

# WRITING DRAGONS

**The Cortland Composition Handbook for  
Students**



**Spring 2025 Edition**

**Cortland** SUNY

# **Writing Dragons: The Cortland Composition Handbook for Students**

Spring 2025

SUNY Cortland

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Foundational (“Anchor”) Assignment information and Student Writing Samples can be found at Digital Commons @ Cortland at <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/rhetdragonsstudentwriting/>

\*\*However, please note that we are in the process of updating the Foundational Assignment information for CPN 100/102 in the Digital Commons. The new Foundational Assignments in CPN 100 will involve the following: 1) working with one complex, source-based text; 2) synthesizing across multiple complex, source-based texts, and 3) exploring claims. The former categories of Analysis and Argument can be used to understand moves made in terms of analysis of one or more texts or ways that claims can specifically be constructed into academic arguments.

# I. Letter to Students

Dear Student,

We are so happy to welcome you into the Composition (CPN) Program at SUNY Cortland! As a student enrolled in CPN 100/102 or CPN 101/103 you will be using this handbook for understanding the policies and practices of our approach to academic writing.

Your teacher will direct you to this handbook in a variety of ways within your courses. However, the following are some other options for you to think about in using this handbook as a resource:

- Review the Student Learning Objectives of your CPN course and assignments. How does each assignment support the work of the CPN Program, as discussed in Part II?
- Reflect on the tips for writing “style” in Part III. How are these the same or different from ways you have written previously? What do you hope to learn about writing style in your CPN course?
- Browse through some of the common student concerns found in Part VI. Have you ever wondered similar questions? How has your experience in CPN 100/102 or 101/103 changed your thinking on these FAQs?
- Engage in the discussion of developing research questions in Part IV. Have you ever been asked to develop an academic research question in the past? What were your experiences? How has your process changed as a result of CPN 101?
- Explore some of the student writing samples for our anchor assignments. (Link in Part VIII.) What do you notice or think about when you read the way other students have approached an argument, analysis, researched inquiry, remix, or critical evaluation? What can you learn by engaging in writing from peer writers?

Regardless of how you choose to interact with this student handbook, we hope that you will enjoy your experience in the Composition Program and your time at SUNY Cortland!

All the best,

The *Writing Dragons* Editors

## II. SUNY Cortland Composition Program

The primary mission of the SUNY Cortland Composition Program is to help you acquire the knowledge of writing and the writing skills you will need for full participation in college, the workplace, and the community. The central focus of the Composition Program is academic writing, which involves reading academic prose and writing analyses, interpretations, annotations, synthesis, claims, and inquiries in a variety of genres. In addition, you will learn about writing and how writing works. The work you do in the composition sequence will lead you to new, critical understandings of what happens when you write and how to achieve what you want with your writing.

We have two different options for completing the Composition Sequence. You might decide to take CPN 100 and then CPN 101 (100/101) or CPN 102 and then CPN 103 (102/103). While CPN 100 and 102 fulfill the same learning goals, as do 101 and 103, the CPN 102/103 option involves a component of “service learning,” or applied learning projects that directly relate to and/or benefit a specific community or group within a community.

The first course in the Composition Sequence (CPN 100 or CPN 102) will introduce you to reading complex, source-based texts, and to rhetorical theories and strategies that writers use as they compose. Rhetorical strategies are forms of writing used for specific purposes, depending on what you are trying to accomplish with your writing. CPN 100 and CPN 102 will help you navigate those rhetorical strategies in a single text, multiple texts, and in exploring claims.

In the second course in the Composition Sequence (CPN 101 or CPN 103) you will refine your writing skills in a course that stresses theme-based critical inquiry and research into complex topics and issues of public importance. The Research Inquiry and Remix assignments ask you to use your rhetorical knowledge to conduct research and compose for a variety of purposes and audiences. Students in CPN 101 or CPN 103 are also required to complete the CLIP program, which is a two-session research and informational literacy course led by a SUNY Cortland librarian in consultation with your writing instructor. More information about CLIP is in Section IV of this book.

Finally, in addition to choosing between completing CPN 100/101 or CPN 102/103, SUNY Cortland also offers additional Writing Workshops, known as CPN 104 and 105. These workshops are taken in the same semester, *in addition to* the two-course sequence and offer opportunities for small group work, intensive feedback, and mentorship connected to your CPN 100 or CPN 101 classes.

### Catalog Descriptions and Student Learning Outcomes

**CPN 100 Writing Studies I:** (A) Introduction to the study and practice of writing with an emphasis on critical reading and thinking skills. Not open to students with credit for CPN 102. Fulfills: GE10; LASR (3 cr. hrs.)

#### Student Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Create cohesive texts with a purpose, context, and effective sequence of ideas.
2. Analyze and use sources to support arguments or claims.

3. Demonstrate audience awareness through critical reading, reflection, and revision.

**CPN 101 Writing Studies II:** (A) Theme-based critical inquiry and research into topics and issues of public import. Not open to students with credit for CPN 103. Prerequisite: A grade of C- or better in CPN 100 or CPN 102. Fulfills: GE10; LASR (3 cr. hrs.)

### **Student Learning Outcomes**

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Compose sophisticated texts that integrate purpose, context, and effective sequencing of ideas.
2. Develop a sustained research process involving the selection of sources, evaluation, and use of research to support arguments or claims.
3. Address a specific audience through use of conventions, critical reading, reflection, and revision.

**CPN 102 Writing Studies in the Community I:** (A) Introduction to the study and practice of writing with an emphasis on critical reading and thinking skills. Includes 30 hours of service learning work in the community. Not open to students with credit for CPN 100. Fulfills: GE10, LASR (4 cr. hrs.)

### **Student Learning Outcomes**

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Create cohesive texts with a purpose, context, and effective sequence of ideas.
2. Analyze and use sources to support arguments or claims.
3. Demonstrate audience awareness through critical reading, reflection, and revision.
4. Participate in a service learning experience that explores community partnership or external feedback.

**CPN 103 Writing Studies in the Community II:** (A) Theme-based critical inquiry and research into topics and issues of public import. Includes 30 hours of service learning work in the community. Not open to students with credit for CPN 101. Prerequisite: A grade of C- or better in CPN 100 or CPN 102. Fulfills: GE10; LASR (4 cr. hrs.)

### **Student Learning Outcomes**

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Compose sophisticated texts that integrate purpose, context, and effective sequencing of ideas.
2. Develop a sustained research process involving the selection of sources, evaluation, and use of research to support arguments or claims.
3. Address a specific audience through use of conventions, critical reading, reflection, and revision.
4. Complete a service learning project that incorporates communication and accountability to the partnership.

**CPN 104 Writing Workshop I:** (A) Intensive, guided practice in college-level academic reading and academic writing. Emphasis on analysis and argument. Corequisite: CPN 100. (3 cr. hr.)

**Student Learning Outcomes**

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Develop flexible strategies for reading, drafting, revising, and editing through participating in a structured workshop environment.
2. Recognize and use conventions of academic written discourse.
3. Compose academic analyses and academic arguments through a multi-draft process.

**CPN 105 Writing Workshop II:** (A) Intensive, guided practice in college-level academic reading and academic writing. Emphasis on researched academic writing. Corequisite: CPN 101. (3 cr. hr.)

**Student Learning Outcomes**

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Develop flexible strategies for reading, drafting, revising, and editing through participating in a structured workshop environment.
2. Recognize and use conventions of academic written discourse.
3. Compose researched academic inquiries through a multi-draft process.

**SUNY General Education Requirements Communication Learning Outcomes**

The goal of the GE Communication category is to develop written and oral communication skills. Through their Composition Program courses, students fulfill the first three GE 10 student learning outcomes:

Students will

- be able to produce coherent texts within common college-level written forms;
- revise and improve their written texts;
- demonstrate the ability to research a topic, develop an argument and organize supporting details



# III. Style: Why It Matters and How to Do It Well

If you've ever seriously studied a specific type of music, learned an instrument, or played a sport, or engaged in anything that eventually demanded a higher-level skill, you probably reached a point when your teacher or coach focused your attention on letting go of old approaches. This was probably hard, since those old approaches had served you well. But sometimes it is important to try out new ways of doing.

Learning to write in college can seem like this—after all, you've been writing in school for years, and you likely have done well. Your learning, however, isn't over. Consider: once, long ago, you sounded out letters. You were even encouraged to do it. Later, though, you were taught to stop sounding out words as you read. What happened? You reached a new stage in your development, and one that wasn't impeded by taking the time to say each word out loud.

