

INTRODUCTION

***MONSTERS ARE
SCARY BUT
WRITING DOESN'T
HAVE TO BE!***

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I KNOW WHY YOU'RE HERE.

YOU ARE HERE BECAUSE THERE IS NOTHING YOU'D RATHER

do than polish your writing skills, am I right?

Good, we're on the same page. (Both literally and figuratively.)

And I know that your being here has absolutely nothing to do with the course being a requirement.

Nope, certainly not.

You are *obviously* here because you *love writing* and would have taken this course under any circumstances. In fact, like most students, I have no doubt you were chomping at the bit to take freshman English (or the equivalent—your situation may vary).

Also, because you are obviously highly intelligent (as well as good looking), I can tell that you are the sort of person who appreciates that knowing the difference between

"Let's eat, Grandma!"

and

"Let's eat Grandma!"

can save lives—and I know you don't want Grandma's death on your hands (if only because you need to save that card to play when you forget about your Chemistry midterm. But I didn't say that).

We get each other. It's refreshing to meet a kindred soul.

But here's the weird thing. And I know you are going to find this hard to believe, but there are actually some people who aren't crazy about writing. Weird, huh?

Why is that? Well, yes, we do have to acknowledge that writing takes effort. As with acquiring any other skill, writing takes practice and patience. No one starts off knowing how to do a triple axel or to play guitar like Hendrix. Some people have

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more natural aptitude for skating or guitar (or both, I suppose—although not many people play guitar while skating; however, I can think of one memorable instance of a guy strapped to the front of a truck playing a fire-shooting guitar), but both are talents honed over time through paying attention to how others do it, practicing, getting feedback, and making adjustments—and one involves falling on your butt repeatedly until you get it right, while the other initially results in blistered fingers.

Writing is like that too, except you are, in most cases, less likely to literally fall on your butt or bleed from your fingers. In most cases.

But the fear and dread many people experience when it comes to writing often goes much deeper than laziness—because, after all, you are more than willing to put time and effort into things you find fun, rewarding, or valuable.

So why don't people find writing fun, rewarding, or valuable?

If you'll pardon my getting all academic for a minute, a researcher named Deborah Brandt did a study where she found that people generally had positive associations with reading. Some had favorite books growing up or remembered being read to by parents or teachers.

But writing was a different story. The people Brandt surveyed associated writing with “loneliness, secrecy, and resistance” (461). Many recalled writing as a chore, and some even remembered getting in trouble for it (writing on something they shouldn't have, such as walls or books, writing profanity or graffiti, etc.—nothing you've ever done, I'm sure). In few cases did Brandt's survey participants remember writing as something done together with others, emphasized by families, or something for which they were praised.¹

1 If this interests you, you can check out the complete article: Deborah Brandt, “Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading,” (continued)

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A lot of the dread people feel about writing though is connected with how writing is introduced and taught to kids—and this is why, as you’ve no doubt anticipated, I’m now going to ask you to write a 15,000-word essay on the history of the tax code operating in your state or region. It will be worth 200 percent of your semester grade, and you will lose 5000 points for each misplaced comma. Also, it was due yesterday. Also, it can only have three paragraphs. Ready?



I’m kidding, of course (or am I? If you think I’m kidding, turn to page 82. If you think I’m serious, please direct a check in the amount of \$2000 to the author, care of the English department at Central Michigan University). But this is what I mean about the educational system being implicated in fostering a negative attitude toward writing. Students are often directed to compose essays around topics distant, shall we say, from their interests, the stakes are high, expectations are rigid, and the feedback mostly negative. The result? Anxiety and dread, of course.

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YOUR TURN

So have I nailed it or am I full of it? Write me a letter in which you describe your associations with writing and where they came from. If you have anxieties about writing, why? And what in your opinion would help you work through them? (And remember: if you tell me I'm totally full of it, then this assignment is worth fifty billion points. Just kidding ... maybe. [If you think I'm kidding, turn to page 82.]

**IN THE WORDS OF EVERY INFOMERCIAL
EVER: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY!
AND, EUREKA! THERE IS! (OK, SORT OF.)**

Yes, writing takes effort, but any task is made easier when you like what you're doing, get praised for it, and feel that you are improving. (And if you honestly recognize that you are honing a skill that can enrich your life and prevent grandma cannibalism, so much the better!)

**AND THIS IS WHY IT IS NOW MY
GREAT PRIVILEGE TO WELCOME
YOU INTO THE FOLD OF THE
INTERNATIONAL ORDER OF
MAD SCIENTISTS!**

Well done to you! Remember when Dr. Seuss told you Oh! The Places You'll Go? Well, you might not have foreseen ending up in a dusty laboratory (that's pronounced Lah-BORE-a-TOR-ee. You have to get it right now that you are a

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mad scientist) surrounded by beakers, potions, and brains in vats, but life takes strange paths, doesn't it?

