



**A discipline is more than just a subject: it is both a subject and a systematic way of approaching that subject.** That approach includes an understanding of past approaches, the use of a particular method for understanding, the use of certain specialized vocabulary, an understanding of what commonly counts as evidence, and so on.

One way to remember the concerns that shape each discipline is to use the acronym “SMILE.”

**S Structure** - Although there may be many different types of writing within a discipline, **disciplinary awareness requires an awareness of structure, or organization.** Just as you wouldn’t write a lab report in one long paragraph, you wouldn’t divide a history paper into sections on “hypothesis,” or “methods.”

**The structure of academic writing is never arbitrary.** The “methods” section of a lab report, for example, exists so that scientists can replicate one another’s experiments. This is unnecessary in an English paper because the “thought experiment” that led the author to their thesis is recreated as the reader works through the paper.

**M Methods** – The easiest way to think about disciplinary methods is to ask, **“How do members of this discipline answer questions about a topic?”** Experimentation is one method, as is observation. Quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis are methods. But methods can also be less obvious. Art Historians might use formal analysis to answer a question about a painting. Historians may use arguments from analogy.

The second part of disciplinary methodology has to do with theories. **Each discipline has its own set of theoretical influences** (think of the way that evolution influences biology, or the way that attachment theory influences psychology). Not all members of a discipline may agree with every theory within it, of course, but most disciplines agree on a common set of important texts, ideas, and thinkers.

One note: Some theories are also applied across disciplines. Marxist theory, for example, may shape the ways that literary scholars approach texts or the ways that historians approach the past.

**I Inquiry** - Just as each discipline shares a common set of theories, **each discipline also shares a common set of questions those theories set out to answer.** This set of questions may be as close to disciplines come to being “subjects.” Physicists, for example, ask, “Why do space, matter, and time behave the way they do?” Literary critics (English professors) ask “How do texts affect or reflect individuals or cultures?” Sociologists ask, “Why do cultures act the way they do?” and Psychologists ask “Why do individuals act the way they do?”

**L** **Language** – For the most part, every discipline has its own specific vocabulary. For example, in biology you would refer to a “female” rather than a “woman,” while in History papers you’d refer to Napoleon as “a male”; you’d say “a man.” “Form” means something very particular when you’re talking about poetry, and something else if you’re talking about paintings.

Each discipline also has conventions for writing style. You probably wouldn’t use metaphors in a psychology paper, and business writing asks you to avoid passive voice.

Each discipline also has its own style of citation. In APA format, for example (often used in social sciences to cite experiment results), you include the author and the date of publication. This is necessary because new experimental results are always being tested. In MLA format, however (used in literature papers) you include the author and the page number. Coleridge’s observations about lime trees will never change, but readers might want to read what came before and after the section you quoted. (For more on citation styles, and links to sites with guidelines and models, see the DEWC’s online “Student Resources for Writing”.)

**E** **Evidence** – The final question that each discipline answers for itself is that of evidence. As you know, different information serves as evidence in different disciplines. Your own personal experience can be a valuable piece of evidence in a lesson plan, but probably will not get you too far in a Biology paper. While evidence does vary depending on the type of writing within a field, disciplines generally have standards they use to determine the value of evidence. (For example, a long quotation might be very appropriate evidence in a literature paper, where you have to analyze language. But in a psychology paper—even if it’s on the same text—you’ll probably be asked to paraphrase. Logical comparisons may be an excellent way to justify an argument in philosophy, but even a logical argument in a business class will probably require you to pull from case studies or data.