

Tips for Writing Papers

Adapted from the History department of Boston College

What an Academic Essay Needs to Do

1. An academic essay attempts to address an intellectual problem or question. The first rule, therefore, of successful essay writing is making sure you are actually writing an essay on the topic or question your instructor has set before you, rather than some other, random question.
2. Beyond this, an essay is analytical rather than descriptive. It is not enough to describe what happened or to write a narrative of past events. You must argue a position.
3. Essays also attempt to persuade. Having posed a question or problem in the first paragraph of your essay, and having stated your thesis, you then need to convince your reader of the validity of your position. In order to persuade, you need to argue in a logical fashion.
 - a. To do this, you should first write an outline before you begin to draft your essay. An outline will help you organize your argument, and it will, in the end, produce a more cogently argued paper.
 - b. Second, you should include only the information in your essay that is relevant to the question you are addressing. Other information, whether factually correct or not, is irrelevant. It confuses your reader and obscures the point you are trying to argue.
 - c. Third, your essay should take your reader by the hand (so to speak) and guide him or her through the process of thought leading to the conclusions you want your reader to draw. You should assume that your reader is intelligent but does not necessarily know the material you are presenting. Thus, if certain facts are critical to an essay, you must present them as such, and you cannot assume that the reader already knows them.
 - d. Fourth, to convince your reader that your thesis is correct, you must support your point of view with evidence. Use quotations and examples from your readings and from lectures to prove your points.
4. You must, however, consider all evidence, even the evidence which might, at first glance, seem to disprove your argument: you must explain why awkward or contradictory evidence does not, in fact, undermine your conclusions. If you cannot

provide such an explanation, then you must modify your thesis. It is never acceptable to avoid unpleasant evidence by simply ignoring it.

II. Basic Structure

1. An essay must have an introductory paragraph that lets your reader know what your thesis is and what the main points of your argument will be. An essay must also have a conclusion (at least a paragraph in length) that sums up its most important arguments. In short, over the course of your essay, you must tell readers what you are going to say, say it, and then tell them what you have said.
2. Paragraphs are the building blocks of an essay. Each paragraph should contain a single general idea or topic, along with accompanying explanations and evidence relevant to it. Each paragraph, moreover, has a topic sentence (usually the first sentence) that tells the reader what the paragraph is about.
3. Do not write one-, two-, or three-sentence paragraphs. Paragraphs have topics, introductory sentences, evidence, and conclusions.
4. Do not write two- or three-page paragraphs. A paragraph generally explores a single idea, rather than a dozen.
5. Before you end a discussion of one major topic and begin another, it is important to summarize your findings and analyze their importance for your thesis. It is also necessary to write a transition to alert your reader that you have begun a new topic. Thus, if your thesis is hinged on three major points, you should spend a couple of pages on each point and write a transition paragraph between each section.

III. Formal Written English

1. Avoid colloquialisms (e.g., *cool*, *kind of*, *totally*, *hung up on*, *OK*, *sort of*, etc.). They are fine in speech, but they should never be used in formal written English.
2. On the other hand, do not use antiquated or obscure words that have been suggested to you by your computer's thesaurus, especially if you are not sure what these words mean.
3. Avoid contractions (e.g., *don't*, *can't*) in a formal written piece of work.
4. Gender-inclusive language should be used, but it should be used sensibly. On the one hand, if you mean all people living in society, do not describe them with the word *men*. On the other hand, if gender-inclusive language makes what you are saying incorrect, do not use it. In other words, when speaking about monks (who are men), do not say *he or she*. If talking about the right to vote in the nineteenth century, the same principle holds, as women could not then vote.

5. It is all right to use *I*, *me*, or *my* now and again, but do not overuse them. It is unnecessary to use expressions such as *in my opinion*, as your reader will assume that whatever you write in your paper that is not attributed to another author is your opinion.

6. Do not use the general *you*. Use *one* instead.

7. When you first discuss an author or historical figure, use first and last name. After this, you are free to use last name only. Do not, however, refer to historical figures by their first name; e.g., Karl Marx should be referred to as *Marx*, rather than *Karl*. This rule applies for women as well as men. Emily Dickinson should be called *Dickinson* rather than *Mrs. Dickinson*.

