

# Common Genres of Academic Writing



**What is a genre?** Generally, the word “genre” means a category, or type of thing. In writing, a genre is a category defined by style, intended audience, content, and purpose. Each genre has certain expectations--if a movie is advertised as a summer superhero flick, you expect different content and structure than if it is advertised as a costume drama set in 17th century France.

The following information explains some of the expectations for four common genres of academic writing: Response/Reflection, Summary, Analysis, and Persuasive Argument. These descriptions are not exhaustive, nor are these the only genres of academic writing. However, these are some of the most common expectations for these fairly common forms.

## What do professors expect from a Response or Reflection paper?

Usually, Response or Reflection writing asks you to connect something you’ve read with either your own experiences or with other work you’ve read or that you’ve studied in class. The purpose is to give you a chance to develop your ideas about the course concepts in more depth. This genre of writing has been shown to improve people’s ability to remember things they’ve read. Professors may have very specific expectations for what questions they want answered, or what style to write such papers in, so the tips below are a place to start; check your prompt or talk with your professor for more details.

Response/Reflection:

- May be personal, introspective, philosophical—a response journal, for example—or may be more formal, directly engaging ideas and expression in the target text.
- May use personal experience and/or observation to develop response.
- May not have a thesis or main idea, but usually has some focus more specific than the whole text under consideration (for example, may focus on one idea from that text, or one passage, or respond to specific questions in a prompt).
- May quote from a text for the purpose of responding to the quote, rather than for the purpose of explicating/explaining the quote or using the quote to prove a point about the text.
- Will nearly always use “I” unless otherwise specified.
- Uses paragraphs, topic sentences and/or closing sentences, an introduction, and conclusion.
- Assumes an audience of at least the author (writing to enhance one’s own understanding), and possibly others interested in what the author thinks, personally, about the ideas in the text.
- May use a less formal register, or conversational English rather than Edited Academic English.

## What do professors expect from Summary?

Summary asks you to simplify a longer text you’ve read (or watched, or heard) for someone who may not have read it (or at least not recently). Professors may assign these to check your understanding of assigned reading, to engage you in leading discussion or presenting to the class, or as part of a longer assignment (an Annotated Bibliography, for example, is mainly a collection of summaries).

Summary:

- Captures key elements of target text as objectively as possible.
- Will only use “I” or “we” if target text is author’s own (for an article abstract, for example, and possibly not even then).
- Rarely, if ever, quotes from the text.
- Does not introduce author’s opinion about the text.
- Usually one or two paragraphs, organized within the paragraph from context of the text/author, to text’s main idea, to subarguments or key evidence used to develop the main idea, closing with a paraphrase of the “take-away message” from the text.
- Assumes an audience of people considering reading the text, or interested in the major contributions the text makes to the larger conversation.
- Uses Edited Academic English.\*

## What do professors expect from Analysis?

If you are assigned an Analysis paper, your goal is to explain how something works, or how it fits into a category, or how it expressed an idea--the goal is always explaining *how*. Professors assign these to encourage you to think critically about course concepts and to introduce you to scholarly expectations in their field, since careful analysis is the basis of how most scholars and professionals communicate about their topics.

Analysis:

- Identifies specific elements of target text, and explains how those elements contribute to the text, especially how those elements might convey implicit meaning, support the explicit message, or complicate the explicit message.
- Rarely uses “I” or “we.”
- Quotes from the text in order to analyze specific details of the quote and to explain how those details contribute to the text’s message.
- Includes author’s opinion about how the details affect the text’s meaning, but NOT the author’s opinion of the text’s meaning.
- Introduction paragraph sets up context for analysis, including target text’s author, title, and other relevant details (for example, socio-historical period, genre of the text, etc.).
- Introduction paragraph establishes the writer’s claim about the text—the understanding of how the text works that the essay’s close analysis supports.
- Body paragraphs open with a topic sentence establishing the point of the paragraph, usually what element of the text the paragraph analyzes and how that element contributes to the text. Topic sentences usually also transition from the previous paragraph.
- Body paragraphs close with a sentence that wraps up the point of the paragraph.
- Conclusion paragraphs wrap up the essay as a whole, and explain what the new state of the conversation about the text is, now that the essay is part of it. (This is tough—most people struggle with conclusions.)
- Uses Edited Academic English.\*

## What do professors expect from Persuasive Argument?

If you are invited to write a Persuasive Argument (or an Argument, or a Persuasive paper, or a Researched Argument), your goal is to take an informed position on a topic and provide enough evidence and careful analysis in an appropriate structure for a target audience to persuade that audience that, at the very least, your position is a reasonable one, and at best, that your position is correct and they, too, should share it. Persuasive, researched argument is the most respected academic genre among professional scholars; when professors talk about publishing articles in journals, this is usually the genre they’re writing. Articles you may not recognize as arguments because they report results of research usually also make arguments--about previous research, about the implications of the results reported, and so on. Because there are many, many formats for different types of Persuasive Argument, from blogs to lab reports, these tips are pretty general.

Persuasive Argument:

- Takes a position on an issue within a larger conversation, and develops analysis of evidence to support that position (so usually follows conventions of Analysis, above).
- Uses quotes for one or more of the following reasons: to establish the terms of the conversation (what others who have written on the issue have said); to provide data to be analyzed in support of the argument.

\*Some of the conventions of Edited Academic English include:

- Avoiding clichés and other figurative language (unless it is explained in the essay)
- Avoiding contractions
- Avoiding second-person pronouns (you)
- Avoiding vague terms such as “things” or sweeping generalities like “People think \_\_\_\_.”
- Formal register—word choice is specific and deliberate: each word is carefully considered and ideally means exactly what the writer means, including connotations and common usage.
- Complete, most often declamatory sentences; questions are rare; exclamations almost non-existent.

## What if I don't know what genre I'm supposed to use?

The following suggestions are adapted from "Choosing Genres" in Lunsford, et al *Everyone's an Author* (2013).

If an assignment specifies a genre, think about what you know about the genre, about what it expects of you as a writer.

If an assignment doesn't specify a genre, are there any keywords that suggest one? [Tip; check out the Argumentative Spectrum for some common keywords that connect to the genres above.]

If an assignment doesn't include any clues, consider the following:

- What discipline is the assignment for? Does that discipline value positions and arguments, or objectivity and facts?
- What is the topic? Are you being asked to write "about" something? You'll probably want to analyze.
- What is your purpose in writing?
- Who is the audience? What interests and expectations might they have?
- What medium will you use? Some genres work better in certain mediums than in others (for example, narrative works well in oral presentation, because listeners tend to remember stories better than other genres).

If the assignment is wide open, check with your professor or other knowledgeable reader in your target audience. Also use what you know about genre to explore your topic.

### Resources for further reading

For more information on how Summary, Analysis, and Persuasive Argument connect with each other: Argumentative Spectrum

For more information on writing a Summary: Summary and Paraphrase

For more information on writing Analysis: Analyzing Arguments, Close Analysis Tips, Introduction to Literary Analysis, Textual Analysis Tips