

Writing Conventions in the Disciplines:

Writing in the Humanities

Basic Purpose/Approach: Writers in the humanities write in order to mediate objects of human culture for their audience. They write as authorities who hope to enable their audiences to better understand the objects of their focus and, at the same time, find greater interest and enrichment through that understanding. They also produce original theoretical works, but these original works give rise to their own stylistic demands, and this kind of work is not usually required of students.

Nouns: Abstract nouns and less specific word-choices are typical of the humanities, because humanities writers are attempting to analyze and interpret objects with unstable meanings. Nouns are chosen for their flexibility of meaning and the richness of their connotations rather than for their specificity.

Pronouns: Writers in the humanities often use the first-person because they are expected to have strong individual authority within their disciplines. The subjective nature of their work is foregrounded by the use of “I.” “We” is also used to denote shared assumptions and knowledge, but students should use “we” with extreme caution. After all, they are not yet authorities in the humanities and may have some difficulty determining what is widely accepted knowledge or paradigm and what is not.

Some years ago, the use of the first person singular was not considered desirable in the humanities, and writers preferred to use the impersonal “one” or other third-person substitutes, so you may find that students, especially those who have had more traditional instructors, are resolutely against using the first person. In this case, the tutor should encourage the student to follow whatever guidelines the instructor has outlined, while acknowledging that other choices do exist.

Humanities writers almost never use “you” to address an audience, because they do not wish to pressure the audience. A more subtle “we” may invite an audience to accept the author’s position, but a “you” feels all too confrontational.

Tense:

Tenses in the humanities are expected to describe what happened when to a reader.

Past:

- Refers to events that happened in the past, including past thinking and writing.

Present:

- Refers to events that happen in a work of fine art or literature. *In Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter the hall...*
- Refers to the writing of peers. *Shea notes that...*
- Refers to anything presently active, for example even an old newspaper might require the use of the present tense: *This sample article from a colonial newspaper shows that...*

Active Voice: This is the preferred voice of the humanities because it is another way of emphasizing the present activity of cultural artifacts and thought. Active voice is also another way of emphasizing the writer's authority.

Modifiers: Modifiers help writers in the humanities accurately establish their angle and qualify subjective positions which can never be said to be absolutely true. Humanities authors use modifiers more heavily than any other group of disciplines.

Diction: Humanities writers are much more likely than scientists to use colorful diction to emphasize personal convictions. They also prefer a stream-lined, concise (but interesting!) style to the carefully precise, wordy style of the sciences. Varied and rich vocabulary is critical to humanities writing, but generally humanities writing is more accessible and pleasurable to non-specialists than scientific writing.

Tone: Writers must establish a tone of authority, yet they must be frank about the fluid, relative nature of the subject matter. They must acknowledge complexities and avoid reducing their insights to easy certainties.