In your development as a writer, you are now again, at the beginning of a new stage. You'll find yourself letting go of some comfortable, old ways, but probably not easily. You'll find yourself feeling frustrated at times, but meeting the challenges will be worth it. New approaches, once learned and practiced, will help you write more clearly and powerfully. You'll become more persuasive with your writing. This is not, however, about learning some new way to write. Rather, it's about learning how to write even more effectively. As a college student, you know the basics. Now it's time to take it to the next level. So, let's start.

## 1) Take Readers on a Purposeful Journey with a Clear Destination

At first, you might fall into the old tendency of writing reports, as if you are completing an assignment that asks you to solely repeat a few of the facts or quotes you found in research or assigned reading. In college writing, however, you'll more often be participating in an ongoing community of ideas, research, and often-conflicting arguments. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke compares this to a parlor full of people having an endless conversation. You arrive when the conversation has already been going on, and you listen, learn, even speak and debate, contribute, and then leave before it's concluded.

Your writing, then, should recognize this larger discussion and respond accordingly. No longer a simple report—you (and your writing) will now need to add to the conversation.

To do this, **take your readers on a journey**. Let them reach your destination and have new things to think about (not just summarize what's already been said). To do this, you'll need to do some exploring on your own, to learn exciting things to share. Whether in research or in required reading, look for the ideas and specific examples or data that are new, interesting, insightful, important, useful, or unusual. These are nuggets you can share along your journey. To take readers someplace significant, you'll first have to find it by going there yourself. That's **inquiry**.

Then you'll need to organize your journey with clear purpose and direction. That's part of **rhetoric**. What are you striving for? Where should your argument or analysis go? How can it best hold your audience's attention and serve your rhetorical purpose? How should it unfold?

Thinking about questions like these will help you design the essay, and determine where each part of it should go.

## 2) Conclusions, the Body, Introductions and the Thesis

A method you might use in constructing your first draft is to write **the conclusion** first. Your conclusion may still change as you modify your own ideas through research, analysis, and evaluation. However, knowing to what destination you will travel can help you determine how to get there. What is the significance of your idea? What's the key thing you want them to "get" about your subject? These questions can help you to keep in mind the destination of your piece of writing. So don't be afraid to tackle the conclusion first, especially if it helps you to focus.

Regardless of when you draft your conclusion, though, make sure to think of it as an important element of your paper. Think of lawyers at trial. They announce the arguments they will present, and then they present them; after all the evidence is presented, in depth, both attorneys *still* give their closing arguments, as they don't agree on what conclusion the evidence supports. These are dramatic moments and help to persuade a judge or jury as to how the evidence that was presented should finally be interpreted. Similarly, once readers understand all the new, insightful, interesting, important, useful, unusual information and examples you've brought to show them, they'll want to know or need to be reminded of: what's the key thing you want them to "get" about it? In a sense, the conclusion both offers and/or reinforces the direction and purpose of your paper.

Now, what steps will **the body** need to cover to help readers understand and accept that final argument in your conclusion? Here's one way to draft a body: Order your points in a logical sequence. Or, if no obvious logical order presents itself, you can invent a design that serves your rhetorical purpose, such as a series of points that increase in strength or move from expected to unexpected points in an argument. There are any number of ways an essay can be designed. The only "rule" might be to make sure the way you order your points is intentional in your journey. If you were going on a road trip you wouldn't want to keep zig-zagging across different stopping points, so make sure your order of points also follows a progression that makes sense to you and to your reader.

Laying out these steps might then help you focus **the introduction** and thesis. Here's how. Like the conclusion, the introduction occupies a critical position, and the opportunities it offers should not be wasted. The introduction should not contain general, vague observations. In fact, don't be afraid to get right to a major point in your opening sentence in your first draft. Then you can provide readers with specific information, examples, and evidence to help them understand your subject and its importance. This background will also lead to **the thesis of your paper**—the central claim you're making about the situation you've described. In effect, what is the *work* your paper is going to do?

**One more point about the body:** don't assume that an introduction, three body points, and a conclusion necessarily means a solid essay or a terrible one, just because it is a "five-paragraph essay." In academia the five-paragraph essay has come under contention, and you might hear one or more of your instructors say that you should "NEVER write the five-paragraph essay you learned in high school." That is because the form, for many, has come to stand for oversimplified, formulaic thinking. However, this has less to do with the number of paragraphs itself, and more to do with not thinking about the organization of a paper as always solely based

on three sub-points supporting a thesis all at the same level of organization. Some thesis arguments may rely on three strong points that all require multiple paragraphs of explanation. Others might require two points with sub-points and a third point that does not have additional sub-points. In other words, it isn't the number of paragraphs that is good or bad, it is the overreliance on a formula. Instead of a formula, think again about where you need to go and exactly how many "stops" along the way you and your readers need to adequately get there.

Now, on to paragraphs.

### **3) A Paragraph can be like a Small Paper**

Just as a paper has a thesis, main body points, and a conclusion, it's often advisable to create paragraphs that offer the reader a topic sentence, points supported by specific evidence, and a concluding or transition sentence.

Think about constructing your paragraphs just as you did the overall plan for the essay. What's the point you're making in this paragraph? Why does it exist in the essay—in other words, does it serve the broader thesis? The point can appear as the paragraph's concluding sentence. If you do decide to use a transition sentence at the end of your paragraph, check that it's a transition, and not just the topic sentence for the next paragraph. Sometimes people think about paragraphs like containers. In that way of thinking, as you reach the end of one container, you might set up your reader for the next, but that doesn't mean that you'll want your next ideas to just be sitting at the bottom. Think about how the point you've made in the current paragraph leads logically to the point you will make in the next paragraph.

When constructing your paragraph think about each step you will take to carry readers to the concluding or transition sentence. These can be the main points of your paragraph (which you'll support with specific evidence). Some people find it helpful to jot down what each paragraph is supposed to "do" in the paper. Then they can make sure that each sentence within that paragraph contributes to the paragraph's main purpose, i.e. in service of the thesis. With this approach, each paragraph should be able to stand on its own like a short paper. Short of that, your paragraph may not be sufficiently developed. Going on for more than this, and you may be presenting your readers with a confusing, repetitive or wandering block of difficult to read text.

Make each important observation very clear. Use specific language, and anticipate what questions will occur to your readers as they read.

Consider the following hypothetical example. A writer wants to make the following observation:

*When people make decisions, they look for evidence that confirms their world view.*

Okay, that's easy to understand. But people might have some questions: Do people really do this? What does it mean to "look for evidence?" What is a "world view" in this context? If the questions are unaddressed, the audience may hesitate to accept the argument. The writer needs to offer evidence that both clarifies the point and illustrates it. For example:

*On April 24, 2020, following the global pandemic, more than 30,000 Twitter accounts retweeted one of two competing news articles on mask wearing and its efficacy in stopping viral community spread. When a sample of users were polled, 76% of them reported that they already "knew" this before reading and retweeting their article.*

Okay, again! Disclaimer: We made up that evidence. Nonetheless, the mission is accomplished: Here you see a clear, readily understood claim, and supporting evidence that informs and, one hopes, convinces the reader. Also, this is not the only evidence we might use to support this claim. We could use any cited, credible evidence that we believe addresses the unanswered questions of the claim.

#### 4) Sentence Structure, Economy, and Emphasis

A good sentence can tell a story when it answers the basic question, *who* (subject) *did what* (verb) to *whom* (object)?

Letting your sentences tell stories makes your writing interesting. Don't try to affect some artificial "writerly" tone. Writers often believe that they need to sound a certain way to impress their audience. Instead, focus on providing compelling evidence to support your points.

**Make characters your subjects** so that people, not abstractions, are doing things. Make those things actions, so that something happens. (This is what we are talking about when we discuss active vs. passive voice. Most of the time, you want your writing to rely on the *active voice*\*\*.)

Instead of "The fear of today's agencies is that their budgets will be cut by Congress," tell the story with characters and actions:

*Members of the CDC, EPA, and other agencies fear that Congress will cut their budgets.*

\*\*Note: this is not the case in all disciplines. In the sciences, for instance, the actors are the "scenes of the science," not the scientists. Even though the scientists or researchers are completing an action in reality you would see the following:

NOT THIS: *The researchers performed the titrations . . .*

THIS: *The titrations were performed with . . .*

This is because our interest and the subject of this sentence is the method used in an experiment—the titrations themselves—not the people completing the actions. When in doubt, ask your instructor for guidance about what might be most appropriate to the discipline or area of study that you are exploring.

