Writing for the Freshman Seminar Program

A Practical Guide for Instructors

Harvard College
Freshman Seminar Program
Faculty of Arts and Sciences
Harvard University

HARVARD COLLEGE

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David Hahn
Tess O'Toole
Zachary Sifuentes

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Principles of Teaching Writing in the Freshman Seminar Program

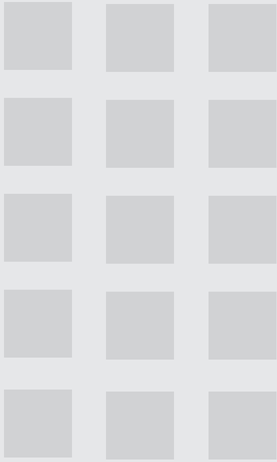
The following guide is not intended to be an exhaustive "how-to" for teaching writing, since there are as many different kinds of writing in the Freshman Seminar Program as there are course topics. Yet that same range and diversity warrants taking a bird's eye view of writing within the Program as a whole; the following guide will identify common student challenges and strategies for you to confront them. We begin with the premise that each instructor knows what's best for their own course. What follows in this guide is therefore intended to be adapted to meet the specific disciplinary needs of each instructor in the Freshman Seminar Program.

What are some of the common challenges facing student writers in the Seminars? Many will be taking courses outside of areas and topics with which they are familiar, and it is fair to expect that most need help navigating disciplinary conventions they may be encountering for the first time. The unique nature of the Freshman Seminars themselves--small, discussion based courses free from the usual constraints of a lecture course, such as exams and letter grades—may also give students pause. They may wonder: what level of formality is expected of me in a weekly blog post or response paper? How do I keep a journal in a college class or write a research proposal? What constitutes a "thesis" in a history paper?

This guide to teaching writing aims to help you address such student concerns by discussing the following strategies:

- knowing your audience;
- identifying, naming and describing your expectations for student work;
- using your existing course materials as models for academic writing;
- being transparent with your students when it comes to expectations and grading criteria;
- using an established, transferable vocabulary to teach and evaluate writing.

introduction



Five Principles of Teaching Writing

Know your audience. The writing abilities of students taking Freshman Seminars vary widely; furthermore, many will be as unfamiliar with the conversations in your discipline as they will be with its conventions. Given the diverse make-up of your students, it may be useful to:

Articulate Your Expectations Explicitly. Students unfamiliar with an area of study often need explicit guidance on many writing issues that more seasoned concentrators take for granted: from how to cite sources to the kinds of sources your discipline relies on; from how a paper ought to be structured to the use of subtitles and sections. To help them understand your expectations, it may be useful to…

Rely on Models. Some of the best models for writing are the readings you're assigning in your classes. Spending just 5-10 minutes in class to show students how writers in your discipline typically structure their articles will help students see that you're not asking them to do something peculiar to you or your class. Showing them how the "pros" write will help you to…

Be Transparent. Tell students what you expect in their writing beyond the length of the paper and the texts they can use. Indicate the kind of writing they'll need to do (close analysis, text in context, research) as well as the kind of intellectual moves you're expecting from their writing (putting a text in context, testing a theory, taking sides in an academic debate). Transparency helps when it comes to reading their essays and commenting on them. And to make sure your students understand your comments, you can…

Use a Stable Vocabulary for Writing—and then evaluate student writing according to that vocabulary. Using a regular and stable vocabulary to talk about writing helps not only to teach and evaluate writing, but to learn writing. This vocabulary ranges from thesis and analytical problem to evidence, analysis, and structure.

A catalogue of writing vocabulary, "Elements of Academic Argument," can be found in the Addenda section of this guide. Students are introduced to this vocabulary in Expository Writing 20, which is required of all Harvard first-years (please be advised that roughly half of your students will be taking Expository Writing 20 in the spring semester).

Knowing Your Audience and Communicating Expectations

Knowing Your Audience

The first step in shepherding your students through the writing component of the course will be to understand the sources of their difficulties. To learn what those might be, it may be useful to spend some time in class reviewing an essay prompt well ahead of the essay's due date. Asking the students to summarize in their own words their understanding of what the essay entails is a good way to gauge their level of comfort and what you might need to clarify about the assignment.

