

Guidelines on Writing Papers and Grading Practices

1. Guidelines for Writing Papers

The literary critic Matthew Arnold said: “Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.” To write a good paper you must have something to say and say it clearly. If you have nothing to say, don’t even start writing.

How do you get to have something to say? Start early, take your time, read the materials carefully, think it over, try to formulate a point of view, read some more, go for a walk, look at your notes, re-formulate what you wrote the day before. If you look closely and think hard, you will come up with a lot of different points you could make. Don’t sit back and “wait for inspiration”. Coming up with a thesis, with something to say, is always the result of work. “Waiting for inspiration” is a shallow disguise of laziness.

Once you’ve got your idea, you have to write the paper. In the course of writing you will usually change some fine points of your idea; so invention and arrangement (coming up with an idea and writing it down) go hand in hand. Here’s the number one rule of paper-writing: You cannot write a decent paper in a single sitting. No matter how short the paper, you have to go through at least two complete drafts.

You’ll want to start with a rough outline. The outline is like a roadmap that tells you where to go and how to get there. Just as a map of Timbuktu tells you little about what it’s like to be there, you shouldn’t expect too much from your outline. Use it, but there’s lots more work to do afterwards. Another common excuse for laziness: “I’ve got a pretty good outline, so I’m almost done.”

The most common mistake students make in formulating their thesis and preparing their outline is this: the thesis is too general and the outline covers too much material. Students make this mistake because they’re afraid that they’ll run out of things to say before they fill their 5 pages, or whatever. You will make the mistake, too, but you should try not to. Don’t think about how many pages you need to write. Instead, think about what you need to say. The length takes care of itself.

Your writing gets better with practice. By writing paper after paper, you will learn how to organize ideas, how to formulate a thesis, how to structure an argument, how to use evidence. There’s no other way to learn. Practice, practice, practice. It pays off. Good writers go places.

2. A Note on Using Sources

You’ll use sources for almost everything you write. Sometimes this gets to be a problem, if students mistake the point of using sources, if they fail to use and cite them correctly, or if they deliberately pass off other people’s work as their own. This is called plagiarism, or academic dishonesty. Read the section on Academic Honesty in the course catalog.

You have to be able to handle sources correctly. Look very closely at the Writing Center’s publication “Using Outside Sources” or another style manual that gives instructions about proper acknowledgement of sources. It is not very complicated, and it is very important to do this correctly. If you are not sure, err on the safe side. *You* are responsible for getting this right!

You may use sources from the web. If you do so, you have to acknowledge them and a style manual will tell you how to do so. *In addition, I require that you annotate the source*, i.e. that you provide a brief explanation of what it is and whether you think it is any good. Your annotation must answer the following questions: How did you find the source? Why did you choose to use it? Who wrote it? Was it

ever published before/ elsewhere in print format? (If so, provide the reference.) What kind of authority does the author of your source have? Also add other relevant background information. I require this, because it is easy to lose sight of differences in quality among web publications and part of your job when you write a paper is to choose your sources carefully. Web research doesn't make writing papers easier. It just makes writing bad papers easier.

3. How I Grade Papers

Grades by themselves say very little about a paper. Every paper has many aspects, different strengths and weaknesses. A paper might be clear and convincing, but boring and unoriginal. Or it may be convincing and original, but trivial. It might be thoughtful, but contain spelling mistakes. By itself, the grade does not indicate what the strengths and weaknesses of your paper are. Generally, I point out the most important ones in my comments. Below is a list of the most important criteria that I look for in all papers. Obviously some of these matter more than others in some assignments. An expository paper that explains somebody else's view, for instance, does not need much of a thesis and won't be very original; its logic and organization, however, need to be flawless.

Thesis

The thesis is the claim that you paper advances and defends. Usually it is a good idea to state your thesis explicitly in the introductory paragraph of the paper.

Papers in the A range have a thesis that is clear, interesting, and debatable. It is sufficiently detailed and expands on the ideas presented in the readings and discussed in class.

Papers in the B range have a thesis that is clear and debatable. It might be somewhat predictable, a variation of the main ideas from the readings and from class.

Papers in the C range and below usually have a thesis that is murky, or confused, or too obvious, or too general. Often such a thesis misrepresents the position it claims to discuss. Sometimes a paper has no thesis whatsoever. Such papers will usually receive a grade of D or F.