**Combine related ideas.** Instead of a string of simple sentences, combine them into packaged ideas. For instance, in writing home about summer camp:

NOT THIS: *I like the coaches. I don't like the food. We went for a swim. We also went on a hike.*

THIS: *We went for a swim, and then went on a hike. I like the coaches, but I don't like the food.*

The first example is a halting list of subjective impressions and activities. The second example combines activities, then combines likes and dislikes. The ideas are packaged together.

**Subordinate less important ideas.** Instead of including strings of independent clauses, let readers know where you're headed. In other words, help your audience see how everything connects.

NOT THIS: *Hunger had finally driven him wild, and Big Foot Sam went on a rampage.*

THIS: *Because hunger had finally driven him wild, Big Foot Sam went on a rampage.*

Now readers know there's a cause and effect relationship, and that your main focus is on the cause of Big Foot Sam's rampage. Your writing will also flow better.

**Cut empty phrases and redundancies.** Eliminate those short empty phrases that just add words without more meaning. For example, "When it comes to" just means "when," and "in the event that" just means "if." Phrases like "the general public," "the stadium's total capacity," and "the content of my essay" are redundant: the public is already general, capacity means total, and essays include their content.

NOT THIS: *It is true that many people believe that football has become the national pastime.*

THIS: *Many people believe football has become the national pastime.*

Eliminating these unnecessary phrases can help your readers focus on the content you're writing without being distracted by the number of words that you're using to say it.

## 5) Word Choice

Be specific. If you say you "oppose high salaries for sports teams," what is "high" in this context? What sport? And do you mean *all* professional teams, even AA ball? Or do you think the Yankees blew too much on star players?

When you write, "Many reasons were responsible for the serious consequences that followed" or similar sentences, what are these reasons, what are these consequences, and how are they responsible? Specify the reasons here, in this sentence, and specify the consequences, here in this sentence. Then go on to establish the connections with evidence.

One approach to help you focus on your word choice is to go through your paper—find every noun and noun phrase, and ask yourself: is this exactly what I mean, or can I be more specific, right here? Then do it.

**Prefer active verbs.** Instead of "A rabbit got into the garage," how about "A rabbit *chewed* into the garage," or *clawed*, or *snuck*, or whatever that rabbit did. Now, with just a one-word change, readers get a clearer mental image of the rabbit.

**Don't be afraid to sound like yourself.** Although your assignment might call for you to be formal, polite, or professional in your writing, sometimes people think that means to adapt a stuffy, dull tone in an effort to "sound better." It doesn't work. Read your sentences aloud: would you ever actually say something like "that being said" or "suffice it to say?" If not, change it to something that you might actually say. Don't shy away, though, from developing new vocabulary in order to try out new ideas. Sometimes words or terms you think of as stuffy or jargon contain new ideas, often specific to a discipline that you may want to explore.

## 6) Punctuation, Grammar, and Documentation

Punctuation, grammar, and documentation are sometimes bundled together under the term “mechanics.” Each has its own history and significance: grammar overlaps with the field of linguistics, documentation is a part of library science. They deserve our careful attention.

However, when you are first encountering these ideas it helps to have an English handbook and use it. One great resource for this is The Online Writing Lab at Purdue University, available for free at [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue\\_owl.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html). (We recommend that you bookmark it in your browser for easy use.)

Let sentence structure govern your punctuation choices, not mood. (You don’t always want to put a comma where you want a pause, for example.)

Where you know (or discover) you have grammar problems, use the handbook to resolve them. Frequent errors in writing include comma splice run-ons, pronoun-antecedent agreement problems, mixed constructions, and faulty parallelism. Look these up.

MLA or APA documentation are the most common styles used in college writing. Again, turn to your handbook. Very few people “memorize” all the aspects of a citation style. Part of learning to use one is finding out which one is acceptable and then looking it up as you go.

Be sure you understand what is and isn’t plagiarism, including “borrowing” words and phrases without crediting the source (which IS plagiarism).

And finally – proofread. Leave time to sit with the finished product. You’ll see things a day or two later that you simply didn’t notice when you wrote it. You’re human. It happens. Then fix them.

Let your ideas shine through. Good style and attention to details will let that happen.

## 7) A Few Short Tips for Working with Sources

At times, your instructor will ask you to work with outside sources when crafting a paper or an essay. These sources may be assigned, or you may have to find your own. You may be asked to rely on non-fiction books, academic articles, poems, unpublished papers, YouTube videos, blogs, websites, or other kinds of sources. Regardless of how and where you find this content, you will have to effectively integrate them into your work in order to support claims, relay information, and to provide examples.

### **Finding sources**

Once you have an idea of your topic (a process we cover a few other places in this book), you can begin looking for sources. Sometimes it might be better to start with an encyclopedia as a way to help increase your general knowledge of your subject. You might even begin with Wikipedia, although most instructors won’t want you to actually use it as a source in your essays. Still, it is a good place to start and may lead you other sources and/or websites (most Wikipedia articles include some list of references at the bottom). Similarly, you might find one or two good articles and then follow the references they make to other sources as a way to trace the ongoing conversation. Another great resource is the library staff. They are trained to help you find

information on a wide variety of topics. A visit to the help desk can save you a lot of time and frustration later on.

Finally, if you are going to use sources from the Internet, take care not to use only the first results that appear on your screen. Use filters and different keywords to produce different results. You can also use tools such as Google Scholar to find academic sources. Remember that websites ending in .gov or .edu are generally more reliable than .com or .org. As with all sources, be sure to investigate to ensure they are credible. One strategy that library instructors use to teach source evaluation is an acronym called SIFT, which stands for “Stop,” “Investigate the source,” “Find trusted coverage,” and “Trace claims, quotes, and media to the original context.” It was a method developed by digital literacy expert, Mike Caulfield.

### **Letting Sources Lead You**

Often, writers will make an argument and then try to find sources for support. That may or may not work – and in addition, it’s much harder to be surprised by information (that is, to learn something new about your topic) if you’re already looking to find sources that merely reinforce your perspective. Another way to approach using sources is to have a general topic and then follow the sources to narrow the focus. This requires a more open mind; you may be surprised where the sources take you!

### **Taking Notes on Sources**

Your instructor will probably expect you to take notes as you read so you can understand and recall things more easily. However, your notes can do a lot more. They can help you make connections to other content you see, read, or view. You may find one source agrees with or disagrees with another. You may find patterns, trends, or intersections among sources, and your job will be to make sense of that for your readers. Your notes can also help you to paraphrase your sources ideas, arguments, information for your own essay.

### **Quoting vs. Paraphrasing**

Some of your instructors will require that you paraphrase your sources’ ideas. Other instructors will want a mixture of direct quotes and paraphrases. Direct quotes may be long or short and will need to be introduced into your essay in context; that is, you “set up” the quotes rather than drop or parachute them in. (Try looking at some of the student writing later in this book for some examples of how other writers quote the sources they use.)

On the other hand, paraphrasing requires a different kind of work. When you paraphrase, you rewrite your own notes on the topic without looking at the original sources. The goal is to present the idea or claim in your own words while keeping the spirit or the context of the original work.

### **In-text Citations and Works Cited (or References)**

It is essential that you give credit to the sources of your information. You usually do that by including an in-text citation whenever you quote or paraphrase. When you include a source in the body of an essay it is like a shorthand or an abbreviation where the reader can then go to the Works Cited or References page to find out more about that source. Therefore, any source you use in your paper, you also will want to provide a bibliographic entry for in the works cited or references page. (See the Purdue OWL for more specific information on appropriate in-text and

bibliographic citation, as we mention a couple of other times in this text – it really is a useful resource!)

Hint: It is easier to add sources to the Works Cited or References pages as you use them and then delete them out if you don't end up needing to use them in the final draft, than it is to look around for a source to make a bibliographic entry for at the last minute. In other words, don't necessarily leave your Works Cited or References page until you are completed with the paper.

## **Conclusions**

While this chapter covered a lot of different topics under the terms of “style and structure,” hopefully one thing became clear—inquiry, rhetoric, and writing (in general) involves a myriad of choices. At first, that might feel daunting. You may have read this chapter hoping for “the answers.” However, great writing is guided by a lot of contextual information such as your purpose, your understanding of your reader or audience, and the format in which you are writing. Hopefully over time, as you try out making different, intentional choices in your writing, you will find that those choices give you a sense of power, control, and potential in where your writing can go and what you can do through writing. We wish you luck!



