



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center

“Explain It to Me” and “Hot Spots”

Explain It to Me

To figure out how to write something, try it out on different audiences, in writing or out loud

Write to a novice: Try explaining an aspect of your project to a (real or imagined) audience who is intelligent and interested but doesn’t know anything about the topic: a family member, for example. The point isn’t to produce a textbook: your audience won’t want to read or listen for that long. Instead, summarize the main question, problem, or issue you are addressing in language that is not too technical.

Write to your advisor: Instead of writing formal text for your advisor to critique, imagine you are writing your advisor an email: What section of your project are you working on? How does it fit in with the larger project and with other work in this field? What do you hope to accomplish through this section, and what problems do you anticipate or are you grappling with?

Write to yourself: If your “inner critic”—that voice in your head that monitors and critiques every word you put on the page—is inhibiting you from writing at all, try writing to yourself. Don’t worry about creating reader-oriented sentences and paragraphs. Instead, use your own shorthand to explain to yourself what you are working on, why you are drawn to and believe in this topic, what problems you are encountering, and how you might work through them.

Although you can do this exercise alone with an imagined audience, take every opportunity you can find—including by meeting with a graduate writing consultant—to talk with others about your project, that talking providing an important rehearsal space and confidence-booster for writing!

Hot Spots

If you need to develop and expand a section of a draft or if you are ready to move from a proposal or prospectus to drafting the actual project, try identifying and writing from “hot spots”:

- Read through your draft or proposal and star key points, a provocative idea, a central tension, or a concept that could use elaboration or illustration. These are the “hot spots.”
- Write one of these hot spots on separate piece of paper or in a new document and then use it as a sentence-starter to begin writing.
- Write for 5 to 10 minutes from each hot spot. Don’t worry if you go off on a tangent, don’t have the quite the right phrase, are repeating yourself, or are producing more text than belongs in your draft. You can decide later what to keep and what to cut.