**The Clear and Concise AF Requirement**

At the beginning of this course, you will get three attempts (max) to write a 250 to 300-word paper that demonstrates your ability to write an essay that is clear, concise, academic, and focused (‘clear and concise af’). **Completing this requirement is more-or-less necessary for passing the course.**

I expect that some of you will already be able to write clearly and concisely af, and will thus complete this assignment on the first attempt. But many of you don’t yet know how to write clearly and concisely af. Most likely, this is simply because your teachers have never *required* you to write clearly and concisely af. (They may have *asked* you to, and given you a lower grade if you didn’t, but they never required you to.) In any case, don’t worry! The whole point of this assignment is to help you learn to write clearly and concisely af.

As I said, you will get three attempts to write a 250 to 300-word paper demonstrating your ability to write clearly and concisely af. Each time you make such an attempt, I will provide feedback to you so that you can improve for the next attempt. When you make your next attempt, you will write a new paper on a new topic—that is, you will not simply revise the paper you previously submitted.

This requirement counts as 1/3 of your final grade, and is graded on an all-or-nothing basis: if you complete it, you get full-credit; if you do not, you get no credit. The highest possible grade you can make in the course without completing this requirement is therefore a D, and thus completing this requirement is more-or-less required for passing the course. For this reason, all three attempts will be due before the drop date, so that you will have the opportunity to drop the class without record in the unlikely event you are unable to complete this requirement. If you try—I mean, if you *really* try—I’m confident that you will complete this requirement.

As for the content of your 250 to 300-word papers, they can be on any reading in the course assigned up until the point at which the attempt in question is due, and you can write whatever you want to write about these readings, as long as you write clearly and concisely af. Finally, here is what I mean by writing that is clear, concise, academic, and focused.

**Clear** writing is at all points easy for the reader to understand. The more a reader has to *work* to understand what you’re trying to say, the less clear the writing is.

**Concise** writing uses no more words than necessary. If there is a shorter way to say what you are trying to say, then say it that way. It takes *work* to write concisely. You have to go through your paper sentence-by-sentence rephrasing and deleting! Part of this work is *emotional*: as William Faulkner once said, you must kill—that is, delete—your darlings.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Academic** writing is writing that follows all of the specific instructions for the assignment—including being submitted on time, to the proper location, etc.—and uses appropriate formatting and citations. You can follow any standard academic style guide. If you’re not familiar with any, you can follow [the APA style guide](https://tinyurl.com/y2aujo9r).

**Focused** writing does not ramble or simply list ideas—it includes only ideas that are necessary for making *one* specific point, and it structures those ideas in way that clearly lead towards making that one specific point. If you find yourself writing things like “this thing, but also this other thing, and moreover this thing here”, you’re doing it wrong. Figure out what *the* thing you’re trying to communicate is, and include in your paper all and only the ideas necessary for communicating that one thing.

1. A note on the relationship between clarity and concision: often times, wordiness inhibits clarity, and so you can make your writing clearer by simply making it more concise. At other times, however, there is a certain trade-off between clarity and concision. For example, some concept may need more explaining, e.g,. through examples, and so making things more concise may actually make them less clear. In these instances, you need to find the appropriate balance between clarity and concision (sorry, life is hard). What you should never do, however, is simply *repeat ideas* or express ideas using *more words than necessary*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)