



THE MOUNGER '48 WRITING CENTER

JEFFERSON HALL
SECOND FLOOR (NE)

E/F/K/L (Mon-Fri, 1400-1600)
ESP (Sun-Thurs, 2000-2200)

Appointments preferred;
walk-ins welcome. Get more info
& schedule today:

usma.mywconline.com

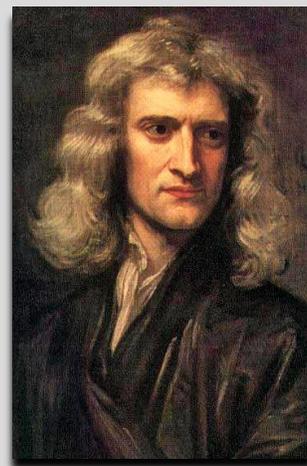
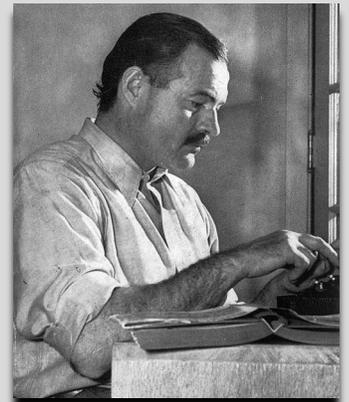
We offer regular one-on-one consultations and periodic group workshops to cadets working on writing tasks for all academic courses; all sessions are led by Cadet Writing Fellows who have excelled in their writing at West Point. Writing Fellows are trained to help you with any part of the writing process: brainstorming ideas; clarifying focuses; developing theses; organizing arguments; analyzing, integrating, and documenting sources; refining your style; revising and polishing drafts. Bring in work for courses in the humanities and social sciences as well as your scientific and technical writing—lab reports, memos, executive summaries, even writing for oral presentation. We can also talk with you about writing for personal interests and professional opportunities. **The sooner you come in, the more we can help!**

CONFRONTING GIANTS

FINDING LEGITIMACY AS A WRITER

CDT Joe DiGennaro ('17)

Do you believe you are a bad writer? Do you find yourself unwilling to take a firm stance on an established position? Are you intimidated by the sources you have to incorporate in your papers? If so, you're probably struggling to assert your own legitimacy as a writer, and that's perfectly alright. Many of the authors we interact with and experience throughout our collegiate educations are some combination of famous, smart, or very old—all of which makes it difficult to criticize or contradict them, let alone build on them. As students we often expect far too much of ourselves initially and seek to match or surpass these scholarly giants in



one way or another. Sometimes, we simply find literary or scientific giants (like Hemingway and Newton, pictured here) too intimidating. We shy away from them. We're unwilling to engage with powerful, established voices because our voices as writers seem small and undeveloped in comparison.

But here's the thing: of course our voices as writers are undeveloped! We haven't had nearly as much practice with writing and thinking as the giants we must contend with. How then do we gain legitimacy as writers?

Real Writing Fellow Observations:

Writers I've met who struggle with confronting their sources usually fall into one of two categories. Either they merely regurgitate their source's ideas or they neglect their sources entirely. Since most faculty expect you to interact thoughtfully with your sources—not just repeat what they say or offer seemingly uninformed opinions that don't truly reckon with it—these writers typically struggle to be successful.

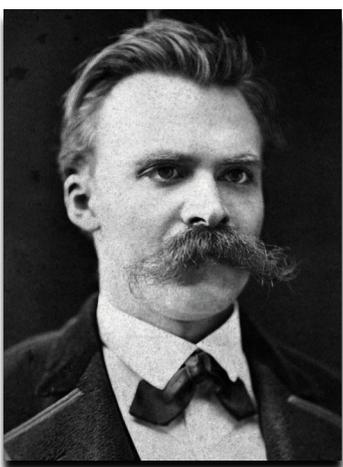


I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it.

-Pablo Picasso

He who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance; one cannot fly into flying.

-Friedrich Nietzsche



Strategies for Interacting with Giants

When you're having difficulty incorporating sources, it helps to visualize how you are relating to them—at least that's what the scholar Mark Gaipa argues.

To help you get started, here are some approaches Gaipa recommends, presented in order of increasing complexity and with my own twists and insights:

Attacking. Don't be afraid to disagree! There's nothing wrong with contesting what you find in your sources. If you don't agree with an author's claims, say what you think. Still, be wary of personal attacks or condescending language: attack the argument, not the person. Also, be careful not to overextend yourself if you don't know much about the topic; you've got to provide evidence for your views, not just spout off with opinions.

Ingratiating. What does this mean? (Gaipa calls it *ass kissing*, if that gives you a clue.) If you're really out of your element, it's fine to leech onto a source who knows more about the topic than you do and ride that source for all it's worth. However, it can be easy to slip into pure summary and neglect developing your own thoughts and analysis. Most college instructors aren't looking for a simple book report. Depending on the assignment—always start there!—a good way to overcome this trap is to consider the source's claims in relation to your own experiences.

Piggybacking. This is similar to *ingratiating* but also a definite step up. With 'piggybacking,' you start with the author's ideas but then expand on them with your own thoughts. Think of it as getting a boost for your argument. This strategy is most effective when you have at least some knowledge about your topic—something to really contribute.

Leapfrogging. This strategy combines *attacking* and *ingratiating*. Instead of completely destroying or praising an author, you acknowledge his or her contributions while simultaneously revealing weaknesses or limitations. In doing so, you legitimize yourself by 'paying your respects,' but you also make clear that your paper is filling a real gap in how other authors take up your topic.

Synthesizing/Recasting. These twin strategies are most effective when you have a thorough understanding of your topic and sources. On the one hand (*synthesizing*), you can attempt to unify authors who seemingly disagree with one another and, in so doing, take the conversation or debate to a new place. On the other hand (*recasting*), you can attempt to change how we see a topic or debate; you're not *attacking* other arguments so much as showing how established ways of approaching an issue (as illustrated in your sources) simply aren't relevant anymore. Either way, *synthesizing* or *recasting*, you're making the move to transform the scholarly conversation, proving how your fellow giants could benefit from seeing each other or their topics just a bit differently.

This writing guide was authored by CDT Joseph DiGennaro ('17) in the context of academic coursework for the Writing Fellows Program at the United States Military Academy. It adapts concepts from the scholar Mark Gaipa's "Breaking Into the Conversation" (2004). It also includes images drawn from the public domain. This guide has been edited and produced by Dr. Jason Hoppe, Director of the Writing Fellows Program. 2016.