

Physics 280

Writing Lab 14

Responding to Quick, Short Writing Tasks

School: BLUF format (bottom line up front)

Address the question / prompt directly, mirror the concepts and language. The purpose / motivation for writing is assumed. Launch into detail with an [indication of the structure to follow](#).

Unspoken curriculum: In the detailed part of the answer, you may think semi-independently in certain fields--those in which knowledge is understood as more constructed or conditional. Otherwise you must demonstrate your thinking according to approved methods. In either case, make your assumptions explicit.

In every case, elaborate your answer to demonstrate knowledge learned in the course (primary emphasis) and derived from the course discipline (secondary background).

Judge length of response / amount of elaboration desired via time allowed, space allowed for writing or an explicit length requirement (number of words, number of sentences, etc.).

[CMU handout](#) for more examples of BLUF in academic writing.

Work: BLUF Format (bottom line up front)

State the purpose / motivation for writing and the main point for readers. If action/next steps are needed, state them near the beginning. Indicate that detail will follow, [forecast its organization](#), and provide headings unless very brief.

Unspoken curriculum: Analyze the political and practical contexts for the task, particularly given your unit within an organization, your boss's position toward the task / task space within the unit, and your own. What is the organization's / unit's / boss's purpose?

Analyze why the task has been given to you for fulfillment. Are you expected to think independently or to produce accepted wisdom? What sources of information are valid? What forms of authority or legitimation are available to you? What is *your* purpose?

Judge the length of response / amount of elaboration preferred by past examples, the nature of the task, the mode and occasion for delivery, and the use to which the communication will be put.

[U. TX-El Paso National Security Studies Institute](#) example of BLUF in intelligence reporting.

Arguments, Continued

Old Concepts: In a previous writing lab, we learned that arguments are built on a thesis (main claim) that is supported by reasons that are, in turn, each supported by evidence. (analogy: conceptual “building blocks”)

New Concept: A **warrant** is the often unspoken premise that explains how reasons support a claim or how evidence supports a reason. A warrant is phrased as an abstracted assumption about how the world works. (analogy: logical “glue”)

Thesis / Main Claim: The U.S. should not continue to invest in expanding the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense [GBMD] program as the fifteen year-old missile-defense system has proved a technical and strategic failure.

Reason / Claim 1: “Tests of the [GBMD] system have failed more often than they have succeeded, despite their having been conducted under artificially simplified conditions.”

Warrant for Claim 1: No further investment should be made in a defense system that does not have a record of successful testing. Corollaries: a. We should invest in proven technologies. b. The best testing is not artificially simplified.

Reason / Claim 2: “Because Russia and China have legitimate reasons to perceive the Ground-based Midcourse Defense system as a potential threat, they have incentives to improve or expand their nuclear capabilities.”

Warrant for Claim 2: If a nation’s defense system triggers other nuclear powers to improve their nuclear capabilities, that system should be considered a strategic failure. Corollary: We should not invest defense systems that have no deterrence effect.

Strengthening Warrants

You can strengthen a weak warrant in the following ways:

1. Qualify the language of the reason / evidence to improve its credibility or weaken the reader's skepticism.
2. Remove a weak reason / piece of evidence and state a better one.
3. State the warrant explicitly and provide a reason (known as "backing") for why the reader should believe it is valid.

Reason / Claim 1: "Tests of the [GBMD] system have failed more often than they have succeeded, despite their having been conducted under artificially simplified conditions."

Warrant for Claim 1: No further investment should be made in a defense system that does not have a record of successful testing. Corollaries: a. We should invest in proven technologies. b. The best testing is not artificially simplified.

Rebuttal of Warrant for Claim 1: If we don't continue to invest in defense systems with weak testing records, they'll never improve and the investment already made in them will be wasted.

Improved Reason / Claim 1 Language: Investment in the [GBMD] has continued, but tests have failed even in the most recent round, despite their having been conducted under artificially simplified conditions.