

FOUR GENRES
ENGLISH 125.068

In this course, you will be asked to write one essay in each of four styles. All of these will be on your chosen theme, so take care to select a topic that is broad enough to accommodate work in each of the following:

I. Personal Narrative

When writing in this genre, you have two goals. The first is to tell a compelling story that people will want to read. The second is less obvious: your story should contain an implicit argument. That is, your story should illustrate a point. If, for example, you're writing a story about how sexism drove you off your high school field hockey team, your story is implicitly arguing (perhaps among other things) that such sexism is still very real. The challenge here is to have use of these aspects in concert: the story illustrates an argument, and the argument augments the story's narrative force. Together, they make your narrative more than a mere recounting of events. Do not let your story wander without an argument, and do not let that argument reduce the story to a philippic.

II. Description

Here you will provide a description of your theme that anyone, even those who do not share your expertise, can understand. Doubtless you will also want to let your audience share your enthusiasm. Because of this, your description will likewise have an implicit argument, namely that what you are describing is worth your reader's interest. You will want to be concise, lively, and engaging, taking care to eliminate the dull, the trite, and the commonplace. You have a unique vantage on your theme, particular to your own experience. Let your reader see as you do. The best descriptions are not laundry lists; their focus is the particular, and their evocation of that focus is as illuminating as it is brief. When Ezra Pound described commuters in the Paris Underground, he needed only two lines:

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.*

Words are coins. Use them to get what you need, but be thrifty.

III. Comparison

When writing a comparison, your goal is not merely to chronicle the differences and similarities between two things or concepts. Here you will not be a historian, saying what was, nor will you be a scientist, examining what is. Instead, you will be an alchemist, attempting to synthesize new material out of existing lead. You will take two points of view or interpretations of something within your theme and show how each, while incomplete on its own, can combine with the other to produce an understanding that neither alone could provide. In order to do this, you will have to set aside the comfortable dictum that, given two points of view, one is right and the other is wrong. This happens, but at University it is much more likely that you will have to sift through divergent opinions to arrive at your own. Sorting right from wrong wholesale requires intelligence and education; sorting it piecemeal requires discernment, which in turn comes from practice.

IV. Persuasion

Here you will address a point of contention within your theme and try to convince your reader of your viewpoint's validity. Persuasion is the hallmark of academic discussion, and is a skill you will need to employ regardless of your chosen discipline. This is the most important, as well as the most difficult, type of writing you will do in this course. In order to be persuasive you will need to articulate your own viewpoint, as well as understand and articulate that with which you disagree. Without a thorough understanding of your opponent, you will not be able to convince a discerning reader to take your viewpoint as their own.