Twelve Elements of Scholarly Writing[*]

1. ***Thesis***: your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the *main* proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable (not obviously or patently true, but one alternative among several), limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence, and central to the topic you are discussing(not peripheral). The entire essay should be relevant to it. **Note:** some explanatory or descriptive essays or papers may not require a thesis as described here. In some kinds of writing, the thesis *always* comes at the beginning of the essay. In some, it can appear elsewhere. If the thesis does not appear at the beginning of the essay, or if the essay is not argumentative, **agenda** (see next element) becomes especially important as a way of rendering the essay coherent. Make sure you know what kind of essay you are expected to write, and how much leeway you have, before you begin work.

2. ***Agenda:*** what you are accomplishing *for your readers* with your analysis, description, or argument—not so much what you are *saying* as what you are *doing,* in your essay, *by saying it.* From the start of the essay, and throughout, a well-articulated agenda provides a compelling motive for a particular kind of reader (you must determine what kind of reader this is) to read. So, in the case of an argumentative essay, you should be *explaining* why your thesis isn't just obvious but requires demonstration or elaboration. In every case, you should be *showing* how your work is useful, perhaps revealing something different from what others might expect or have actually said; how it speaks to a puzzle or conflict that others might have; or how it has a larger implication that others might not immediately see. Especially in the case of argumentative essays, these "others"—imagined or actual—shouldn't be dummies; you need to make clear that their misapprehension or rival claim can be argued for. In other words, there is a plausible counter-argument to your argument, and not just a flimsy counter-claim, which you must answer. Or there is the likelihood of puzzlement or uncertainty on the part of intelligent readers, who might overlook what you have discovered. Or what you are explaining is especially difficult to understand, and your work is designed to make it accessible. Your agenda thus won't *necessarily* emphasize your own interest in the topic--your private and idiosyncratic motivation for writing the essay (e.g. "the teacher made me do it" or "Because of certain traumatic events in my childhood, etc., etc., I have a burning desire to write about cancer clusters"), but it might not be the reader's motive for reading it. Your articulation of agenda is what you say to show that your argument isn't idiosyncratic, and is of interest to any serious student of your topic.

3. ***Evidence***: the data—facts, examples, or details—that you refer to, quote, or summarize to support your thesis. There needs to be *enough* evidence to be persuasive; it needs to be the right *kind* of evidence to support the thesis (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); it needs to be sufficiently *concrete* for the reader to trust it (e.g. in textual analysis, it often helps to find one or two key or representative passages to quote and focus on); and if summarized, it needs to be summarized *accurately* and fairly.

4. ***Analysis***: the work of breaking down, interpreting, and commenting upon the data, of saying what can be inferred from the data such that it supports a thesis (is *evidence* for something). Analysis is what you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: you show how its parts contribute to a whole or how causes contribute to an effect; you draw out the significance or implication not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what makes the writer feel present, as a reasoning individual; so your essay should do more analyzing than summarizing or quoting.

5. ***Key Terms***: the recurring terms or basic oppositions that an argument rests upon, usually literal but sometimes a ruling metaphor. These terms usually imply certain ***assumptions***—unstated beliefs about life, history, literature, reasoning, etc. that the essayist doesn't argue for but simply assumes to be true. An essay's keyterms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout (not be abandoned half-way); they should be appropriate for the subject at hand (not unfair or too simple—a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be inert clichés or abstractions (e.g. "the evils of society"). The attendant assumptions should bear logical inspection, and if arguable they should be explicitly acknowledged.

---

[*] Adopted and modified, with the author's permission, from Gordon Harvey's "Elements of the Academic Essay." Harvey's elements emphasize argumentation, though most of them apply to essays that purport to be purely descriptive or analytical as well, and they are modified here so as to realize that potential. As stated, these elements probably do not apply to fiction-writing or poetry. NOTE: If you find any or all of these elements helpful, you should feel free to use them in your classes and modify them for your own purposes, but please be cognizant that they are copyrighted, and do not reproduce them for wider use.

6. ***Structure***: the sequence of main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should follow a logical order, and the links in that order should be apparent to the reader (see "stitching"). But it should also be a progressive order—there should have a direction of ***development*** or ***complication***, not be simply a list or a series of restatements of the thesis ("Macbeth is ambitious: he's ambitious *here*; and he's ambitious *here*; and he's ambitions *here*, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious") [or even, "Cancer clusters are misleading: they are misleading here; they are misleading here, and they are misleading here, too; thus, cancer clusters are misleading."] And the order should be supple enough to allow the writer to explore the topic, not just hammer home a thesis. (If the essay is complex or long, its structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence.)

7. ***Transitions***: language that ties together the parts of an argument, most commonly (a) by using linking or turning words as signposts to indicate how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous; but also (b) by *recollection* of an earlier idea or part of the essay, referring to it either by explicit statement or by echoing **key terms** or resonant phrases quoted or stated earlier. The repeating of key or thesis concepts, or the clarification of or emphasis on **agenda**, is especially helpful at points of transition from one section to another, to show how the new section fits in.

8. ***Sources***: persons or documents, referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. They are typically sources of (a) factual information or data, (b) opinions or interpretation on your topic, (c) comparable versions of the thing you are discussing, or (d) applicable general concepts. Your sources need to be efficiently integrated and fairly acknowledged by citation.

9. ***Orienting***: bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient the reader who isn't expert in the subject, enabling such a reader to follow the argument. The orienting question is, what does my reader need here? The answer can take many forms: necessary information about the text, author, or event (e.g. given in your introduction); a summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned (including announcing or "set-up" phrases for quotations and sources). The trick is to orient briefly and gracefully.

10. ***Stance***: the implied relationship of you, the writer, to your readers and subject: how and where you implicitly position yourself as an analyst. Stance is defined by such features as style and tone (e.g. familiar or formal); the presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; the amount of time spent orienting a general, non-expert reader; the use of scholarly conventions of form and style. Your stance should be established within the first few paragraphs of your essay, and it should remain consistent.

11. ***Style***: the choices you make of words and sentence structure. In scholarly writing designed to speak to a wide variety of educated readers (as opposed to specialize readers well-versed in the vocabulary of a particular discipline), style should be exact and clear (should bring out main idea and action of each sentence, not bury it) and plain without being flat (should be graceful and perhaps, at moments, interesting, without being stuffy overdone). Your style must depend on the kind of writing you are being asked to do, so, as with thesis, make sure you understand what kind of writing this is as you begin your project.

12. ***Title***: Your title should always inform, and perhaps (depending not the kind of scholarly writing you are doing), capture interest. To inform—i.e. inform a general reader who might be browsing in an essay collection or bibliography—your title should give the subject and focus of the essay. To interest, your title might include a linguistic twist, paradox, sound pattern, or striking phrase taken from one of your sources (the aptness of which phrase the reader comes gradually to see). You can combine the interesting and informing functions in a single title or split them into title and subtitle. The interesting element shouldn't be too cute; the informing element shouldn't go so far as to state a thesis. Don't underline or italicize your own title or put it in quotation marks. Use italics and quotation marks only where you are quoting another title or someone else's words within your own title.