water and continues with the start of a personal observation in the final sentence. Rather than merely describe (see the discussion below), expository writing serves to go into more analytical depth, very often in the form of one’s personal understanding of the subject.

- **Description**—There are two ways to consider what is meant by “description”. One involves **creating a picture of your subject**, whether it’s a person, place or an animal, often referring to the ways in which the senses are involved.

This kind of description can be useful in academic essays within the Arts and Humanities in particular, for example, describing your interpretation of an impressionist painting (e.g. a *rotund, mustachioed*

French man smokes a *chunky* Havana cigar, while the *vibrant* colours which surround him merge into a *drunken* rainbow); or describing the smell, sight and texture of a specific dish, written for a cooking class, in which respective words such as *fragrant*, *inviting* and *crumbly* might be used.

- A second kind of description does not necessarily rely on adjectives to describe any of the five senses involved within a certain subject. Instead, this kind of description simply discusses basic information about your subject: **what it is and what it's about, but offers little more.**

Description of this kind should not dominate your essays, but should be used as a prelude to more analytical writing (more on this later). An example is provided below:

The film *Psycho* (1960) is about a young woman, Marian Crane, on the run, having stolen money from her employer. One rainy night she stops at the Bates Motel, where she checks in for the night. She meets the manager, Norman Bates, who seems friendly, if a little nervous. After she checks in, she meets him in his parlour for supper, where he discusses the problems with his mother.....

Hopefully, you can see the direction this essay is going in. It does little more than recount the events of a film, without any analysis (e.g. discussing how the use of camera helps to create tension, or pondering the Norman Bates' character on a deeper level) or going into more explanatory depth. This is what distinguishes this kind of description from exposition. As mentioned, exposition goes into more detail than just the surface information of a subject, such as its definition or a step-by-step account of the basics. Exposition is essentially about "here are the facts explained from my understanding". An example of a more expository approach taken to the paragraph above might read thus:

The film *Psycho* (1960) is about a young woman, Marian Crane, on the run, having stolen money from her employer, *in order to help her down on his luck boyfriend. Though we know she's committed a crime, we somehow sympathise with her.* One rainy night during her travels, she stops at the Bates Motel, where she checks in for the night. She meets the manager, Norman Bates, who seems friendly, if a little nervous. *He invites her to supper with him, happy to make her some food. It is perhaps obvious to Marian that he is attracted to her, though she does not seem to*

feel threatened. During her meal, Norman discusses the problems with his mother.....

The italicised portions serve to offer more of the expository depth needed for an academic essay.

- **Narration**–You seek to **tell a story (or case study)**, relevant to your essay’s main focus. Bear in mind that narration can function as expository writing–the difference is in its method. In other words, you’re using a story in order to explain events relevant to your essay.

With regard to the issue of the current economic crisis, the story of Maria Jones is unfortunately typical. She was made redundant from her job as a caretaker just one month ago, which forced her to move from her rented apartment into a rented garage. Even living in no more than a cramped single room presents a struggle for her to make the rent. She rises at 6:00 every morning in order to help her two sons get ready for the day ahead of them.....

As can be seen, the kind of narration used within certain departments (check with your lecturers to see if yours is one of them) often functions to put a human face on the subject under discussion (common in the Social Sciences, such as Sociology). This differs of course from the kind of narration found in fiction, but broadly, they are both the same in that they present a story for the reader. With fiction, the story seeks to entertain; with academic essays, the story seeks to inform.

- **Argumentation**–You seek to **persuade your reader** that your opinion on a given subject is the most valid. Any issue which has more than one viewpoint is a potential argument.

Nowadays, the issue of animal rights would appear to be at the forefront of a great debate. The debate in question revolves around the issue of whether we should or should not allow animal testing for the purposes of benefiting mankind, but when weighing up the benefits, the answer should fall in favour of people. Those who have life threatening diseases can, and have been helped, precisely because testing animals, albeit under the most humane of conditions, has helped to discover treatments that can benefit them. We need, therefore, to consider the long term benefits to people, before rushing to condemn the work of scientists and doctors whose role is to benefit mankind.

Do bear in mind, however, that in terms of academic essays, there is no “pure” genre, because very often, your essay will rely on several genres to make its points, albeit secondary to the essay’s main purpose. This is also true in the real world. Consider motion pictures, in which a science fiction film, such as *Star Wars*, offers more than just sci-fi. Though science fiction is undoubtedly the main genre, there are secondary genres of *fantasy*, *adventure* and *action*.

To illustrate this notion of a “hybrid essay genre” further, if discussing your personal language use within an essay, this would largely be expository based, but can very often involve some narration (e.g. recounting stories of how you learned language as a child) and even have a touch of argument, such as arguing against the idea that one accent is “better” or “worse” than another.