## IV. From Report to Inquiry: How to Ask Fruitful Research Questions

Much of your scholastic experience before college and even in college has been based on learning specific, concrete knowledge required for your courses: what was the War of 1812, how is the area of an isosceles triangle calculated, what factors increase demand for economic goods. When asked to conduct research, in these situations, you were looking for the right answers, and your results were graded according to their correctness.

Researching to find “the right answer” based research will always have its place. If you’re researching an argument about changing demographics in the US, for example, you’ll want to get current data to compare to your base year to report the changes. However, research can be much more than that. Sometimes you’ll need to venture further: exploring and investigating your topic, and then bringing the results of your voyage back, for further analysis. You won’t always know what you will find, and at times what you find will shape your journey.

That’s **inquiry**. Much of the time, when asked to conduct research for a college course, your task will not be a report (other than specific supporting data), but an inquiry. This means that instead of a professor telling you what to find, you’ll be tasked with figuring that out for yourself. Yikes! What to do?

Think of it like this: a newspaper editor doesn’t get up in the morning, decide what the news is going to be, and then instruct the reporters to go find it (except for clearly biased propaganda publications). Instead, reporters are expected to investigate what’s going on. Later, once that research is done, the editor and reporters will take a look and say, “OK—what’s the story here?” That becomes the day’s news (ideally).

Inquiry research is like that – you’re going exploring, not knowing what you’ll find.

### Look to rediscover a sense of wonder

That can seem pretty scary—looking for something when you don’t know what it is. How will you know when you find it? What would you look up?

The ability to construct “wonder” questions is natural to children: “Why is the sky blue?” If you show them a prism and how it separates colors, then “Why does it do that?” If you explain somehow about frequencies of light, you’ll get another “Why” and another and another until you give up. The children aren’t trying to be difficult—they are looking for cognitive frameworks. When as adults we stop asking questions, we risk settling for a narrower understanding of our world in all of its complexity. Asking questions sharpens our mental acuity and helps us to keep an open mind when we are confronted with events or points-of-view that seem inexplicable or foreign.

Adults—such as college students—don’t always ask questions so readily; they instead try to fit any new information into their existing cognitive frameworks. That’s efficient—but it’s not so helpful when trying to learn things which challenge those fundamental assumptions. In other words, that’s great for organizing a report, but not helpful when conducting inquiry.

So, the first step is a letting go of these assumptions and frameworks. Set aside thoughts like “How would I write this?” and instead seek out new adventures. Be prepared to be surprised. Do your research not just to gather details, but to dig deeper into your topic. Keep an open mind: instead of taking a fixed position on the topic before you begin, try to understand the context and look for how the issue is more complex than you ever realized.

This will mean that no single source will have what you need. In order to compose a unique, thoughtful research paper, you need multiple sources in order to understand various points of view. You’ll find bits and pieces in various places that tell a news story you’ll piece together eventually from all your research. That’s what inquiry means – and that’s how to approach it. It’s quite different from researching a report or finding “right” answers.

## **YOU are now the Teacher**

How many times have you wondered, “I don’t know what my professor wants for this assignment?” When conducting inquiry, that’s an impossible question with no answer, because your professor isn’t looking for any pre-determined “right answers.” Instead of someone else setting your learning agenda, YOU are now in charge. YOU decide which way your investigation takes you. YOU evaluate which information is best. YOU make the case for what it means.

While at first this might seem like a heavy burden, it’s actually freedom. Ever try to find “enough” for a prescribed topic to stretch it into a sufficient paper? You don’t have to do that in inquiry! Instead, you find whatever **new** (to you and potentially your readers), **insightful** (different ways of looking at things), **interesting** (to you—and not predetermined areas), **important** (as judged by you), **useful** (new approaches for you and potentially your readers), **unusual** (as it questions assumptions and frameworks), or **just plain cool** (as defined by you) information there is to find. It’s not a hunt where you find a necessary set of pieces. You find what you find, and then tell that new story.

Inquiry means it’s time to build your confidence. This can be done in small, simple steps. You don’t have to invent some amazing new machine, discover a revolutionary scientific law, or envision an astounding work of art that changes the world. Instead, you collect interesting, insightful bits of information along the journey of your investigation, and you later assemble those gems—a process called *synthesis*. Technically, you didn’t come up with any of those ideas, perhaps, but you constructed them from various sources in a new way that tells a different story. Because you’ve shared the knowledge gained from your inquiry, you are now the teacher—and the writer of an authoritative article.

## **Moving from “dead-end” questions to fruitful ones**

All research begins with questions; it is not an overstatement to say that many academics believe a research project is only as good as the question or questions behind it. This brings us to an important and somewhat difficult point. While there are no “bad” questions, it is the case that in college-level research there are some kinds of questions that tend to lead to projects that are more conversational, stimulating, and thought-provoking than others. Most research questions can be categorized in one of two ways: terminal questions or inquiry-based exploration.

At first, for many students, questions tend to be “dead-end” ones, meaning either that the answer is already known, or that once the answer is found, the journey is over. Sure, you might need to ask “How many dogs and cats are in animals shelters in the United States?,” but once you get that “right answer,” what’s next? On the face of it—nothing is next. Dead-end questions lead you in an unproductive cycle, and will eventually frustrate you. Instead, you want to ask fruitful questions, that is, questions that will take you on a journey, questions that will allow you to investigate, discover, and explore.

Exploratory questions are *open*, seeking to explore complicated issues or problems for which few, if any, widely agreed-upon or “right answers” exist. Exploratory questions are more likely to begin with words like *why*, *what if*, or *how*. When we ask exploratory questions, we begin with the assumption that multiple perspectives or factors contribute to our chosen problem, and we proceed by trying to offer a thorough critical analysis of those factors and the ways that they work both together and independently to shape the issue. Sometimes we are seeking only to provide a detailed analysis of the influence of different factors on the development of an issue. Other times, open exploratory questions are a launching place for our recommendations about, or arguments for, a possible solution or solutions from among a range of alternatives.

Warren Berger, author of [A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas](#) (2014), suggests three categories:

1. Why?

Remember how well this works for children? This can work for you as well. Instead of just taking sides on an issue, pro or con—the US health care system, for example—you can explore the whys. Why do we have the current system? How did it start? Why (what problems did it address)? Why do other countries have different systems? What are the different results among these systems? Why is there resistance to changing? Why hasn’t the system changed despite some resistance?

Get the idea? Keep looking beyond the obvious. Find new gems of information to share.

2. What if?

Speculative questions can be great ways to look beyond current assumptions and form new hypotheses. It’s important these can be investigated—“What if aliens came to Earth and showed us how to be forever healthy so health care wasn’t needed” isn’t going to further your inquiry—but it **COULD** be a good “question-storming” idea. **Question-storming** is just like brain-storming, except that instead of jotting down lots of thoughts, you jot down lots of questions, with the idea that there are no “bad” or “silly” ones.

Question-storming might get you thinking: What if the US initiated a major program to help people live healthy lives? What if a massive effort toward prevention could keep people well? What if the concerns and issues identified in the Why questions could be addressed though a different approach like this?

Notice what’s happening? You have LOTS of directions to investigate, and you’re building an argument at the same time—even if you don’t yet know where it’s ultimately going.

### 3. How?

Here's where the practical questions come. How would these "what if" scenarios be realized? Fortunately, other people have likely explored these or similar questions and published the results—hence, you are doing a "re-search" for their studies, which can then be synthesized into your proposals. If you run into problems, use how questions to seek solutions—How can people be encouraged to eat healthy diets and exercise regularly? How can health care assist people in recognizing the health risks of tobacco and alcohol? How might low motivation be positively addressed? Who has tested various approaches already, and what were the results? How might these result be used and expanded?

Voila! You are doing Inquiry! And you're getting a lot of good information in the process.

## **Using exploratory questions to locate yourself in the conversation**

So now you have a lot of good research. But where is your voice in the conversation? One of the purposes of higher education is the improvement of human life through advancing knowledge—and your ideas are an important piece of that conversation. However, as a student, you may feel you are being asked to provide an expert opinion on a complicated topic, and that can be intimidating. Remember, though, that asking exploratory questions is not about presenting final or absolute answers. Two other goals of academic inquiry are far more important: synthesis and credibility.

