



# Writing Tips



## The Research Paper

**Note:** This is a generic guide. Please check with your instructor for specific style requirements.

**Source Materials.** Choose a subject in which you are interested and which is not too broad. Once you have chosen your subject, consult the library catalog and Reader's Guide in your library to find out what reference material is available. Notice the copyright date; some materials may be out of date.

Keep in mind the difference between original and secondary sources of material. For example, in writing about a person, his letters would be an original source of information, and a printed collection of his letters would generally be almost as good as an original source (remember, however, that letters are sometimes edited). A secondary source would be the opinions of another author about the person under discussion. For important papers, original sources should be used when available.

### Source Cards.

List each source on a separate card - usually 3X5". Include:

- **Author's name**, last name first, or the editor's name followed by the abbreviation Ed. If no author is given, list the title first.
- **Title**. Underline the title of the book, magazine, or newspaper and put quotation marks around the title of an article or chapter.
- **Publication data**. With book titles, include the city where published, name of publisher, and copyright date.
- **Library call number**. For books, include the call number so that you don't have to look this up again.

**Outlines.** Start with a working outline showing clearly the topics you expect to write about. As you gather material, you may want to change this outline, omitting topics about which you find little source material and adding others that appear to be interesting or significant. After you have gathered all your information, you may make your final outline to guide your writing.

**Taking Notes.** The best way to gather material is to take notes on 3X5" or larger cards for which you have a file box. These cards will enable you to organize your material and refer readily to your information on each topic as you write. The following are helpful rules for taking notes:

- Use a separate card for each note. This permits you to file your cards under the proper topic. Sometimes more than one card will be necessary for a topic.
- Take thorough notes on all of the points you hope to cover. Many students find that three or four good notes are required for every page of the research paper. Don't keep repeating information even if it is found in different books, and don't take notes on material you don't plan to use.
- List the topic the note refers to. Usually the topic is shown at the top left corner of the card. This enables you to refer to your notes quickly as you write and helps you to organize your material.

- Be accurate. Your notes must report facts, figures, options, and quotations accurately. Double-check every word and every figure with your source. Give enough detail so that you yourself can understand what you have written.
- Mark each different quotation clearly. Put quotation marks around each short quotation. Longer quotes are shown by leaving larger margins. Take down the exact words, punctuation, and capitalization. Use three dots to indicate the omission of parts of a quotation. Use direct quotations only if you plan to give the exact opinion of an authority or if the same data cannot possibly be expressed in your own words. Too many quotations will make a very weak paper. Express your own ideas your own way.
- Identify the source and give the page reference for each note. This information will be necessary for your citations and your bibliography. You should have some key for connecting your note card with its source card. You may make up your own abbreviation for each source card, or you may number your source cards in order and then put the proper source number on each note card.

**Writing the Paper.** If you have your purpose and viewpoint clearly in mind, you may start by writing an introduction. Otherwise, save your introduction to the last and start with your first topic. Follow your final outline in arranging your notes. In this way your material will be logically organized, but you still must supply transitions -- sometimes in whole paragraphs -- to make your paper a unified, coherent whole. Try to make your sentences sound smooth and connected, not like a miscellaneous assortment of sentences hastily thrown together. A first draft may be written rapidly, but be very careful of the mechanics of your writing in your revised final copy.

**Bibliography.** At the end of your research paper give a bibliography of all the printed material you have used in preparing your paper. Usually, your bibliography will include the same works credited within your paper, but you may list additional helpful works that you consulted but did not have to credit. Forms of bibliographical entries vary among disciplines. Please check with your instructor or appropriate writing guide.

**Writing Essays.** The term **essay** is rather broad, for it includes all forms of short creative writing inspired by personal reactions. The inexperienced writer, however, should restrict his attempts at essay writing to one type -- the informal, or familiar, essay. This form is the expression of the writer's own thoughts on his chosen subject. The subject and the style of the informal essay may vary to suit the writer. The style of writing, though is in keeping with the mood of the theme. Some suggestions offered for writing the informal essay follow: make your reader share your ideas and understand their relation, choose appropriate words, use a simple style, use quotations and figures of speech, vary your sentences, revise for clearness and effectiveness.

**Citations.** Since usage varies from discipline to discipline, check with your professor or check the MLA, APA, or appropriate writing guide.

\*\* MLA, APA, and other writing guides are available in the library. \*\*

## Hung-up Writing Papers?

- First: PLAN. Set a target date. When is your paper due?  
Then: ORGANIZE. Break your effort into steps (outlined below). Look at your calendar and divide up the remaining days. Set target dates NOW for completing each step.  
Next: START working on the first step.

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Writing a paper requires that you expend two different types of ENERGY:

CREATIVE and CRITICAL

Don't attempt to use both at the same time!

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1. CREATIVELY...choose a topic. TARGET DATE: \_\_\_\_\_
  - If you may choose your own topic...  
Choose one that interests you.  
Choose something you know about...either on your own experience or something you can learn quickly with the available resources. To find ideas, check the index of your textbook. Ponder possibilities as you read and think. Jot down ideas as they occur to you and keep them in one place.
  - If your instructor assigns the topic...  
Be sure you understand it. If you are not completely sure, get clarification from him/her, a T.A., or another student in the class. If you're not interested in the topic, develop an interest by finding a good (that is, personal) reason for doing the assignment.
2. CRITICALLY...narrow your topic. TARGET DATE: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Write about something limited enough in scope that you can be detailed about it within the space you have. (This may take time and occur as you read or write.)  
For example, narrow your topic...  
from "history of art"  
to "history of art from 1865 to 1900"  
to "history of French art from 1865 to 1900"  
to "Comparison of Impressionism and Symbolism in French Art 1865 to 1900"
3. CREATIVELY...collect your ideas. TARGET DATE: \_\_\_\_\_
  - To collect ideas from reading, ask a librarian for help in locating materials. Keep notes about separate ideas from your reading on separate 3X5 cards. Include author, title, and page number on each card for each source.
  - To generate more ideas, recall your own experiences. Daydream about them; follow your thoughts.
  - Brainstorm: write down as quickly as you can any ideas which might be connected to your topic. Don't worry about order, wording, or even whether or not you'll finally include these ideas in your paper. You can sort these out later. Talk to other people for more ideas.