In the end, it is **the instructions for your essay assignments** (i.e. the essay question itself) that dictate the main rhetorical function of your essay, and learning to analyse essay questions is very important. Analysing the question is basically about **isolating the key words** from the question and then seeing how **they all fit together to form one coherent essay purpose**. Some essay questions can be no more than a sentence; others may consist of more detailed information provided in bullet points. Consider the following:

Write an essay which argues for or against a government provided health care system in the USA.

In the example above, look for the key words:

- *argue(s)*
- *or*
- *health care system in the USA*

1. Argue

Clearly, the main purpose of this essay is to argue. Think about this term, obvious though it may seem. If you’re arguing with a friend or colleague, what are you really trying to do? Insult them? Hurt their feelings? Hopefully not, and such language is pretty much off limits in academic writing anyway. Are you trying to persuade them that you are right and they are wrong? Well, perhaps. But in academic writing terms, we would generally avoid notions of “right” and “wrong” as they sound too absolute, overly assertive and perhaps a bit too emotional. Therefore,

for the essay above, persuasion is indeed the right way to go, but in a logical manner, one based on facts, and less on emotion. Think of it this way: have you ever heard someone give an argument (such as on a debate team) which relied on powerful use of language (but not too much emotion) and a logical chain of thought and reasoning? Perhaps you didn't agree with their argument, but *you agreed that it was well presented*. This is the stuff that an academic argument is made of.

2. Or

Even a seemingly innocent word like “or” can have a big effect on your understanding of the essay question and subsequently, how well you answer the question (or not). Basically, you need to focus on just one side of the coin regarding the argument, based on the use of the word “or” in the question. Not all argument essays have to follow this “one-sided” aspect necessarily, but again, the essay instructions will tell you what is required. If you were required to discuss both sides of the coin, regardless of which side you're on, then the question might read thus (but of course, does not):

“Write an essay which argues for or against a government provided health care system in the USA, showing the sides of both arguments, however—both private and socialised medicine”.

3. Health Care System in the USA

This is the focus of the essay in terms of the subject of the very argument you're making. You would need to research the health care system in the USA, but as most arguments are concerned with opposites, then we can expect that the opposite of “government provided health care” (such as that in the UK), would be privatised medicine. This in turn involves health care plans and insurance that you must pay for yourself.

If you were to argue for a government provided health care system in the USA, then what support would you give? You could, for example, focus on the benefits of this system, using information gleaned from countries which have such health care (such as the UK, Sweden, Canada and so on). You might want to also refute the current health care system in the USA, offering support as to why it is *not* as effective as some might otherwise believe. In the end, there would be many ways to provide support, but we're still at the starting post for your essay after all: deciding

what the main purpose of the essay is, and based on this example, the importance of analysing essay questions has hopefully been made clear.

Finally, we could imagine that besides making an argument, other genres may play a part too in the essay described above:

Exposition

It stands to reason that when arguing about something, you need to explain something about it first. In this case, there would need to be some exposition perhaps, telling your reader about the different health plans provided in the USA—their names, what they cover, what they don't cover, costs to the company, costs if a person pays for them privately and so on. The main issue is that the reader understands the facts before you start to argue your side.

In the USA, privatised health care plans come in a variety of packages, with some covering more than others, but at a greater price. Blue Cross and Kaiser, for example, are two main providers. For the employed, their company provides a comprehensive health care plan, with usually a relatively small contribution from the employee. However, this only applies to the *full-time* employee. Where does that leave those who are part-time, self-employed or unemployed?

A brief background is provided above, which then serves to lead into the actual argument, seen indirectly, but seen nonetheless, with the use of the rhetorical question in the final sentence. Prior to this, however, the writer is withholding his/her argument and simply explaining the facts, to make the reader more aware of the subject which is being argued.

Narration

Here's where you might feel it necessary to provide "stories" as it were, which could involve the following:

- **Personal experience with either system** (though ensure that narratives, especially first person narratives, are acceptable within your department's writing)
- **Examples of case studies or other people's experiences with either health care system** (taken from news reports perhaps)

A personal narrative might read thus:

When I was just a boy, I was in need of an appendectomy. In the local hospital in my hometown, no one on staff asked my parents to provide them with evidence of medical insurance, however. Instead, I was operated on within three hours, had professional follow-up care and all within a comfortable environment. The fact that my parents wouldn't have been able to pay for privatised medicine emphasises the point that free health care for all should be a right, and not based on a system of privilege where only a few have the means to pay for it.