Common Challenges

- One factor that predictably poses a challenge to many students is the impact of disciplinary difference on academic writing. You can't expect students studying a subject in a Freshman Seminar to be familiar with the conventions, forms, and analytic modes of academic argument as it is practiced in your discipline.

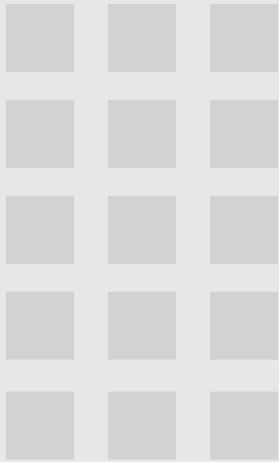
- In this respect, your job is different from what it would be if you were teaching even an introductory course offered by your department; you will likely have to spend more time with individual students or collectively in class clarifying a few of the basic premises of academic argument as it is practiced in the course's discipline, or explaining the genre of essay they have been assigned.

Possible Strategies

It may be instructive to remember that the goal of a Freshman Seminar is not to teach disciplinary writing conventions, and you should not therefore aim to have your students master those conventions.

- You may take advantage of the fact that underpinning those disciplinary differences are features common to all academic argument. Practitioners in all disciplines make arguments, advance claims, marshal evidence, entertain counterarguments, etc. By focusing on the common features of academic writing, you can help your students write cogent arguments without asking them to adhere too strictly to the conventions of a particular discipline.

- A catalogue of some of the features common to academic writing across disciplines is provided by the "Elements of Academic Argument" in the Addenda to this guide. The "Elements" are used in the Harvard College Writing Program for a range of courses and are meant to be adapted to fit various disciplinary needs.



Communicating Expectations: What Your Students May Ask

One strategy for communicating your expectations is to address the following set of common questions, either through a handout or class discussion:

- How **formal** is the assignment? Writing assignments in Freshman Seminars can range from traditional essays to response papers to blog posts. Students may need guidance on what kind of claim or observation you expect them to make. They often wonder whether they can use the word "I" in an academic context, for example; this question is usually a proxy for a deeper worry about tone and expectations that you can address before they hand in the assignment.
- Is a **thesis** needed for this assignment, and if so what kind? Should the writer make an interpretive claim or a causal claim? (Or, instead of presenting a claim, should the writer posit a hypothesis and announce her position only at the end of the essay?) You could also give the students a few samples of a strong thesis for a hypothetical essay on a different subject; that can help them see the type of claim they are expected to develop.
- What does the essay's **introduction** (if it has one) need to accomplish? How should it frame the subject of the essay and lead the reader to the thesis?
- What kind of information typically provides **evidence** (texts? statistics? logical inference?) for this assignment? What particular modes of analysis are expected? (Students used to working exclusively with texts might need guidance about working with data and vice versa.)
- What kind of **conclusion** should the essay feature? Should the writer merely restate her main points, or is the conclusion better viewed as an opportunity to reflect on further possible implications of the analysis?
- Are there particular **stylistic conventions or preferences** that students should try to emulate? (If so, you can provide them with a sample or two of what you think constitutes good prose in this field.)
- What are considered appropriate and reliable **sources** for this assignment? If the students will work with secondary sources, should they be aware of any particular indexes that can lead them to good articles or books? What is the course policy on the use of on-line publications as sources?

Three Strategies That Help Turn Students Into Better Writers

While it would be ideal to dedicate chunks of class time for writing instruction, there are many ways to incorporate such instruction into your existing classroom discussions. Here are some possible strategies:

1. Use assigned readings as models of good writing

To further students' understanding of your expectations for their writing, you can use assigned readings as instructive models. That is, you can use your course materials not just for their intellectual content but as models of good writing. By making the connections between the source materials through which the students learn the subject matter and the essays they will write, you will be teaching them how to become better academic writers.

Examples

- Asking students to summarize key claims and identify the evidence the writer presents in support of those claims can perform that kind of double duty.
- Encouraging students to analyze the way an argument is framed and supported, or asking them to evaluate the writer's evidence and identify her premises and assumptions, hones students' critical thinking skills in ways that can positively inform their understanding of the reading and their ability to write intellectually engaging essays about that reading.

