

## HOW TO WRITE GREAT PAPERS

### General writing advice

Don't lose points for formatting errors! All you need to know about proper APA formatting is available to you. Points for proper formatting are freebie points as long as you are willing to make the effort to consult the resources. You need all the freebie points you can get because other parts of the paper are truly more difficult!

- ◆ Review and use the guidelines in the *APA Publication Manual, 6<sup>th</sup> edition* (2010) each time you write a paper
- ◆ Any time you find yourself wondering what a formatting procedure is or making an assumption about a procedure without being able to refer to a specific rule, check it—The APA manual has a good index. There is a rule for about EVERYTHING!
- ◆ Ask professor for specific formatting preferences and grading criteria for specific assignments

**Characteristics of papers that are well-received by instructors.** Papers that:

- ◆ Follow APA formatting
- ◆ Are not muddled with bad grammar, spelling errors, typos, non-sentences, ugly sentences
- ◆ Respond completely and systematically to the tasks assigned
- ◆ Show evidence of being well-thought out
- ◆ Do not appear to be rush jobs
- ◆ Can be read without extensive painful efforts to guess or surmise what your points are
- ◆ Have arguments that are easy to follow
- ◆ Are a joy to read

### Steps in Writing a Well-Received Paper

Most of these steps apply to all papers whether they are insight papers or formal research papers, however, they are especially applicable to assignments that require you to research a topic and then write about it. These steps take a macro to micro approach—starting with the larger overall argument of the paper and working down to sections, paragraphs, and sentences.

#### *READ AND THINK*

1. Read the necessary materials. Gain knowledge and understanding of the topic.
2. Think. What are your own original reactions to or observations about the topic?  
What is it you want to say about the topic?

NOTE 1: The thinking part is probably the hardest part.

But . . .

NOTE 2: Your observations, insights, critique or arguments in response to your source material are the **crux, foundation, and most critical component** of your paper. They **are** your paper. The content of the books and articles you read is **not** the most important part of your paper.

3. Think some more. List the points you want to make in your paper. Determine a logical sequence for presenting the points.

#### *ORGANIZE YOUR THOUGHTS ON PAPER*

4. Sketch out an outline for your paper—the skeleton of your points, the framework of your argument, the major headings that relate to your thoughts. This preliminary outline makes little or no reference to specific readings—it organizes your original thoughts only. The outline headings will correspond to major sections of your paper.

5. Enhance your outline by noting which information from the sources you read belongs in different sections of the outline. It belongs if it's on the topic covered under the heading, and it helps you make the points you want to make on the topic.

6. Organize the information that belongs in each section of the outline. What are the points to be made under each major outline heading? What subheadings should be used to organize those points within sections?

7. Think next about the point to be made in each paragraph under each heading or subheading. As you write, you may want to insert temporary headings before almost every paragraph as a temporary organizational aid for yourself. The heading for a paragraph briefly states the point or main thought of the paragraph.

**NOTE: MAKE PROFESSORS HAPPY BY USING HEADINGS. WELL-CHOSEN HEADINGS MAKE IT EASIER TO READ YOUR PAPER AND FOLLOW YOUR POINTS AND ARGUMENTS. EASIER TO READ = HIGHER GRADE.**

#### *START WRITING WITH THE READER IN MIND*

8. Start writing. Begin with an introduction that introduces your topic and lays out what you will cover in your paper. This description of what you plan to do in your paper serves as a “map” to your paper for you and the reader. There should be major headings in your paper that correspond to each major task you promise to do in your introduction. The headings should use similar language to the language in the introduction and should be in the same order they are mentioned in the introduction.

9. Refer back to this “map” to your paper constantly as you write the paper. Expect that the instructor will be doing the same when he/she reads the paper.

10. You may also find it useful to briefly summarize what you plan to do in each section of the paper in a similar fashion, at the beginning of the section. If you start a section this way and say you will be discussing, for example, three points related to heading, then begin paragraphs in the section with “The first point,” the next or second point, the third and last point, etc. Help the reader out as much as possible!

**HELPFUL = HIGHER GRADE.**

11. As you progress through the paper, refer to your outline to see what heading to use,

what topic to discuss, what points to make about the topic, and in what order to make them. The readings you have completed support, illustrate, and enhance your points. They are subordinate to and supportive of your points. Your major argument and points exist without them, but you need the literature to justify and validate your points.

12. Every paragraph under a heading or subheading should serve a purpose related to your points. Some points require more than one paragraph, but each paragraph has a single unique purpose under its respective heading.

13. Every paragraph should have a thesis statement, should make one major point, and should include at least one transitional sentence that relates it to a prior or subsequent paragraph.

14. Sentences within paragraphs should be parsimonious, clear, well-constructed, free of grammatical, punctuation, and typographical errors. Use the *APA Publication Manual, 6<sup>th</sup> edition* (2010) and other resources. Here is a website that you may find useful for guidance on writing basics: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/index2.html>

**Many other online and printed resources are available.** The **UNC Writing Center** has lots of online helpful handouts and tools. You can schedule with a tutor, but just keep in mind that they work with undergrads first. Check out the Center's webpage at <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/>

#### *CHECKING FOR LOGICAL CONSISTENCY AND COVERAGE OF POINTS*

15. As you write, ask yourself the following questions:

Where am I in the outline I laid out at the beginning of the paper?

Am I following the order of headings/topics I laid out?

Do my headings match the topics I said I'd be talking about?

Have I covered each topic I promised to discuss in each section?

How does this paragraph fit in my overall points for this section?

Is it clear how this paragraph follows from the previous paragraph or leads to the next paragraph?

Have I made all my points? Have I backed up all my points?

16. After you are done writing, look through your entire paper to see if the order of the headings and subheadings makes sense.

17. Go through each section under a heading to identify the point of each paragraph. Is the point made by each paragraph clear? Does it follow logically in the sequence of points made under the heading. If you are not sure why the paragraph is there or what its point is, your instructor will not know either.

NOT KNOWING = LOWER GRADE.

#### *CHECKING FOR MECHANICAL WRITING ERRORS*

18. Proofread twice and/or get someone else to proofread (within the constraints of the honor code—ask your instructor if you have questions). Print out and read aloud!

**Final Advice:** Make a good first impression. Take a lot of time to make your first paper extra good.