8. Avoid beginning sentences and paragraphs with the word *however*, and never end a sentence with *however*.

9. *However* can be used only to link two halves of a single sentence, separated by a semicolon (not a comma), if both clauses have something to do with one another. Incorrect: *He was hungry; however, it was a warm day.*

10. The words *while* and *although* have slightly different meanings. *Although* means "regardless of the fact that" or "even though." *While* means "at the same time that."

IV. Verbs

1. Stick to the past tense as much as possible. Do not write about long-past events and long-dead people in the present tense.

2. Do not, however, change the tense of verbs in passages you are quoting.

3. Think carefully when you use the passive voice in favor of the active voice. *Luther believed that...* is better, clearer, and punchier than *It was believed by Luther that...*, and *A.G. Bell invented the telephone* is better than *The telephone was invented by A.G. Bell*, because Luther and Bell were acting rather than being acted upon. Still, people are acted upon as well as act, and events are caused as well as happen on their own accord. When you are attempting to express this, by all means use the passive voice (e.g., *Smith had been unemployed during the Depression*, or *Peasants had been removed from their lands during Enclosure*).

V. Nouns and Adjectives

1. Write out numerals (except dates) under 100 (i.e., *three* instead of *3*), except when they appear as the first word of a sentence or are being used as percentages.

2. Do not use an apostrophe for decades (i.e., *1920s*, not *1920's*).

3. Write out all centuries (i.e., *sixteenth century*, not *16th century*).

4. When a century is used as an adjective — that is, as a phrase that describes a noun (i.e., *sixteenth-century art*) — it is hyphenated. When a specific century is used as a noun (i.e., *at the end of the sixteenth century*) it is **not** hyphenated.

5. You also must hyphenate other pairs of words when using them as adjectives. For example, when *African American* is used as a noun (*African Americans were long denied the right to serve on juries*), there is no hyphen. When it is used as an adjective (*African-American men are often stopped without cause by the police*) there is a hyphen. The same rule applies to *middle class*, *working class*, or any other pair of words. When pairs of words act like nouns, they are not hyphenated; when they act like adjectives, they are.

6. Adjectives make for interesting writing, but they should be used sparingly. *The Communist Manifesto was really, truly very much a work of groundbreaking importance* is not as good as *The Communist Manifesto was groundbreaking*.

7. In most cases, it is wise to avoid using the same word twice in a single sentence or many times in a single paragraph.

8. Nonetheless, some ideas, institutions, and activities have highly technical meanings, and synonyms cannot be found for them. A *communist*, for example, should not be called a *socialist*, nor should *slavery* be termed *vassalage*, *indenture*, or some other word that does not actually mean "slavery." Just because these synonyms have been suggested by your computer's thesaurus does not mean your computer knows what it is talking about. You need to think carefully about the meaning of the words you use.

9. Avoid using anachronistic terms. Words like *superstition*, *the masses*, *the people*, *nation*, *citizens*, and *countries* can all be used to describe the modern world, but they are inappropriate for the pre-Modern period. For example, just as you would not describe twentieth-century France as a *kingdom*, you should not describe twelfth-century France as a *nation*.

10. Make sure that single nouns match single pronouns and verbs, and that plural nouns match plural pronouns and verbs. Consider these sentences: *The conventions connected them to a national body of women who shared ideals and beliefs. It allowed them to work with black men.* In this sentence, *they* should have been used instead of *it*. Another example: *His first memories of slavery was...* The word *was* should be *were*.

11. Make sure that the antecedents of your pronouns (i.e., the nouns to which pronouns refer) are correct. Read the following sentence: *Masters tried to use religion to control slaves, but they were not very interested in conversion.* The author is trying to say that masters were not concerned with the spiritual conversions of their slaves. Grammatically, however, the word *they* refers to *slaves* rather than *masters*, because the noun *slaves* is closer to the pronoun *they* than the noun *masters*. This makes the sentence factually incorrect, since slaves were very interested in their own spiritual lives.

12. Avoid using *this* or *that* as a subject (i.e., *This made an enormous difference*). It is better to be more specific: (i.e., *This new development made an enormous difference*).

