

# Guide for Writing in Communication Studies

## About Writing in Communication Studies

Communication studies is a diverse field that draws from a number of different academic arenas. Student research may include sources from philosophy, religion, psychology, anthropology, business, graphic design, and many others. At Southwestern, communication studies students tend to focus on the creation, dissemination, and critical analysis of public forms of communication. We use theories and techniques from rhetoric and media studies to explore how communication functions in our culture, how communication is created and contested, and how communication works to shape our experience and understanding of the world.

**Writing assignments in communication studies vary widely depending on student learning outcome goals for each course. However, there are some commonalities in writing throughout the discipline.**

## Types of Writing in Communication Studies

- Many courses require a **critical analysis** of some sort of communication phenomenon (for example: a speech, movie, song, media campaign, space, material object, individual identity, social role, etc.). A critical analysis will require you to build an argument by researching the communication phenomenon, summarizing the object of study, provide your impressions of the object, and drawing broader conclusions about communication based on your analysis.

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## About this guide

This guide contains the following sections:

- About Writing in Communication Studies
- Types of Writing in Communication Studies
- Writing a Critical Analysis Paper
- Evidence in Communication Studies
- Conventions of Writing in Communication Studies
- Citations & Formatting
- A Few Other Tips

*The Disciplinary Writing Guides are designed to provide an introduction to the conventions, or rules, of writing in different subjects. These guides have been designed by Southwestern professors to help you understand what will be expected of you in your classes.*

- Other courses will require you to **create communication** based on your understanding of communication processes. These creations may be in the form of a public speech, a website, or a performance.
- Another common assignment in communication studies requires you to **review and synthesize the literature** surrounding a particular communication phenomenon. For example, you may provide a history of the use of Aristotle’s rhetorical concepts in contemporary politics.
- Finally, a number of courses will ask you to read and **critically reflect on or critically engage** some piece of communication or analysis of communication. In this type of paper, your goal should be to move beyond simple impressions and engage more directly with the materials by thinking of implications, examples, and possible applications of the ideas being presented.

## Writing a Critical Analysis Paper

The critical analysis paper highlights your ability to make critical observations and draw conclusions about communication through the investigation of a particular communication object. In a critical analysis paper, there are usually at least four sections:

- **Description of the object of study**
- **Explanation of the method of critical examination or critical perspective**
- **Analysis of the object**  
(This is the most important part of the essay and also the longest.)
- **Conclusions and implications of the project**

For each of these sections, different types of research are required. First, the communication object or artifact being analyzed must be researched. You will provide context for the object, including information about why it is a significant object worthy of analysis. Second, you will choose a critical perspective or method that will be used to analyze the object. This perspective will be explained using scholarly evidence that reviews the literature associated with this particular method of analysis. Third, in the analysis section, you will apply the method of analysis you’ve chosen to the communication object. This section comprises the vast majority of your essay. An in-depth analysis will include extensive detail from the object under examination: as you explain what you have found in the object, you will need to cite the object itself and provide direct quotations or descriptions to support your claims. Finally, the conclusion may include evidence of the scholarly conversation that surrounds this object or critical perspective. This information might also appear in your introduction, depending on the argument that you will be making about the contribution that your study offers.

# Evidence in Communication Studies

The primary form of evidence in most communication studies papers comes from the object being analyzed, usually in the form of quotations and descriptions. In most assignments, you may also choose to critically engage other scholars in order to support your arguments and observations. You should provide citations for the sources of evidence that you draw from, usually in the form of internal citations. In many cases, it is a good idea to paraphrase the results of your outside research (while still providing internal citations) in order to help foreground your own voice.

**Whenever quotations are used**, they should be introduced and explained so that their inclusion makes sense and does not interrupt the flow of the essay. Do not assume that the quotation will make an argument. Instead, explain how the evidence contributes to the argument or observation. Quotations, like paraphrased material, also require proper citation. In a critical analysis, the object of study should be cited when providing examples, quotations, or descriptions in the analysis of that object.