The first of these two important goals is the synthesis of original ideas based on existing knowledge. As a student researcher, you are learning how to analyze and make critical evaluations about sources. The best questions arise out of your reading about a topic and are generated by your critical interaction with those sources. In this way, questions are the concrete demonstration of your ability to synthesize: to generate original ideas based on the incorporation of new information into your pre-existing understanding. Identifying lacunae (gaps) in the research you have read permits you as the author to use them as openings for your own research and interpretation.

The second important goal of research inquiry is related to synthesis and concerns the concepts of ownership and credibility. All research builds on the idea of a vast conversation. To take part in that conversation, your contribution must acknowledge the other participants. For this reason, one of the hallmark characteristics of good questions is that their origins are clear to your reader; that is, you share your journey with them. One way of showing your reader the evolution of your thought and acknowledging the pre-existing conversation is to include a review of the scholarship that was most relevant to your question's genesis before you pose your question.

But there's yet another way to build credibility and ownership—recursivity.

## **Recursivity and viability in questioning**

*Recursivity* (n), or the quality of being recursive (adj), means to continually monitor your question as you move forward in your answering process so that you can refine it as necessary to make sure your question still matches your actual research. It may seem strange to talk about questions and recursivity—the act of revising, changing, and re-working. After all, earlier we

mentioned that a research project is only as good as the question—how can we now talk about changing the question once the research is underway?

The answer is quite simple and lies in the idea of viability. Research is an activity that can and usually does involve false starts, dead ends, and a certain amount of frustration. Experienced researchers know that many times even the most attractive questions may not pan out—sources adequate for establishing credibility may be few or hard to find; the question may be too broad or too narrow; further research and thinking may reveal that something quite different is the real question behind an issue or problem.

So, accept that questions are plastic, not set in stone. You can adapt, revise, tweak or re-calibrate your questions as your research project evolves. Academics typically rewrite their research questions at least several times during the course of a project. Likewise, you don't have to feel you are stuck with a question that is not working out.

Another major consideration of a question's viability is how manageable finding and making your argument will be, in terms of the time, energy, and available resources that your question is likely to demand. Carefully consider your questions in terms of their practical logistics. If you aren't sure whether you can reasonably manage the project that would flow from your question, seek help. Speak to your professors, the Writing Center or Learning Center tutors, or your peers. As with all writing activity, feedback is essential for strengthening your work.

## **Following up – and writing up**

As you gather interesting and useful information, keep asking questions about it – what new why, what-if, and how questions does your research raise? The idea is not to find some magically wrapped up finish line—that only happens in dead-end questions. You will likely have more questions at the end than you had at the beginning—and that's great! In fact—you can share some of those further questions in your conclusion.

So enjoy! Be like a child, and develop a sense of not only wonder, but of play. You won't get frustrated if you ask and answer questions that ignite your imagination. Let the “what would I write” question come at the very end of the process, once you've considered all the information you've found.

You'll be taking readers on an insightful journey of exploration—and that's already an interesting paper.

## **Want to learn more?**

Check out these websites:

<https://amorebeautifulquestion.com/>

<https://rightquestion.org/>

# V. Shared Practices in the Composition Program

Every writing class is different, but there are common elements shared across all sections of CPN 100, CPN 101, CPN 102, CPN 103, CPN 104, and CPN 105. This section outlines some of these key components.

## Writing as a Process

The writing process varies between individuals, and your instructor will probably introduce you to various stages of the process they want you to work through in specific ways. You might be familiar with some of the names for various parts of the “traditional” writing process, including prewriting, research, drafting, revising, and editing. (These will be broken down in more detail in some of the following sections.) As you approach these stages, keep in mind that the writing process doesn’t always follow a neat, linear model: it is messy. You may prewrite, draft, prewrite again, revise, edit, and then submit an essay. You may do some of these steps at the same time, and it might change with each new essay. Don’t get too frustrated. The more you write and practice, the more you will come to know that there is no one right way to write, but there are ways that work for you.

All Writing Studies, or composition classes at SUNY Cortland also include peer response sessions and individual conferences with your instructor, which are also important elements of process-based writing in CPN 100, CPN 101, CPN 102, CPN 103, CPN 104, and CPN 105.

## Prewriting

Prewriting can be a useful way to generate ideas. Once you receive the prompt or assignment sheet from your instructor, you can use one of many prewriting methods to get you started on developing and organizing your ideas effectively.

- For instance, you might turn your writing situation into a question and list some possible solutions. For example, “What topics could I use to answer the assignment question?”; “What do I already know about my chosen topic?”; “What are some questions that I want my essay to answer?”
- Or you could free-write: set a time limit, and during this time, write non-stop about the assignment or your chosen topic. Your hand should be moving constantly, and you should try not to worry about mistakes. Don’t look back.
- If neither of those options are working out, you could try outlining. First, decide what your major topics are and the order in which they make the most sense. Then, decide where each of your sub-topics belong. You can also use this method to highlight places where you may need more support from outside sources.
- Finally, you can also use digital approaches (such as Prezi or PowerPoint) to help you boil down your ideas into the main points and then visually rearrange elements to see where they fit best. Or, if you like to talk through your ideas instead of writing them down, consider audio recording as you talk aloud (to yourself or another person).

Often, assignments will require you to engage with assigned reading. When you read (and reread) these texts, you should do so with a pen in your hand so you can annotate the texts. More

than mere underlining and circling, annotating involves “writing back” to the text – asking questions, labeling the main and major claims, identifying the text’s strongest and weakest points, and even taking note of what the text does *not* include and why the text may omit a perspective, evidence, or claim. Annotation is a part of being a critical reader, which is an important step towards becoming a mature writer.

In other words, there are a variety of approaches to generating and arranging ideas for writing. Your instructor will likely have several that they’d like you to try. Some might work better for you than others, and some might work better for some papers than others. The best way to find your preferred method is to try as many as you can.

### **Drafting**

Drafting is the process of first putting together the words that make an attempt at an essay. Part of the reason we often call these first attempts “rough” drafts is that they are only an *initial* attempt, focusing on testing out sentences, trying out the arrangement of paragraphs, and using sources. That is, while your first draft might be thoughtful and interesting, it will probably not be polished, and it may not entirely fit together. Usually, however, you will have the opportunity to improve your initial draft through revision, feedback from peer response, and conferences with your instructor. Your first draft is not a finished product - don’t get too attached to it, since you will probably receive feedback that requires you to make significant changes to the organization, argument, sources, or all three!

### **Revising and Editing**

Revising refers to changes that you implement in regards to larger issues: tone, organization, argument, sources, etc. Editing applies to more minor changes to things like grammar, sentence structure, and word choice. Generally, it makes sense to focus on revision before editing, until you are prepared to fully polish a draft before you submit it; that way, you avoid wasting energy on sentence-level, local issues that you may end up getting rid of during the revision process anyway. Your instructor will likely lead you through several activities and assignments to help you productively approach revision for each project you complete.

Leaving time between drafts and steps can help bring the revision process into focus. When you complete a draft, try to leave yourself enough time to turn your attention elsewhere, even if only for an hour. Seeing your own composition with fresh eyes will sometimes create a disconnection between what you thought you wrote and what you actually wrote. The revision process is often an attempt to reconcile what writers wrote in their last drafts and what they intend to mean in a final draft.

## **Critical Evaluation and Reflection**

Throughout both CPN 100/102 and CPN 101/103 courses you should encounter numerous and often iterative opportunities to consider your own writing. What choices have you made in your own writing process? How have you used feedback, peer review, and/or conferencing to inform your revision. The specific assignments or activities related to critical evaluation and reflection may differ from course to course, but each CPN course will present spaces to explore writing about your own writing.

## **Peer Review**

There are many different approaches to peer response, but generally, most instructors will ask you and the others in your class to read each other's writing and provide some feedback for how to improve the quality of ideas and approaches to the work. While you may give and receive some comments on grammar and sentence structure, the main purpose of peer response is to consider larger issues - things like tone, audience, organization, argument, and use of sources. Students often feel like they don't have the authority or experience to help others with their writing. Remember, though, that you are a new audience for another person's essay, and your new, unique perspective can point out things the original author may have overlooked or left underdeveloped. Your responses should be respectful and go beyond merely evaluative statements like "This is good" or "This is bad." Also, try to avoid comments that sound like demands ("Fix this paragraph."). Not only can this come across as hostile, but it does not give the writer a clear idea of how to address an issue. (What exactly needs to be "fixed?") Rather, attempt to provide a reasoned rationale on why and how you think a change should be made. Finally, don't forget to point out what you think works in the essay; encouragement can be just as useful as suggesting changes, and can show the writer what they should continue to do in the future.