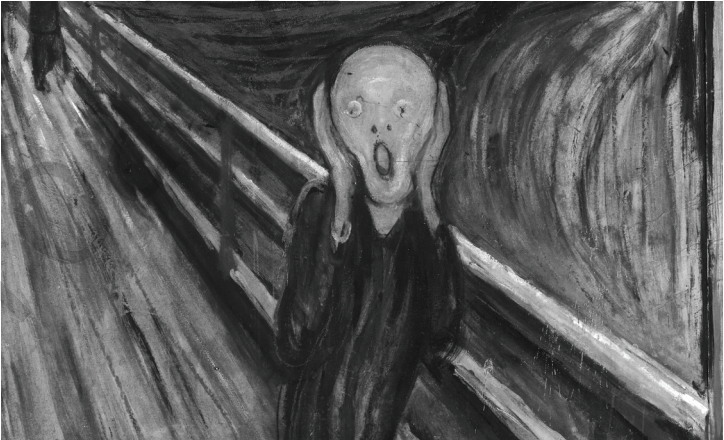
SO NOW WE ARE GOING TO DO WHAT MAD SCIENTISTS DO: CONDUCT FORBIDDEN EXPERIMENTS!

READY TO START DIGGING?

It occurs to me that some of your classmates may now be thinking, "Umm ... huh?"

For their benefit (not yours—smart and good looking as you are, you've already figured this out), let me explain.

At this point in your academic career, the response is likely deeply conditioned—your instructor tells you to “compose an essay on ...” or “write a term paper,” and what happens? Instant dread, anxiety, panic, fatigue, sometimes screaming, and possibly drooling.



The author, pictured here, demonstrates typical response to term paper assignment.

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Experiments

Experiments on the other hand (especially forbidden ones): well, those are a different kettle of brains.

With an experiment, you *try things out and see what happens*. And as every mad scientist worth their salt knows, no matter how diligently one prepares, sometimes the monster lives, sometimes not so much. One hopes the lab doesn't blow up, but there is no expectation of success the first time around. The usual process is try, fail, tweak, try again. Repeat as needed.

So, fellow mad scientists, we are going to engage in monster building and conduct some "writing experiments." These will be experiments designed to introduce you to different types of academic writing of course (you are a scientist after all), and help you polish composition skills you'll need in other contexts (both academic and non-), but the idea is to think of them as experiments—that is, as opportunities to try out different styles of writing with no expectation of mastery the first or fifth or tenth time around.

There is another goal here however—one connected to mad scientists and monsters—and this is to try to have a bit of fun with writing. Let us combat the dread of writing by writing about dreadful things! Because if we can't have fun when writing about mad scientists, monsters, and the living dead, then all is lost. (However, since it might just be possible that this isn't everyone's kettle of body parts, there will be other options presented for the squeamish as well.)

A User's Guide to *The Mad Scientist's Guide*

Before we really get going, let me just say a little bit about how this book is set up because, believe it or not, there is a method to my madness here. This book consists of seven chapters that

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are sequenced in terms of the writing process: getting ready to write, organizing one's thoughts and planning, doing experiments, and then going back to the drawing board to tweak the experiment and try again. Chapter Six provides details about the most common systems of citation, and then I supply a few annotated examples of different types of student writing.

That said, the first thing you learn in mad scientists' school is that mad scientists seldom follow the rules—that's one thing that differentiates mad scientists from the more pedestrian sane ones. What that means is that *there is no need to work with this book in the order in which things are presented*.

While your instructor has the final say on things like this (remember this!), starting with Chapter One on mechanics—the subject most inclined to inspire nightmares—may not always be the best strategy. Mad scientists often operate on the “when all else fails, consult the instructions” premise.

It is also worth mentioning that this guide is filled with pop culture references and my tone is occasionally (OK, mostly) sarcastic. These things don't always translate well (which is one reason we now have emojis), so I'll do my best to clarify as we go along. If you think I'm being humorous though, you're probably right.

So the question then arises: How best to read and work with this guide?

1. Let your instructor guide you; they are the boss. That's why they get paid the big bucks.
2. Try to have fun with it! That's the point here. If you are writing and enjoying it, then we've won.
3. Remember that experiments sometimes crash and burn. That's the nature of experiments. Aim for success, but be ready to try again.

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4. Think about what questions you have. Ask those questions. Don't say something or someone is unclear if you haven't asked for a clarification.
5. Write in this book. (Although if this is an ebook, then maybe don't write on your reader or computer. Especially if it isn't yours.) Write all over this book. Add moustaches to pictures as needed. Trust me—you aren't going to get much for selling this book back, so make it yours.
6. Use this book for other purposes such as killing flies and as a coaster. Get your money's worth out of it. But keep it handy. Refer to it.
7. Bear in mind that most of the essay examples included in this guide have been composed by undergraduates for particular courses. They shouldn't be presumed to be perfect. Users of this guide are encouraged to discuss their strengths and weaknesses.
8. And feel free to send me feedback (instructors too). If you ended up with a very successful assignment, found a mistake, have a suggestion for a revision or an additional assignment, you can direct them to **madscientistguide@gmail.com**. Who knows? Maybe your essay on Slender Man or serial killers will end up in a future edition.

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So, what do you think—are we good here?
If so, let's go!

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The author, figured here, excited to begin.