2. Shape discussions in ways that model the critical thinking students need to use for their upcoming assignments

You can lead discussions in terms that reflect—and engage students in—the kinds of thinking your writing assignments will require.

Examples

- Will they soon be writing a multi-source essay that requires them to integrate primary and secondary sources? In this case, ask them how a primary source assigned one week might challenge or support a secondary source they have also been asked to read.
- Will they be writing a comparative essay? If so, it may help to ask students to identify grounds for comparison between the two sources and to discuss possible meanings or implications of observed similarities and differences.

3. Have students prepare for discussion in ways that require them to practice modes of thinking or writing that are applicable to the upcoming writing assignment

As you set-up the reading or discussion for next class, you can frame those instructions in a way that prepares students both for writing the upcoming essay and the next discussion.

Examples

- For instance, if the upcoming writing assignment asks students to identify and weigh in on a scholarly controversy, and next week you are going to discuss articles that take different positions on a common subject, you could tell the students to come to class prepared to present the academic debate reflected by article 1 versus article 2. That allows them to practice a move they must perform in their essay.

- Consider the kinds of thinking and writing needed for the upcoming writing assignment. The following are all things you can ask a student to do to prepare for discussion while simultaneously setting up the next assignment:

Can you briefly summarize a scholarly argument or research finding at the start of class?

Can you come to class ready to identify parts of a text that highlight a particular issue?

Can you come to class prepared to identify an issue or problem worth discussing by finding sites of contradiction in the evidence?

Helping Students Through the Writing Process

Writing as Sequence

Practiced writers know that good writing involves a great deal of work that precedes the putting of pen to paper to compose the final product. They also understand the value of editing and proofreading multiple drafts.

Common Challenges

- Novice college writers used to the simpler assignments assigned in high school might not fully grasp how important drafting and revision are.
- All of your students will be adjusting to the intense work-load of a college semester. Many an essay suffers from the fact that the student has tried to do all the work more or less at once, at the eleventh hour.

Possible Strategies

- One of the most practical ways in which you can help your students is to assign early in the term the kinds of preliminary work they will need to do in order to produce the particular genre of essay they have to write.
- For instance, if they have been assigned a research paper, two of the preliminary steps will be hunting for appropriate sources and reflecting carefully on the sources selected for inclusion in the paper. As a practiced writer, you can help your novice writers see that this work can be broken down into steps and scheduled.
- You could devote part of a class discussion to identifying those steps and suggesting a possible timeline, or you could create a handout that outlines the process and proposes a schedule. Especially for freshmen overwhelmed by the length and complexity of the writing they are assigned at Harvard, learning that they can break the work down into a sequence of steps that leads up to the composition of a draft can be enormously helpful.

Working With Students To Develop Their Essays

Your course's writing assignments may be sequenced in such a way that students are required to submit specific preliminary work (such as an outline or a draft) for your review and feedback. If that's not the case, encourage students to seek you out if they need help developing their essay, but also explain that it is their responsibility to come to you with ideas or preliminary work to which you can respond.

Common Challenges

- The most novice writers—first semester freshmen who have not yet had Expos—may need you to suggest concrete ways to start the drafting process before they come to meet you.

Possible Strategies

- Things you can offer to do when students are developing their essays include vetting a tentative thesis statement; discussing with them the way they plan to use one or more of their sources or the way they plan to relate their sources; and reviewing an outline.

- If one of your students appears to be struggling especially hard with a writing assignment, you can refer her to the Writing Center for supplemental help. Peer tutors staff the Writing Center, and they meet with students at any stage in the writing process. Students can book appointments on the Center's website. (See Addenda for details).