## **Individual Conferences with Your Instructor**

Conferencing is another important way to receive feedback on your writing. Instructors will usually read through your drafts and offer comments and suggestions in the margins or at the end of the essay, but sometimes, they may also ask that you meet with them to discuss how you can improve your writing. This gives you a chance to respond to and receive clarification on your instructor's comments, better understand how you can approach an essay, and gives you an opportunity to think further about how you're developing as a writer. It might be a good idea to prepare two or three specific questions before you go to the conference because time will likely be limited, although your instructor may have specific things they want to discuss with you. Additionally, even if conferences are not required for a particular assignment, you may find it helpful to set up an appointment with your instructor to get feedback prior to turning in your paper.

## **Support from Others on Campus**

SUNY Cortland offers free resources for students looking to get support and to challenge themselves as they grow as writers. These resources include The Writing Center, The Learning Center, and NightOWL, and each of these resources can help you to improve your writing (and also become a more effective writer and a more successful student). We highly recommend taking advantage of the unique opportunities each of these services provides:

- The Writing Center, located in Brockway Hall, Room 216 (above Hilltop Dining), offers 30 min. and 60 min. appointments to work with you at any stage of the process, even before you start writing. Students use the Writing Center in a variety of ways: to break down and develop an approach to an assignment, to work on getting an outline together, to explore new perspectives and ideas just coming into focus, and to stay on target for long-term writing projects. Using individualized approaches, the writing consultants' goals are similar to your instructor's in that they aim to support and challenge you to



develop your ideas and to reflect on your writing and writing process. To schedule an appointment, just log in to myRedDragon, go to the Student Tab, and follow the WCOOnline link (under Academic Resources). You can also visit their website at [cortland.edu/writing-center](http://cortland.edu/writing-center) to get more information.

- The Learning Center, located in Van Hoesen B-205, offers individualized, student-centered sessions focused on supporting the whole learner. You can meet with either peer tutors (students like you who've gone through an internationally recognized tutor training process) or professional tutors for hour-long appointments to get help with many subjects, including writing. You can stop by or call (607) 752-4309 to schedule an appointment, and can find more information on their website at [cortland.edu/asap](http://cortland.edu/asap).
- NightOWL offers online tutoring services for any course (except foreign language courses), including writing courses. You can drop in and work synchronously with a trained tutor, upload your work, or discuss ideas at any stage in the writing process. For more information, visit their website at [cortland.edu/nightowl](http://cortland.edu/nightowl).

## **In-Class Writing**

While some instructors include in-class essays as a major assignment in their courses, even those who don't have a graded timed writing component will still require you to write in class. In-class writing can take many forms, from engaging in some of the prewriting, drafting, and/or revision activities listed above, to writing reflectively, or even writing a summary of the last class session. Because CPN 100, CPN 101, CPN 102, CPN 103, CPN 104, and CPN 105 are *writing classes*, you should arrive every day ready to write. Whether through short activities meant to generate and develop ideas or a complete in-class essay, in-class writing is a vital part of your development as a member of a community of other writers.

## **Digital Component**

Especially in the twenty-first century, composing means more than just putting words on paper. Because the Composition Program values a wide range of rhetorical strategies (for both production and analysis), you'll be spending at least two weeks in one of the computer labs set aside specifically for writing classes. Your instructor will have specific activities and assignments that make particular use of the tools and technology available in this space.

## **The Composition Library Instruction Program (CLIP)**

CLIP (the Composition Library Instruction Program) is a joint teaching experience where both librarians and faculty work together to teach information literacy within CPN 101 and CPN 103. Students will participate in two class sessions which are intended to teach basic information literacy skills in order to build a solid foundation of research knowledge and abilities. During these two sessions, you will actively engage the research process, evaluate differing publication formats, and learn about the library tab in myRedDragon. In addition, you will find out about library research guides, different search strategies, Boolean logic, limiting and faceting the results list, and locating individual databases when appropriate. There will also be a chance for you to practice these skills in the context of their research assignments. After the second session, students usually complete an online assessment.

## Textbooks

Your instructor may have decided to use a different text (or texts) for your course, but we believe these three texts are potentially valuable resources for first-year writers (and beyond). The full list of texts is:

Clark, Carol Lea. *Praxis: A Brief Rhetoric, 3rd Edition*. Fountainhead Press, 2016.

Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *“They Say / I Say”: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. 4th edition, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Lunsford, Andrea A., et al. *Everything’s an Argument*. 8th edition, Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2018.

## VI. Common Student Concerns and Resources

Dear Student: We are so excited to welcome you to SUNY Cortland! You are ready to begin adding to your cache of skills, fine tuning your identity, and preparing to embark on a dynamic and useful career. Throughout your experiences in the Composition Program here at SUNY Cortland, you will be encouraged to engage in critical and sustained inquiry.

Inquiry can be a wonderful way to explore your career options, learn about the culture of diverse groups of people, stretch and shape your identity and values, and to discover what you are interested in learning. The form your inquiry process takes in terms of written artifact can vary widely. You may be asked to write an analysis of a popular song, short story, or peer-reviewed article in Writing Studies I. In Writing Studies II, you may be asked to create an original work of art such as a poem, meme, or memoir, or to create a researched inquiry argument. Reflection on and self-evaluation of the work you have done and the progress you have made will also be a critical component of your learning. There are so many interesting things to discover and fun ways to write about them.

The inquiry process can also be challenging. There may be times when you feel like you’ve hit a wall creatively, or maybe you might need help discerning the finer points of a cool article. The following section provides some ways in which you might meet the challenges with which you are presented, including some useful resources you may not have considered. Good luck to you as you continue to develop your writing!

Sincerely,

The Composition Program Faculty

### Common Student Concerns (FAQs)

The following is a compilation of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) or common student concerns. You are not alone in having these questions!

- 1) [What am I going to learn in my Writing Studies class?](#)
- 2) [What if I don’t understand an assignment?](#)

- 3) I'm not sure how to get started; what should I do?
- 4) My teacher wants me to submit my assignments through Brightspace, so how do I do that?
- 5) Is AI Writing Allowed in CPN Classes?
- 6) Where can I get help with my grammar and spelling?
- 7) I can't find any sources. Who can help me?
- 8) There are comments on my paper that I don't understand. Should I ask about them?
- 9) What can I do if I feel like I am stuck with my writing?
- 10) What do I do if I don't understand an article I've been assigned to read?
- 11) What can I do to obtain useful feedback from my peers?
- 12) I am having trouble documenting sources; what should I do?

## 1) What am I going to learn in my Writing Studies class?

While it is true that all Writing Studies courses have common anchor assignments and learning outcomes, your first resource for specific questions about course content is your professor, who is more than willing to discuss what you will learn in his or her Writing Studies course. Your professor will also provide you with a syllabus for the course, which serves as an outline for what you will learn. Often times, Writing Studies courses may revolve around a general or specific theme, such as sustainability, diversity, poverty, or even a question such as “What does it mean to be a writer?” The reading you are assigned and the discussions you have in class will commonly relate to that theme in some way. Other professors may choose not to have a theme for their courses, which means you might study a variety of different topics or issues. Information about anchor assignments, learning outcomes, and other policies of the Writing Studies program are answered in this book, may be asked of your professor, or even shared with the Director of the Writing Program.

## 2) What if I don't understand an assignment?

Your professor creates writing assignments that explore the anchor assignments in the Writing Studies program. If you are having difficulty understanding what your professor is asking of you in terms of inquiry, research, reading, critical thinking, or writing, again, *please ask your professor!* The individual instructor who is teaching the course you are in would LOVE to have as many conversations as you would like about exploring the question, so that you have a clear understanding of it and are prepared to undertake your inquiry. Remember, a great part of the process is actually exploring the question you'd like to address, so it's important to take some time and figure out what interests you. It is also a good idea to visit both **The Writing Center (cortland.edu/writing-center or Brockway 216)** and **The Learning Center (cortland.edu/tlc or Van Hoesen B-205)** whose tutors are specially trained to help you in creating meaningful writing.