Evidence

The most common kind of evidence that we use in analytic papers are quotes from the texts we discuss. If you claim, for example: "*Plato thinks power naturally corrupts all people,*" then you should provide a quote from Plato that shows that he thinks this. Other kinds of evidence are clear and convincing examples, thought-experiments, or common and near-indisputable knowledge. Depending on your paper, you might find empirical evidence (results of scientific observation and experiment) useful.

A: makes excellent use of evidence. The paper gives evidence whenever needed and the evidence clearly fits and supports the claim. It chooses the evidence carefully and on the basis of a comprehensive overview of the available evidence. It does not willfully ignore evidence to the contrary of its claims.

B: makes good use of evidence. It gives evidence whenever needed and the evidence supports the claim adequately.

C and below: Uses some evidence, though more, or more adequate, evidence is needed to support the claim.

Organization

Your paper must have an introduction and a conclusion. The main argument needs to be divided into paragraphs. Each paragraph should make one point, and they should not be too long. Different points should be treated in separate paragraphs. You need to introduce each paragraph with a topic sentence and make sure that the transitions between paragraphs are easy to follow. Successive paragraphs should build upon one another and the paper as a whole needs to work to establish a single point, your thesis. Preparing an outline helps the organization of your paper, but only to the extent that you put thought into the outline.

A: the organization of this paper is outstanding. The paper is easy to follow, the argument proceeds logically and builds up to the conclusion. Each paragraph makes sense and belongs in its place.

B: the paper is organized well, for the most part. The train of thought is clearly discernible and easy to follow.

C: the organization of this paper needs to be improved. At times it becomes difficult to follow the argument.

Style

This category includes a variety of features, some of which are hard to pin down. Most obviously a good paper is well-written. Your prose should be clear, and easy to follow. You must choose your words carefully and aim for accuracy. Do not try to impress with “fancier” (longer, or Latinate) words. A paper that is well-written makes for good reading. You will develop your personal style of writing. For analytic papers, the most important feature of style is clarity. Read a style guide (such as Strunk and White, *Elements of Style*) and make it a habit to refer to it.

A: the paper is well-written and enjoyable to read.

B: the paper is clear and relatively easy to read. The prose is straightforward.

C: the prose is muddy and unclear in places and needs to be improved.

Originality

An old joke goes: “Your paper is interesting and original. Unfortunately the interesting parts are not original and the original parts are not interesting”. Obviously your paper should contain your own ideas; you should never ever pass off someone else’s ideas as your own. Further, it is important that your paper be inventive and creative to a certain extent. You need to make your own claim, not merely repeat what you’ve read or what we’ve discussed in class. If your thesis and your argument are predictable, you might be “playing it safe,” but you won’t get a good grade.

A: the paper is original in its thesis and its argument. It goes significantly beyond the views presented in readings and lectures.

B: the paper makes its own claim, yet its thesis and argument are substantially predictable on the basis of classwork. Parts of the paper repeat the central ideas of readings and lectures.

C: the paper makes no substantial claim of its own.

Logic

When presenting an argument, we use logic. In your papers you must be very careful that your reasoning is convincing and flawless. Make sure that your conclusion really *follows from* what comes before. If you say that one claim *implies* another, make sure that it does. If you argue well, your paper will be compelling, i.e. any reader who agrees with your starting point will have to agree with your conclusion.

A: the paper is flawlessly reasoned.

B: at times the logic of this paper is a stretch. It requires some charitable cooperation by its reader to make it compelling.

C: the argument is not compelling. The chain of reasoning contains gaps and the conclusion does not follow from what comes before.

Format

It is as important as all the other criteria that you finish your work and that you hand in a finished and clean copy of your paper. Spelling mistakes and grammar mistakes are unacceptable and will drop your grade considerably. Other aspects of proper formatting: your paper must have page numbers, a title, include your name and the course information on the top of the first page (or on the title page if you choose to make one). You must give references to all sources that you use and the references must be correct and complete. Once again, a style guide can help you here. Also, it helps to have someone else read over your draft with you. It is always a good idea to go to the writing center.

A: the paper is completely formatted.

B: the paper contains few minor mistakes, such as spelling mistakes.

C: the paper contains a number of formatting mistakes.

If you want more detailed feedback on your papers than a single grade plus my comments, reproduce a table like the following at the end your paper. That way I can quickly and easily indicate what some of the strengths and weaknesses of your paper are.

	F	D	C	B	A
Thesis					
Evidence					
Organization					
Style					
Originality					
Logic					
Format					