The Writing Process Series 2019
Taught by Dr. Elisabeth McKetta + Margaret-Ann Simonetta

Session 1: McKetta’s Writing Tips (for any source-based nonfiction)

1: Set a moonshot goal by writing your précis.
   - A précis is an abstract or summary of a text or a speech. Writing one helps clarify your end goal and sets your “ideal version.” You can return to your précis throughout the process, using it to guide your writing. Answer these questions quickly for the first writing project you have due and then smooth the answers out into a single cohesive paragraph.

Try this:
1. I think I’m going to write about ___. I find it interesting because ___.
2. Here’s what I know currently about my topic: ___. What I still need to learn is: ___.
3. If I had to form a single question about my topic today, it would be: ___.
4. In the bigger picture, studying my topic could shed light on ___.
5. What I want to leave my audience thinking or feeling: _______.
6. Drafty title: “Catchy phrase that taps into the heart of my topic.”

2: Find your model and use it as a guide.
   - Having a model text will serve as a guide in terms of the formal elements. Looking at its structure, tone, flow, length helps you set the parameters for how your piece will take shape. You may choose a work by a writer you admire, or pick a TED talk, or an article in a reputable journal in your area of interest. Try The American Scholar, Scientific American, New Yorker, Google Scholar, JSTOR, or Hollis.) Or ask a librarian for suggestions. Don’t overthink this. Just pick a piece that does something like what you hope your piece will do.

Try this:
1. Locate an article, essay, or talk that you admire to serve as your model text.
2. Study this text, paying attention to how it is built. Ask: How long is it? Where is it published? How does it begin and end? What grabs you? How does it state its topic or thesis? What tone does it use? How does it use evidence? How does it transition from point to point? Note what you like and dislike. Pick a paragraph and notice its sentences’ jobs—if you wish, write a paragraph for your own idea that mirrors the model paragraph.

Tip 3: Master your evidence using a sources master-database
   - Your evidence is the bone-structure of your paper, and if you organize the draft according to what “bones” belong where, it is easy to write the body around them. Organizing all of your evidence and sources into a single document gives you a master database for all things relating to your paper. If you get stumped, think of times you’ve used sources in your work or personal life. Remember that sources create knowledge, give credit, prove something true. Analysis is your spin on the sources, a way to tell them what you need them to think, a way to exert solid control over your resources in the service of a main point.

Try this:
1. Identify 3-5 potential sources.
2. For one of these sources, start a “Sources and Beginnings List” by writing down its citation information, followed by one quote or summarized idea from the piece. Afterward, in a different font, jot down a few notes about how you might use this evidence. Add to this list as you go; it will grow and feed your paper.

Email Elisabeth with writing questions: mcketta@g.harvard.edu / www.elisabethsharpmcketta.com
Email Margaret-Ann with speaking questions: margaretannsimonetta@g.harvard.edu