## 3) I'm not sure how to get started; what should I do?

If you are stuck on how to get started, speaking to your professor is always your first step. In fact, your professor will likely incorporate one or more of the strategies for generating ideas

below. If you have already spoken with your professor, try a few of the strategies below (Raimes and Miller Cochran, 2014):

**Freewriting:** If you are unsure how to approach a broad topic or unsure what to write about, try sitting down with pencil and paper, and letting your brain lead you from idea to idea, without concern for correctness or precision. Think for example about the question asked earlier: “What does it mean to be a writer?” What does this make you think about? Let’s look at an example of some freewriting addressing this question:

*To me being a writer is not something I am I would not do any writing if I wasn't in this class because I am not interested in pursuing a career as a story teller I want to just get through this class and get a grade I need to move on to the next thing because I won't be doing a lot of writing in my major. I don't write well and often have grammar mistakes but I am willing to get better at it. I don't like to read either because I'd rather be outside doing something fun and getting exercise but I know that I have to do this. I wish I could write about something I am more interested in, like soccer or something.*

Think about what kinds of ideas you see in this sample of freewriting, such as why is it important to write about something that one is interested in? This idea alone could become a method of inquiry.

**Looping:** You can expand upon the ideas you see in your freewriting by looking at it carefully. After you free-write for a while, go back and underline ideas you think are the most important to you. Then, you can try writing some more on that idea in particular. Then you can underline the most important concepts in that paragraph, and so on. For instance, doing this with the example above might help you to narrow down the topic to a question about the importance of writing and research inquiry about soccer in Division III sports.

**Brainstorming:** You can generate ideas by making a list of ideas as you think of them. Brainstorming can be enhanced if you do it as a member of a group (such as a peer review group, learning circle, lab or study group). This allows you to discuss your ideas together, obtain feedback, and even get suggestions you didn’t think of during the process. Then, you can arrange ideas, develop the questions you have about them, and begin your inquiry process. For example, let’s take the example of sustainability, from the earlier discussion of themed courses.

*Sustainability:*

- *What does it mean?*
- *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle*
- *Electric car*
- *Developing nations*
- *Fossil fuel burning*
- *Carbon footprint*
- *Legislation: state, local*
- *Individual action*
- *Political ideology (republican, democrat, citizen)*
- *Timeline for change*

Here, the student has generated many different terms related to sustainability and is looking at different areas in which perspectives on the issue might vary. This small list has some pretty big issues on it, so now the student might **ask peers or the professor** about which fits into the assignment guidelines, discuss which is most interesting or pressing, and generate some inquiry questions based on these quick ideas.

**Mapping or Clustering:** Especially appealing to those who value visual learning, clustering is a unique way of generating or connecting ideas. This can be done well in either an individual or a group setting. Write your topic in a circle in the middle of your page. Then, using lines that branch off from the center, think about related ideas, terms, issues, notes, and interesting tidbits that connect to that main idea.

By visualizing what you care about within the wide range of a broad topic, you can create a research inquiry question that both meets the needs of the assignment and allows you to write about something that interests you on some level.

**Journalists' Questions:** You might approach a topic, especially a current one, by asking the standard questions you would ask if you were a journalist reporting on the issue. *Who did what? When did it happen? Where did it occur? Why did it happen? How did it turn out?* Whether you are telling the story of an event or examining a question of inquiry, asking the six questions will help you to get a grasp of your topic.

In general, responding to what you read for class and making comparisons between conclusions made there and your own personal experience, your own objective opinion, and even the research you are doing on your own or with the help of your **professor or librarian** will help you to fine-tune your ideas and get a grasp on the knowledge you are trying to build.

#### **4) My teacher wants me to submit my assignments through Brightspace, so how do I do that?**

It is always a good idea to ask your professor questions about submission guidelines, because each professor you have may have different requirements. In general, however **the tools that Brightspace offers can be learned through tutorials provided by Brightspace itself.** If you log in to MyRedDragon, and locate and click on your Student tab, and then click on Brightspace Courses and Tutorials, you will be able to navigate the system. It's likely if your professor has specific or technical requirements, he or she will demonstrate how to do those either in class or in an appointment you make during office hours. There is no separate action that needs to be taken in Brightspace for assignments to go through Turnitin.

As a first-semester freshman, any student will also have the added resource of being able to **speak to your instructor for COR101: The Cortland Experience**, who will provide an introduction to MyRedDragon and Brightspace. Don't be fearful of asking your COR101 instructor about your concerns with properly utilizing the technology provided to you on campus.

Also, please become familiar with and make use of *all* the technology available to you on campus. For example, it's important that you know how to use the WEPA printing system, even if you have your own computer and printer in your dorm room. There may come a time when a professor will ask you to generate something in a computer lab and print immediately using the WEPA system, and you want to be prepared.

It may also be that your professor may utilize an online resource such as Cisco Webex, which is provided by the college to students and faculty. If you have questions about how to access or apply this or any other technology your professor uses in a course, you may ask your professors, your advisor, or even by emailing or visiting the technology help desk at [thehelpcenter@cortland.edu](mailto:thehelpcenter@cortland.edu) or by calling X2500.

## 5) Is AI Writing Allowed in CPN Classes?

AI writing platforms such as ChatGPT, Gemini, and other AI enhanced search engines are not a substitute for your own original writing. In other words, if you turn in AI writing in part or whole of an assignment as if it is your own writing that is the same as plagiarizing other sources.

However, that being said, your instructor may allow or introduce AI writing in class or in stages of the writing process for pedagogical reasons. You must *explicitly* ask your instructor about what kinds of AI writing are allowed in your course policies *before* using it in any CPN work.

## 6) Where can I get help with my grammar and spelling?

If you are struggling with the mechanics of your written work, it is a good idea to look through the “**Style**” section of this book. Many of your questions can be answered right there, in terms of usage, formatting, et cetera. Your professor may have also chosen to incorporate a guide book or rhetoric text which contains information about clear and concise writing. Questions of this nature can also be answered for first semester freshmen by utilizing the **COR 101 Reader, Purpose and Practice: Making the Most of Your First Year at SUNY Cortland**. This book is available free to all students who are enrolled in the COR101 program. It is an invaluable resource that includes information and answers to MOST of the questions you might have about not only grammar and mechanics of writing, but also about being successful at Cortland all-together. If you feel you are struggling with conveying your ideas in your written work, **The Writing Center** and **The Learning Center** can provide services to help increase your skill and confidence in conveying your ideas. *However, it is important you realize that neither The Writing Center nor The Learning Center is an editing service, and tutors there will not provide that service, which is a skill you must hone yourself, with guidance from your Writing Studies professor.*

## 7) I can't find any sources. Who can help me?

If you have been asked to perform inquiry and find your own resources for your work, there are several ways to do this. Professors will have different requirements depending upon the assignment guidelines, so it's important that you understand those first. Students who have engaged with the strategies for getting started and have formulated a question may working on a topic that is too narrowly defined, or not narrow enough. **Your professor can help you** to narrow your topic, but your librarians on campus are also an excellent resource to help you not only narrow the focus of your inquiry, but also guide you toward the most useful resources available to you. Depending upon the assignment guidelines, **your librarian can aid you** in searching the internet, library databases, and even choose with you from among the thousands of books, maps, recordings, articles, archives, and other materials they have in the library itself. And, if the library doesn't have direct access to an item you need, the librarian can show you **Inter-Library Loan** system, and get it for you, often within twenty-four hours. The important thing to remember is to not wait until deadlines to begin your process. Inquiry takes time and

may include false starts, wrong roads, and revision, but there are great folks on campus who are waiting to help you. You may also utilize the librarians by emailing them at [research@cortland.edu](mailto:research@cortland.edu) or by visiting the library website, and clicking on “Chat with a Librarian.”

## **8) There are comments on my paper that I don’t understand. Should I ask about them?**

In any course, whether it is in the Writing Studies program or in your major or even an elective, if there are comments upon your written work that you do not understand, **ask your professor!** Each professor you have might use a slightly different style of commenting upon your written work, and it is an excellent idea to ask questions about things of which you are unsure. This can be especially important if you are being asked to revise a certain piece of work. Revision is more than just editing, it is a comprehensive re-examination of the artifact (paper, lab report, quiz, or exam) that you have created, to determine how to make the piece stronger, clearer in expression, and more thorough in discussion of content. Your professor, far from being annoyed with your questions, will be gratified by your active concern in improving your work and will be excited to engage in discussion with you about the skill of revision.