Practical Solutions to Common Writing Issues

The following comments are addressed to students who may be encountering specific writing problems; such comments are meant to be adapted to fit the needs of specific courses and disciplinary conventions.

section four

If the problem is...	A student might want to focus on...
Thesis	**Analytical Question or Problem**. Asking harder questions, and perhaps even articulating those questions you want to answer or resolve in the paper. These kinds of analytical questions or problems will most likely come out of identifying difficult, puzzling or contradictory evidence. Scholarship, in the end, is all about defining complex problems that you can then work to resolve—and that's the thesis.
Analytical Question/ Problem	**Evidence**. The heart of all scholarship is resolving complex and therefore interesting questions and problems, and we usually find those questions and problems in puzzling, difficult or even contradictory evidence. By focusing on where the evidence is "grey" in a text, issue or topic, you'll implicitly be focusing on raising an interesting question or problem—and thus showing your audience why your argument in this paper matters.
Analysis	**Use language that signals analysis.** This is what moves observation into insight—and insight is what lets you develop your argument. In the next paper, it might be helpful to think in terms of "this suggests that…" or "this implies that" or "this hints at" or "this speaks to." Each of these phrases will help you show your audience what the evidence is saying under its surface and connect that analysis to the larger claim you are making. By foregrounding what your observations mean, you'll be tying your insight back to your thesis, and thus implicitly developing your argument.
Argument	**Paragraph mapping**—that is, summarizing the argument in each paragraph in one sentence and using that sentence to lead off the paragraph. This will help foreground your argument and help your audience make connections between the "local" point of a paragraph and the larger point of the paper. And the good news: all those arguments are here. It's just a matter of floating them to the top. **Define Keywords.** You'll notice that I've pointed out a number of spots that you could define your keywords— even a couple of sentences will help to clarify, elaborate and otherwise develop the strong ideas you are working with. You can think of keywords as analytical "slogans." Defining those analytical slogans will help to develop your central claim.

Argument (contd.)	**Transitions.** You can do this by relying on stitching (carrying forward keywords from one paragraph to the next), or by using "this" as an emphatic adjective to remind us of the idea you are carrying forward ("This idea of bildungsroman, for instance, is…"). The idea here is to call your audience's attention to how the paragraphs connect. The more you make these connections explicit, and the more you talk directly to your audience, the more your paper will have an inherent organization to it.
Structure	**Paragraph mapping.** That is, writing a one-sentence summary of the argument of each paragraph and using those sentences to start the paragraphs. This will also give you a bird's eye view of the paper and allow you to readily evaluate how paragraphs are working relative to your thesis (evidence, counter-argument, premise). And once you get a sense of the main sections of the paper, you'll be able to tell your audience how they connect. **Signposts.** These are comments that are directed at your own audience and that tells it what's important about your analysis or why your argument is going to move in a new direction—or, in this case, what your analysis means for your thesis. These can be any one of the following: The point here is this:… or It is important to remember that… or even Thus far this paper has argued that… These notes are as important for your audience as they are for you. It will keep that great thesis in the forefront.

John Harvard: A sample comment

Your Argument

This paper argues that Neruda's "I Explain a Few Things" represents a breaking point in poetry—what poetry can address, how it can address that, and what precipitated the breakage in the first place. Part of the argument here is that while this particular poem is reacting to historical violence, it doesn't mean that its poetry is completely lost to that history or violence. The poem still relies on "sound and appearance…to describe the atrocity" (4) of war. Does this suggest that poetry may still be functioning, still be expressive? Does poetry survive atrocity?

Your Most Important Accomplishment

Evidence. It's apparent that you're starting to understand what evidence is, and how to analyze it using the four levels of reading—great job. This is particularly evident in your paragraph at the bottom of page 3, where you end up claiming that "Each stanza becomes fragmented as each line stands as a single, horrible thought." Here, you bring your observations and analysis to bear on your thesis, meaning you understand how this particular piece of evidence relates to the bigger point you are making.

If You Had One Extra Day to Work on It

You'd focus on **structure**. You'd want to ask yourself: how might each paragraph develop my thesis? One place to consider this is on page 4, when the paper begins to restate what you've already established. On page 4, you provide your audience with another example, and to transform that example into evidence that furthers your argument, you might want to consider how it expands, narrows, challenges or redefines that thesis. This "furthering" is what I mean when I say you want to focus on structure. It will help you develop the argument of the paper, rather than reiterate it.