In the sample above, the writer, through the use of a personal narrative, is also implying that free health care serves to somewhat break down the class barriers, as it's provided for all a country's citizens, rich and poor alike. Though this is not *the* argument that the essay calls for, it is being used presumably as *support* for the main argument.

Description

Finally, description within the argument essay might involve “painting a picture” of the way in which the senses are involved. For example, what are the sights and sounds of the hospital you might wish to focus on?

The hospitals that private insurance companies provide offer patients all the comforts of home that they would expect, such as private bedrooms, a TV with cable, quality food and immaculate surroundings. You can even rely on fresh flowers every day in some cases. If items such as TVs and flowers have been taken care of, then it is a safe assumption that the most important aspect of all—professional medical care—has been taken care of also.

Again, we can see how an argument is being built up to, in this case with a description first, consisting of adjectives such as *quality*, *immaculate* and *fresh*, all of which combine to create a vivid visual image in the reader's mind as to what the hospital might look like.

Let's consider a final example of deconstructing an essay question, as the means to determine the essay's main rhetorical function:

Write an essay discussing the rise of Joe's Coffee House across Europe from 2000–2005.

In the essay question above, the words “an”, “the” and “of” are not necessarily key words (grammatically speaking, yes they are, but they don't add information about what type of essay you're being required to write and what specific aspects of the subject you need to address).

However, the word “discussing” is very important to note, because it suggests that **an expository approach** to the essay is expected, not so much an argument. This is because the word “discuss” means something to the effect of “to talk (or write) about something in order to consider different ideas or opinions about it”. The fact that you might consider different ideas or opinions on a given subject is not indicative of an argument essay, which usually seeks to focus on just *one specific idea*, and possibly refute evidence for other sides of “the argument coin” in the process. With the question given, then, you’re being asked to inform the reader about the rise of Joe’s Coffee House across Europe (“Joe’s Coffee House across Europe” are also key words of course, as they are the subject of the essay, and not “Joe’s Coffee House across Asia”) within a specific time period (i.e. 2000–2005 **only**, and not before or after). If you were to have a conversation about this subject, it would probably focus mainly on explaining how Joe’s Coffee House spread its influence across Europe (e.g. clever marketing, appealing to the European love of coffee, etc.) while allowing for some argument (e.g. arguing that *Joe’s Coffee House offers a superior cup of coffee* and therefore has few rivals). In short, the essay question above, if you look at it carefully, is clearly suggesting that you as the writer should primarily take an expository approach.

Therefore, consider your essay question carefully as this is the narrowest level of contextual information with regard to how to write your essay and the most relevant, as it dictates the way in which you must of course write your essay.

Having discussed how to approach, analyse and understand your essay question, and before moving on to how to actual start your essay, let’s now try to answer a very important, and relevant, question: *what exactly is good writing?*

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER ONE

1. Learn to carefully analyse the essay question, identifying the key words as a means to discover the essay's main genre.
2. Give thought to the context of your academic essay before you write: is it primarily trying to explain, persuade or simply tell a story? Is it a personal essay? Think about such things before you write.
3. Don't forget that an essay rarely relies on one genre alone to do its job, however. Remember that your essay will inevitably exhibit aspects of several essay genres, with **one main genre**, however, as its **ultimate focus and purpose**.

CHAPTER TWO

BEFORE YOU WRITE

Let's start from the beginning. Before a single word of the first draft of your essay has been composed, in fact, before you have even been given a subject for your first essay (or chosen one yourself), let's try to answer the following question: *what is good writing?* On the first day of my own writing classes, I take the time to do just this. First, I write on the board in large letters **WHAT IS GOOD WRITING?** Then, I give each student a handout which contains three short samples of writing, each sample belonging to a different writing genre. By the way, in this chapter I generally use the word "genre" to refer to *writing genres* (e.g. business writing, creative writing, etc.); in Chapter 1, however, the word genre referred of course to *academic essay genres* (e.g. argumentation).

After the students have been given the time to analyse the writing samples in groups, I then open up the class discussion by asking the question *is this good writing?*, in relation to each of three writing samples. The purpose of this exercise is to help students understand exactly what is meant by "good" writing, by focusing on the area that determines the definition of "good": *context*.

Sample One

When I arrived at the bridge, fixin' to do a spot of fishin', I done seen a ghost! Shit! I ran back home as fast as my legs could carry me, afraid to look back. I ain't never been there since.

Is this good writing?

From my experience, the students' collective answer seems to be "no". What do *you* think, however? Do you also think that the writing above is somehow "not good"? And if it isn't good, does that mean that it's bad? Perhaps because of the obvious use of slang, a swear word and non-standard grammar (*I done seen*), you might feel compelled to say that this is "bad" writing, because academic writing clearly does not *generally*