**Plagiarism can best be avoided** by consistently citing the sources of the original material. There is almost no case where a student will be negatively evaluated for providing too many

citations, so if there is any doubt about the necessity of a citation, the best course of action is to provide one. It is also very important to never cut and paste material into the writing assignment document. It is incredibly easy to cut something from a database or a website and paste it with the best intentions to add quotation marks and a citation, and then forget. When this happens, plagiarism has taken place and has serious consequences. You should only include material in the paper draft document **you** have written. Instead, create another document to hold and organize clips from the internet or articles.

**You should seek out the best possible evidence** to support your arguments. Internet

sources are often a great place to start looking for material, but rarely the best place to conclude a search. Websites like Wikipedia and blogs are not scholarly sources and should not appear in most scholarly work, unless they are the communication objects being examined. Peer-reviewed journal articles and books generally comprise the majority of the scholarly sources in an essay. A good place to search for these is *Communication and Mass Media Complete* or *Academic Search Complete*, databases available through the [Smith Library Center](#) website. Popular media sources may also be used to describe the context or object of study, but remember that these sources may be of poor quality.

## Conventions of Writing in Communication Studies

One of the goals of the department of communication studies is to enable students to communicate clearly and elegantly. The following tips are a good place to start, though individual professors may have slightly different expectations.

- **Use the active voice** instead of the passive voice (Write “Readers visited the site 1,148 times,” instead of “The site was visited by readers 1,148 times.”)
- **Proofread carefully** for spelling and grammatical errors.
- Most writing should **use the third person**. The use of first person singular tense is acceptable when referring to oneself, but first person plural (“we,” “us”) and second person (“you,” “your”) are often vague and should be avoided unless the referent is clearly specified.
- **Write in clear, organized paragraphs** of appropriate length. This means that a paragraph is more than two sentences, but generally shorter than a page. Paragraphs should have a topic sentence that explains the unifying idea of the paragraph to readers.
- **Use a variety of sentences structures** (simple, compound, and complex) in order to avoid boring your readers and always write in complete sentences.
- **Avoid using gendered language** (“mankind”).
- **Scrutinize your use of punctuation** to ensure it is correct. The use of commas, semicolons, and colons are an ongoing difficulty for many students.
- **Avoid exclamation points** in academic writing.
- **Avoid universalizing language** that assumes everyone has the same access to resources (“Since everyone has a smartphone, it’s important to know...”) or the same experiences (“Everyone goes on a summer vacation.”). Generally avoid universal terms like “everyone,” “no one,” “always,” “never,” etc. These are often easy to disprove and weaken the thrust of an argument or observation.
- **Include a clearly-defined thesis statement and a preview of the main points**. This is especially important in critical analyses and literature reviews.
- **Always consult the assignment sheet** before beginning a writing assignment, and then consult it frequently while working on assignment so that the specific requirements are not forgotten. Consult the assignment sheet one last time before preparing the final draft for submission to make sure that all of the major and minor requirements of the assignment have been met.

## Citation and Formatting in Communication Studies

Communication studies calls on a number of different style guides to determine citation and formatting rules. Most communication studies courses will utilize internal citations and a list of works cited prepared according to the most recent Modern Language Association (MLA), Chicago (CMoS), or American Psychological Association (APA) style manual. Be sure to check with your professor or the assignment rubric for guidelines about which format is preferred in your class. Consistent formatting should also be applied for block quotes, headings, subheadings, and works cited formatting. You can find up-to-date examples and guidelines for these citation styles in the “[Student Resources](#)” section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center website. If you have questions about what citation style is best for your class, consult with your professor.

## A few last tips for writing in communication

In most cases, writing is something that happens over a span of time that includes creation, review, and revision. Each of these steps is equally important. Revising is an active process that requires you to read and assess your work carefully in order to improve. Many classes will use peer review to help you get feedback on your work. Peers can provide useful information about the clarity of ideas, the organization of an essay, and the strength of the argument. Faculty members are also happy to answer questions and provide examples, when appropriate. However, faculty members probably do not have time to review an essay in its entirety before an assignment is due. For many assignments, visiting the Debby Ellis Writing Center for a consultation is encouraged. While this document has useful guidelines, be sure to consult with the instructor of your class for specific expectations and any points of clarification.