How You're Going to Go About It Next Time

Paragraph mapping. This means that you'll write a one-sentence summary of the argument of each paragraph to see if the paper is falling into repetition or if it is moving forward. It also means that you'll consider the thesis not as a 'single unit' but as complex statement made up of component parts. Your job will then be to argue those parts relative to each other. This will allow you to develop your ideas in an organic way—by demonstrating them, expanding them, contracting them, and testing them—and to link those ideas together in substantial ways.

Your Growth as a Writer and Scholar

When you let the structure of your paper move your argument forward, you are going to demonstrate just how insightful you are. I want you to get your feet even more planted in the academic world so you can succeed at Harvard; your development in unit one has shown me that you have the promise to do just that.

Addenda

addenda

Additional Resources

Harvard Writing Project workshops on teaching writing. The Harvard Writing Project (HWP) works with faculty and teaching fellows to develop effective ways of assigning and responding to student writing. Harvard Writing Project consultants can help instructors learn how to encourage their students to write better, more persuasive papers. HWP consultants are available to help organize special training sessions, lead workshops on responding to student writing at staff meetings, and develop course-specific teaching guides. For more information about working with an HWP consultant, contact James Herron, HWP Assistant Director, at jherron@fas.harvard.edu.

Additional Resources for Students

The Writing Center. The Writing Center, part of the Harvard College Writing Program, is a place for Harvard undergraduates to get help with any aspect of their writing, from specific assignments to general writing skills. The Writing Center is staffed by trained undergraduate tutors who provide individual conferences at no charge to the student. Students don't have to be finished–or even started–to come for a conference, and can come with ideas, notes, or a draft. To learn more about Writing Center, please visit the website at http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k33202.

Examples of Writing Assignments

1. Formal Essays

May be assigned at the end of the semester as final papers or at regular intervals during the semester.

Examples

1. From the syllabus of *Before Modern Love: Desire, Duty, and Marriage from the Roman Empire to the Renaissance*, Fall 2013. Prof. Christine Lee:

A comparative assignment, 8-10 pages. *For this paper, you will be asked to juxtapose 2 course texts and make a claim about them. You may, for example:*

- *compare how two texts treat a shared theme*
- *argue for a contrast between two texts that might, on the surface, seem very similar or*
- *make an argument about the influence of one work on another, or how a later work rewrites a previous one*

2. From the syllabus of *Dickens in America*, Fall 2011. Prof. Jill Lepore:

A 3,000 word research paper. *For your research project, I suggest that you choose an American with whom Dickens had a significant relationship, and investigate the influence of that relationship on Dickens's views of America and Americans. Possibilities include: Charles Sumner, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, James T. Fields, Richard Henry Dana, William Cullen Bryant, John Quincy Adams, and Cornelius Felton.*

2. Response Papers

Usually between 250-300 words or 1 page in length. These may be assigned weekly or spread out over the semester in regular intervals.

Examples

1. From the syllabus of *Conflict and Cooperation—from Genes to Society*, Fall 2012. Prof. Kirsten Bomblies:

We played the so-called Hawk-Dove game from Game Theory in class. This was one of the first games described as Game Theory began to be applied to biology (by Maynard Smith in the 1970's). Read the overview I wrote about this game and consider: what happened when we played this in class and how does it fit with theoretical predictions, or not? For Hawk-Dove, we assume $C>V>O$. What would happen if $V=O$ or $V>C$?

2. From the syllabus of *The Creative Work of Translating*, Fall 2011. Prof. Stephanie Sandler:

Write a one page reaction to John Adams's On the Transmigration of Souls, reflecting on the forms of public mourning he might be translating.

3. Blog Posts or Journal Entries

Usually between 250-300 words or 1 page in length. These may be assigned weekly or spread out over the semester in regular intervals.

Example

1. From the syllabus of *Investigating an American Quilt*, Fall 2007. Prof. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich:

In addition, you will keep a journal. Think of this as your "scrapbag." It might include:

- *summaries and reactions to the assigned readings*
- *reflections on visits to archives and museums*
- *descriptions of artifacts*
- *transcripts of interviews with friends or family*
- *bits of fiction or poetry (your own or others)*
- *photographs (your own or others)*
- *actual patchwork or needlework experiments*

You should try to write 250-500 words each week so that by the end of the semester you have a rich cache to draw upon for your final essay.

