



Friday @ the Center: May 11, 2007

Writing for Everyone: Part 11

(Look! It's part 11 on May 11!)

GLOBAL TIP: An excellent writing exercise for both upper-division and lower-division students from many different disciplines is the summary paragraph. It's a quick way to see if students grasp the main idea of a reading assignment, lab procedure, film, or lecture. A good summary paragraph should open with a one-sentence summary followed by a four-five sentences highlighting the major points. Such a summary might appear in an annotated bibliography, a bibliographic essay, or—eventually—in a longer paper that draws on secondary material to establish its argument or analysis. Students often struggle to write succinct yet comprehensive summaries. It doesn't take long to read and comment on these, using statements like, "The opening sentence doesn't give us the gist of the essay." Or "Your summary leaves out the third point, which is the most important one." Or "This is far too long for a summary; how could you shorten it?"

FINISHING TIP: The eleventh most frequent punctuation error in college writing, according to Lunsford's research, is an **unnecessary shift in pronoun**. The most common instance is when a writer changes from *one* to *you* or *I*. For example, "When *one* first begins writing on the college level, *you* often are worried about writing enough pages." Readers may become confused by unnecessary shift between first-person (*I, we*), second person (*you*), and third-person (*he, she, it, one, or they*.) (We'll talk in the future about the nagging problem of a shift in number from a singular antecedent to a plural pronoun.)

To Wikipedia or not to Wikipedia

My sixteen-year-old son has learned a lot from Wikipedia. Several months ago we saw the film *The Illusionist* together, and as soon as we returned home, he went on line to find out more about Tesla from the Wikipedia site. Yet many questions have been raised about the quality of information on Wikipedia, and I'm sometimes disturbed that college writers often confine themselves to this popular site when they do research. At Middlebury College, Vermont, the history department voted unanimously in January to adopt a statement banning their students from citing Wikipedia in essays and examinations. Each history syllabus now contains the disclaimer warning students that they can consult Wikipedia for initial background reading, but they are not to use it as a primary source. What do you think?

And don't forget . . .

- Monday, May 14

2008 Weter Lecture applications due
Office of Academic Affairs

- *Friday, May 18*
Fifth Annual Undergraduate Erickson Research Conference
Otto Miller Hall
3:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Still enjoying May, but counting the days to graduation (that would be 30),

Susan

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