## **9) What can I do if I feel like I am stuck with my writing?**

Whew! This can be a tough one. You’ve been working for hours, days, weeks, and you are just unsure how to refine a piece, even though you feel fairly certain it is unfinished. This sometimes manifests in “writer’s block,” the feeling that you just cannot put word to screen for another moment and generate anything useful.

**The first thing to do if this happens is STOP.** Save your work, close the document, whatever it may be, and walk away from it for a time. When you are up against a deadline, this can be hard to do, but necessary. Leave the area in which you are writing; go get a smoothie, go for a run, read a book, play a game, and then come back to it. This simple act of taking a break can be very helpful in working through a block.

**You can also seek out your resources: have a friend read your work.** If your professor will read your work, ask him or her to sit down and help you through the block. Or, visit The Writing Center or The Learning Center, or another trusted confidant who can give some other strategies or feedback. Maybe, you need to re-visit the assignment sheet and guidelines. Sometimes, getting a new set of eyes on your work can be most fruitful.

**Try writing by hand.** *We know, we know*, no one uses a pencil anymore. But, trying to brainstorm, free-write, or even edit your work utilizing a different medium can be useful. Maybe you just need to get away from the electric glow of your laptop for a while.

**Consider another perspective:** it is possible that you feel stuck because your focus is too narrow. Visiting the librarian to help widen the base of your knowledge can be valuable. Perhaps you can’t find enough to say because you haven’t done enough inquiry.

**Refuse to Procrastinate:** putting off doing work can allow for fun more immediately, but it also allows for more stress later. Stress can be the obstacle that’s keeping you from being able to express yourself in a thorough and meaningful way. Creating a schedule for assignments that you

have to complete can be the key in avoiding this kind of block. Strategies for avoiding procrastination can be found in the **COR101 Reader** and in your **course rhetoric text**. Ask your **professor** too about what you can do to relieve the stress of the assignment and thus, the need to procrastinate.

Self-reflection is key here. These suggestions may work for you, but you may need to develop your own strategy for working through writer's block.

## **10) What do I do if I don't understand an article I've been assigned to read?**

Understanding what you read can be difficult, but not understanding a piece of reading does not indicate that you have a weakness or failing. You may find sources that are simple and straightforward, and you may find sources that are very sophisticated and dense. **Your professors want you to ask about the reading they assign**, especially in areas where you are not understanding. They are here to aid you in building your knowledge, so ask them! **The Writing Center and The Learning Center can also help you to examine an article that is causing you difficulty**. They are trained to help you remove the barriers to your understanding.

## **11) What can I do to obtain useful feedback from my peers?**

Often, when a professor assigns written work or a project, he or she will incorporate into the course schedule time for **guided peer review** with peers. This is one way to obtain useful feedback from them on your work. Informally, forming **study groups or writing groups** can be a good way to engage with each other in the writing and inquiry process. It can be very helpful for your peers if you indicate what you might be looking for in terms of feedback; for example, if you are struggling with integrating source material, make that clear to your peer so he or she can pay special attention to this area of your work. If you have concerns about feedback you receive, it is a good idea to make an appointment to speak with your professor, who can guide you in terms of the assignment requirements. You can also turn to the consultants at **The Writing Center** for feedback, and the conversations you have there may give you a sense of how you can also ask for (and give) better feedback in the future.

## **12) I am having trouble documenting sources; what should I do?**

Documenting the materials you utilize in a course can be a tedious process, but it is also an imperative one. Regardless of how seriously you've taken the practice of documenting sources in the past, it is very important, now that you are a participant in the inquiry process, to formally recognize the materials that advance your knowledge. You can do so in a number of ways; the most common forms of documentation you will be asked to use here at SUNY Cortland are **MLA (Modern Language Association) or APA (American Psychological Association)**. *However, there are other documentation forms your professors may ask for, so the first step is to know the requirement for the assignment, which can be found on the assignment sheet or by asking the professor.* You may also find information on documenting sources in any textbook that you are assigned in your Writing Studies course. Most of your questions can be answered by looking through that material carefully and asking your professor for help with difficult or unusual sources. As we mentioned before, you can also use the very reliable and user-friendly



internet source created by Purdue University ([https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue\\_owl.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html)). Not only is this source easy to use, it also provides information on several common documentation styles. Take your time on this, follow the simple rules, and utilize your resources to reference sources properly, and your confidence will grow.

## VII. What is rhetoric?

What is rhetoric? Pronounced (RHET-or-ic with the emphasis on the first syllable) it is an ancient study of how to speak or write in a way that is “decorous,” or fits with an occasion (sometimes called “the rhetorical situation.”)

Like all big questions, “what is rhetoric?” could be answered many different ways. The ancient Greeks and Romans focused on rhetoric as the study of high officials phrasing and framing their speech-making in the most persuasive terms. Some people still consider rhetoric as purely the study of persuasion in the case of official speeches or documents.

However, people’s notion of what rhetoric entails has also expanded over time to include different speakers, different contexts, and different forms, genres, or formats. There are some who say, “Well, if rhetoric can be anything, then how is it a helpful concept?” Others say, “Atoms make up everything, but we still study them.” These large philosophical questions may not be a part of the way your course approaches the study of rhetoric (or they may be!) Regardless, when an academic researcher or someone outside of a classroom talks about rhetoric they tend to mean how, why, and what ideas someone is fusing together to persuade or identify with a given audience and for a purpose. So, with this in mind, here are a few helpful terms to get you started at studying the rhetoric of any text, object, artifact, or document,

### Terms

**Genre**—genre is sometimes thought of as the “format” of a text, object, or document. However, it is really a set of productive expectations about form, content, and social purpose for how something is composed. Not all texts within a genre will be identical, but they may be described as being “similar enough” to be in that category. (Ex. a resume is a genre because it’s specific content in a range of formats for some specific social purposes.)

**Rhetorical (Moves, Choices, or Strategies)**—what was done for effect, impact, efficacy, ideology, persuasion, or identification for an audience in a context. These could be small choices like the use of “we” in hailing an audience, or large ones like how to use a term or concept to make a reader re-imagine the problem or context at hand.

**Logos**—choices that appeal to an audience through a sense of logic. (Ex. this lawnmower cuts grass 45 seconds faster per square foot.) Logos is often considered strongest or most “true,” but it rarely works without other appeals and still requires warrants, hidden assumptions, and context. (Ex. does the audience want the fastest lawnmower, or the cheapest, most durable, or best for the environment?)

**Pathos**—choices that appeal to emotions. These can sometimes be strong because they are unstated or intuitive, but evoke emotion. (Ex. the sad music used in ASPCA commercials.)

**Ethos**—sometimes referred to as ethics, it’s actually an appeal to the good character/authority of a speaker. This appeal relies on the idea that it matters who is making a claim, like using experts to directly quote in an article or thinking about a publication source or author credentials. Texts themselves may also be said to have ethos if they demonstrate choices that evince a good “value” for that audience or genre. So, ethos for a website could be accessibility or not containing broken

links. Ethos for a resume could be that it is concise, visually pleasing, or uses genre conventions, like reverse chronology.

***Kairos***—choices that appeal to the opportune time and place can be said to be “kairotic.” There is obviously a *kairos* to appeals that involve resources. (Ex. asking a government agency for funding for an initiative when money is available or the issue is popular with the public.) However, *kairos* can also consider spatial terms or less clear resources like goodwill or energy. Basically, it is the combination of choices involved in either being at the right place at the right time or appealing to/creating a sense of timeliness.

For more resources on rhetoric or rhetorical strategies, check out the following!

## **Resources**

[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/academic\\_writing/rhetorical\\_situation/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/rhetorical_situation/index.html)

<https://writingcommons.org/section/rhetoric/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/>

## **VIII. Foundational (“Anchor”) Assignments and Student Writing Samples**

Assignment information and Student Writing Samples can be found at  
Digital Commons @ Cortland at <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/rhetdragonsstudentwriting/>

\*\*However, please note that we are in the process of updating the Foundational Assignment information for CPN 100/102 in the Digital Commons. The new Foundational Assignments in CPN 100 will involve the following: 1) working with one complex, source-based text; 2) synthesizing across multiple complex, source-based texts, and 3) exploring claims. The former categories of Analysis and Argument can be used to understand moves made in terms of analysis of one or more texts or ways that claims can specifically be constructed into academic arguments.