4. CRITICALLY... organize your ideas. TARGET DATE: \_\_\_\_\_
- Make an outline. This is essential. There is no better way.
  - Browse through your collected notes until you detect a pattern in them. Put similar ideas together. Shuffle your note cards (or cut pages into pieces and shuffle them): how many ways can you see to relate these ideas? Arrange these groups of notes to reflect how they are related.  
If no suitable pattern occurs, go away for a while; then try again. Or, ignore the data; make up an outline about how you want things to be. See if you can fit your data into it.
  - Make a thesis statement. Write a paragraph or two (or talk to someone for a few minutes) summarizing what you want to say. Use this like a bull's eye: be sure that each paragraph you write is directed toward this thesis.
5. CREATIVELY... get your ideas on paper. TARGET DATE: \_\_\_\_\_
- Gather all the materials you need...notes, paper, pencils, typewriter, etc...allow yourself some time, and START WRITING. Allow yourself no excuses and try hard.
  - Work quickly. Don't worry about exact word choice or refinements of grammar: you can edit and revise later, if you have something to work with. Get main ideas, details, examples, explanations, etc. down in the outline. Remember...you are simply putting into one draft the notes and ideas you've already formulated.
  - If you freeze..."talk" your ideas to someone real or imagined or to a tape recorder. Explain as simply and clearly as you can what you want to say. Then transcribe what you've said.
  - Or, very quickly, write out your ideas and then scrap them. Do this several times until you feel easier about putting words on paper.
  - If you are fearful that your paper won't be long enough, repeat some of the suggestions under "choose a topic" above. Or ask yourself what you can do to guarantee that your ideas have been accurately and thoroughly explained. Could you explain more carefully, give an example etc.?
6. CRITICALLY... revise your rough draft. TARGET DATE: \_\_\_\_\_
- Note: Complete your rough draft several days or at least 24 hours before due date!
  - Check organization: does one paragraph follow another logically? Provide transitions. Cut paragraphs out and re-arrange them with glue or tape like pieces of a puzzle.
  - Check unity: do all of the paragraphs develop your thesis? Is your thesis clearly stated somewhere, usually at the beginning or the end of the paper? Is each paragraph unified around a stated or clearly implied topic sentence?
  - Check sentence structure: are sentences grammatically correct? Are your sentences varied in length and structure, designed to emphasize key ideas? Do they indicate relationships clearly, express ideas economically? Are they punctuated correctly?
  - Check word choice: are your words concrete? Appropriate? Use a thesaurus for new ideas (but be sure you use them accurately).
  - Read the paper aloud, or tape it. Does it sound awkward? Have a friend read the paper to see if he/she can follow your thought. Make necessary changes.

TYPE A FINAL DRAFT ..... AND TURN IT IN!!

# A CHECKLIST FOR WRITTEN WORK

## **Choice of Subject**

- Does your subject match the assignment?
- Is it relevant to the course material? Significant? Important?
- Is it suited to the paper's length? Too broad or too narrow?
- Is it clearly formulated as a central question, issue or thesis?
- Is the title specific, appropriate, and effective?

## **Use of Material**

- Do you report honestly what you have read and observed?
- Do you offer relevant material to illustrate, support and develop your ideas?
- Are your illustrations and references clear, accurate and effective?
- Do you use quotation, paraphrase and summary accurately and not too much?
- Do you accurately identify your sources?

## **Thought and Interpretation**

- Do you understand your material, or are you offering a hasty reaction or casual opinion or misinterpretation?
- Are you independent, original and imaginative, or is your approach conventional and clichéd?
- Is your thinking clear or vague? Logical or illogical? Objective or biased? Penetrating or superficial? Convincing or unconvincing?

## **Organization**

- Is your introduction inviting and thought provoking? Does it say too little or too much?
- Are your paragraphs too short or too long? Are they unified, coherent, well developed? Are they relevant to the subject or thesis?
- Does each paragraph follow the preceding one logically with good transitions?
- Is your conclusion relevant and effective?
- Do your outline and the development of your ideas thoroughly answer the question, explore the issue, or prove the thesis posed in your subject?

## **Grammar and Expression**

- Is your choice of words precise or inaccurate, fresh and lively or dull?
- Have you made any grammar errors?
- Is each sentence clear, effective and economical, or awkward and ambiguous?
- Are successive sentences varied in length and wording, or do they monotonously repeat phrases and lengths?
- In general, does your writing style help present and clarify your thoughts, or does it confuse and distract the reader?

## **Spelling, Punctuation, Mechanics**

- Is your paper neat, clear, orderly, legible? Adequate margins? Pages numbered?
- Are spelling and capitalization accurate and consistent?
- Are direct quotations properly introduced, spaced and punctuated?
- Is the punctuation appropriate and accurate?
- Are page references and footnotes supplied in proper form?
- Is a bibliography, if required, supplied in proper form?
- Have you proofread carefully and made necessary corrections?