

A Brief Version of the Elements of Writing Proficiency

The Elements of Proficiency are the criteria that faculty readers use to evaluate your proficiency in critical reading, thinking, and writing. The Elements are directly related to particular aims of the General Education program (Gen. Ed.). The Gen. Ed. program is based on the premise that frequent consideration of complex problems helps you to develop the specific capabilities most often used in critical reading, writing, and thinking.

You are not expected to have mastered all of the capabilities completely; rather, you are expected to “demonstrate intermediate proficiency in writing.” This means that your writing will not be graded as a “retake” merely because it contains a few spelling or punctuation errors. However, it is unlikely that you will pass the exam without demonstrating an intermediate mastery of the higher order thinking criteria outlined in the *Elements of Writing Proficiency*.

The elements are separated into three categories: critical thinking, critical reading, and effective writing. Each of these categories is assigned a percentage weight in evaluating your essay. The categories and elements are listed below in an abbreviated form; there is a printer friendly version of the full descriptions called, *Elements of Writing Proficiency* and *Evaluation Rubric*, in the menu of the WPR website.

Critical Thinking, Effective Use of Your Own Ideas: Evaluation Area 1 = 40% of grade

- **Develop a sustained clear position, often by using a thesis, central idea, or hypothesis** about the issue under consideration. The question will instruct you how to focus on the issue; you should hold that focus throughout the whole paper. Generally, your paper should go into depth and full detail about a single topic. Deep focus allows you to inquire into a particular issue. Full detail and depth might mean you do these types of things: examine evidence closely; assess the source and quality of evidence; distinguish between facts and opinions; and/or, acknowledge, analyze, and evaluate value judgments in the readings and in your own position.
- **Synthesize source materials to support your position.** Develop your position with clear references to specific arguments in the reading set. Quote, frame, and analyze passages with the clear purpose of supporting your position. To create a context for your position, you need to summarize and attribute any ideas that you use from the readings.
- **Organize your argument in a clear and appropriate sequence** of support for the thesis, central idea or hypothesis. Sustain your position throughout the whole paper by ordering it with a clear organizing principle. Each paragraph contains one idea, supported and developed fully, that supports your thesis; paragraphs are “linked” in a chain of reasoning that develops your argument persuasively.

Critical Reading, Effective Use of Multiple Sources: Evaluation Area 2 = 40% of grade

- **Identify, Summarize, and Define key terms or categories of classification** in the reading set. Often, the purpose of academic reading and writing is to create or contest a definition of a complex concept. Often, writers organize a pattern of information around definitions. Or, writers develop a definition that contains value judgments. Try to identify the key terms and definitions in the readings; then, establish what the readings have in common, or equally important, which definitions are contested. Summaries are generalizations that condense complex ideas, sometimes by noting structures of classification, stages in a process, or abstract connections that organize an

argument. You may identify a focus or possibly supporting evidence for your thesis by identifying, summarizing and defining the key terms in the readings.

- **Analyze and Evaluate** the problem/question at issue (and/or the sources' arguments) in the reading set. Summarizing and defining the ideas in the readings starts the process of taking an idea apart so you can analyze and evaluate it. Analysis often occurs in the act of summary when you identify the key elements of an argument; however, analysis goes further than just noting the key elements. Analysis is a type of critical reading that works with the meaning of a text; perhaps reading with or against an argument or perhaps evaluating it from your position. Evaluation acknowledges various perspectives, and explains your position with a reasoned presentation of your evidence. Evaluation is the weighing of complex issues in terms of the strengths and weakness of the various perspectives.

- **Synthesize and assess** the key assumptions, concepts, themes, or ideas in the reading set. Your paper pulls together the various assumptions, ideas and issues in the readings and assesses them. Then, you synthesize the ideas so that they are connected to your position. The processes of synthesis often occurs as the continuation of analysis and evaluation; if analysis is the process of taking an idea apart to see and understand its structure, synthesis is often the process of putting an idea back in to a whole to establish its connection to your position.

Elements of Writing, Effective Use of Writing Skills: Evaluation Area 3 = 20% of grade

- **Organize paragraphs**, both globally and locally.

Global: Each paragraph signals a new idea; and, it signals how that new idea is clearly related to the paragraphs that come before and after it. Check paragraph length, unity, and order.

Local: Focus on one idea per paragraph; each sentence in the paragraph connects clearly to the meaning of other sentences. Develop ideas; this is often done when sentences pick up one idea from a previous sentence and advance it further by analyzing the idea more fully.

- **Sentences should express your meaning clearly.** Avoid these things: using clichés; using common place knowledge; using sentences that are underdeveloped or overdeveloped. Organize sentences to make your meaning clear and understandable to the readers. Check for wordiness, spelling, word choice, and mechanics.