WHAT IS AN ACADEMIC ESSAY?

ACADEMIC ESSAY is a loose term, since some teachers will assign narrative essays or lab reports that don't fit into the kind of essay described here. But generally speaking, in English composition, literature, history, art history, world humanities or world civilizations courses (and possibly in some social science courses), professors will expect you to exhibit analytical thinking in the form of an essay.

Academic writing is persuasive: the writer has to persuade a critical reader that her generalizations about a topic are really thoughtful and credible. Topics should not be treated as if they were obvious or uncomplicated. Depending on the topic, generalizations must be expanded and supported through descriptive detail, facts, reasons, or personal experience. Writers have to reason their ideas in order to convince readers who tend to be skeptical and won't be convinced without the careful use and ordering of evidence.

If an essay lacks these features, a professor who expects academic writing is likely to dismiss what the writer says, not because it's "wrong," but because the writer hasn't used the conventions that help to lead us towards interpretive thinking.

When a reader encounters academic writing, she expects to find certain features or qualities or signals. Sometimes rhetoricians call signals "rhetorical conventions" or "cues."

"Conventionality" doesn't mean dullness or conformity to what a reader wants, though, because conventions also mean that people share expectations with each other: they are both responsible for making a piece of writing meaningful. As in a conversation, people use the same language even if they're disagreeing about issues. Within a set of conventions, the best writers will find their own voices. Conventions are elusive and multiple -- and sometimes the best writing is judged to be that which "deviates" from the conventions that are familiar to audiences.

Conventions for academic writing are numerous and elastic. For the kind of interpretive, humanistic writing seen most commonly in the Writing Center, conventions might include "signposts" such as an introduction with a thesis and a rational development of evidence. (See the two handouts on these conventions.) Additionally, to be fully persuasive, writers must pay careful attention to editing and proofreading their sentences. The presence of numerous errors can "break" with convention, thus failing to convince the reader of the validity of the writer's thinking.