Elements of Academic Argument
(Gordon Harvey, adapted by Karen Heath)

What the essay is about:

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; be limited enough in scope to be argued with available evidence; and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early and it should govern the whole essay.

Why it matters:

2. Question, Problem, or What's at Stake: the context or situation that you establish for your argument at the start of your essay, making clear why someone might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued (why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other theses might be less persuasive). In the introduction, it's the moment where you establish "what's at stake" in the essay, setting up a genuine problem, question, difficulty, over-simplification, misapprehension, dilemma or violated expectation that an intelligent reader would really have.

What the thesis is based on:

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; the right kind of evidence to support the thesis; a thorough consideration of evidence (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); and sufficiently concrete evidence for the reader to trust.

What you do with the evidence:

4. Analysis: the work of interpretation, of saying what the evidence means. Analysis is what you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: taking it apart, grappling with its details, drawing out the significance or implication not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what makes the writer feel present, as a thinking individual, in the essay.

Evidence and analysis add up to. . .

5. Argument: the series of ideas that the essay lays out which, taken together, support the essay's thesis. A successful argument will do more than reiterate the thesis, but rather make clear how each idea develops from the one before it (see "Structure," #7 below). The argument should show you not only analyzing the evidence, but also reflecting on the ideas in other important ways: defining your terms (see #8 below) or assumptions; considering counter-argument – possible alternative arguments, or objections or problems, that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; offering a qualification or limitation to the case you've made; incorporating any complications that arise, a way in which the case isn't quite so simple as you've made it seem; drawing out an implication, often in the conclusion.

Where the evidence comes from:

6. Sources: texts (or persons), referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. In some arguments, there will be one central primary source. In others, sources can offer (a) factual information or data, (b) opinions or interpretation on your topic, (c) comparable versions of the things you are discussing, or (d) applicable general concepts.

How to organize the argument:

7. Structure: the sequence of an argument's main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should follow a logical order which is apparent to the reader. But it should also be a progressive order -- they should have a direction of development or complication, not be simply a list of examples or series of restatements of the thesis ("Macbeth is ambitious: he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious"). In some arguments, especially longer ones, structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence.

The argument is articulated in part through:

8. Key terms: the recurring terms or basic oppositions that an argument rests upon. An essay's key terms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout; they should be appropriate for the subject (not unfair or too simple -- a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be clichés or abstractions (e.g. "the evils of society"). These terms can imply certain assumptions -- unstated beliefs about life, history, literature, reasoning, etc. The assumptions should bear logical inspection, and if arguable they should be explicitly acknowledged.

You keep the reader clear along the way through:

9. Transitions and signposts: words that tie together the parts of an argument, by indicating how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous (transitional words and phrases); and by offering "signposts" that recollect an earlier idea or section or the thesis itself, referring back to it either by explicit statement or by echoing earlier key words or resonant phrases.

... and through:

10. Orienting: brief bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient readers who aren't expert in the subject, enabling them to follow the argument, such as: necessary introductory information about the text, author, or event; a brief summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned.

Addressing your readers involves:

11. Stance: the implied relationship of you, the writer, to your readers and subject. 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 format and style. Your stance should be established within the first few paragraphs of your essay, and should stay consistent.

… and:

12. Style: choices made at the word and sentence level that determine how an idea is stated. Besides adhering to the grammatical conventions of standard English, an essay's style needs to be clear and readable (not confusing, verbose, cryptic, etc.), expressive of the writer's intelligence and energetic interest in the subject (not bureaucratic or clichéd), and appropriate for its subject and audience.

And last (or first):

13. Title: should both interest and inform, by giving the subject and focus of the essay as well as by helping readers see why this essay might be interesting to read

Freshman Seminar Program
Morton Prince House, 2nd Fl.
6 Prescott St.
Cambridge, MA 02138
seminars@fas.harvard.edu
Phone: 617-496-3993
Fax: 617-496-3262

Harvard College
Freshman Seminar Program
Faculty of Arts and Sciences
Harvard University