VI. Quotations

1. Quoted material needs to be introduced. You cannot simply throw in a quotation without introducing it in a way that allows your reader to see what it is doing there (i.e., *This is clearly the case when Smith writes...* or *For example, Athanasius argued that...*)

2. Examples or quotations should not, however, be introduced as follows: *On page five it says...* or *In the book it says...*

3. Indent and single-space long quotations (generally anything more than three lines). When you have indented a quotation, do not use quotation marks. The indentation, itself, marks this as a quotation.

4. Check all quotations carefully against the text. The price of using someone else's words to prove your point is quoting them accurately!

VII. Punctuation and Capitalization

1. *However* and *therefore* are almost always preceded by a comma or semicolon and followed by a comma (i.e., ..., *however*,...).

2. *Which* is more often than not preceded by a comma (i.e., ..., *which*...).

3. If you have written a two-part sentence joined by an *and*, and if both parts can stand on their own as sentences, the *and* should be preceded by a comma. Thus, *Henry II's justiciars traveled to shire courts, and they gave judgments there*; but: *Henry II's justiciars traveled to shire courts and gave judgments there*. The second sentence does not take a comma, because the last clause cannot stand on its own as a sentence.

4. All punctuation marks go inside quotation marks. (Correct: *"like this."* Incorrect: *"like this".*)

5. Avoid exclamation points!!!!

6. There is a difference between a hyphen (-) and an em dash (—). A hyphen joins two words, usually those in an adjectival phrase. An em dash represents a break in thought or a pause for emphasis; it is usually typed as two hyphens. For example: *Nineteenth-century France experienced several different kinds of governments -- three republics, two empires, and two monarchies*. The character between *Nineteenth* and *century* is a hyphen. The character between *governments* and *three* is an em dash.

7. Either underline or italicize all book titles and foreign words.

8. Titles such as "king," "bishop," "senator," and "prime minister," when attached to a personal name, should be capitalized (e.g., *Saint Martin*, *Senator Kennedy*). They should not, however, be capitalized if they are used as nouns unattached to personal names (e.g., *According to Gregory*, *all bishops...*).

9. Your papers are written in English, not German. Unlike German, English does not capitalize nouns as a matter of course. Do not capitalize *nineteenth century*, *lords*, *law*, *jurors*, *legal reform*, *slavery*, *working class*, *capitalism*, *socialism*, etc. Words are not capitalized simply because they represent something important. The rule is: When in doubt, do not use capitals.

VIII. Footnotes and Bibliographies

Instructors may give you very specific instructions about footnote and bibliography styles. The books for Hacker and Fister's *Research and Documentation in the Electronic Age* and *The Columbia Guide to Online Style* contain basic information about the most common footnote and bibliography formats, including Turabian, MLA, and APA.

IX. Finishing Touches

1. Always number the pages of your paper.

2. Always double-space your papers, use a ten- or twelve-point font, and stick to the standard margins set by your word-processing program.

3. Papers should be stapled. Paper clips, plastic clips, and ornamental binders should not be used.

4. Never turn in a paper without running it through your spell-check program. Remember, however, that spell-check programs do not catch everything. If you have misspelled a word in context, but this misspelling is, itself, a word (e.g., *if* for *is*, or *their* for *there*), spell check will not catch your mistake. Do not rely on grammar check to catch these errors, either.

5. Always reread your paper carefully before you print out a final draft. Make sure that every sentence makes sense, that words have not accidentally dropped out of your text when you made corrections to it, or that your spell-check program has not introduced errors (e.g., *salve* for *slave*, *Santa* for *Satan*, *Richard Nikon* for *Richard Nixon*, etc.). If you read your paper out loud, you are more likely to catch mistakes than if you read it silently.

X. Academic Integrity

It is your responsibility to follow University rules and regulations in regards to matters of academic integrity. If you do not have a clear idea about what constitutes plagiarism or cheating, or what activities, when writing a paper, are considered violations of University

policy, it is your responsibility to find out. For further information, visit the [University Policies](#) page on the Student Services web site.

XI. A Final Word:

1. Writing does not depend on the possession of a muse. Instead, it is just plain, hard work. The more work you put into your essay, the better it will be. This means that the earlier you begin to start collecting information relevant to your paper and the sooner you begin thinking in general ways about the topic, the better your essay will be.

2. Second drafts are always better than first drafts, and third drafts are better than second drafts. Therefore, ***always*** rewrite your paper before you give it to your instructor.