

Writing Tips

(also known as “Things Required for a Good Essay Grade”)

Details:

- Pay attention to grammar, syntax, spelling and punctuation--if you have a large number of errors in these areas, it will affect your grade. Make sure to proofread your essay.
- Make sure to follow the formatting instructions indicated on the syllabus Please do not use plastic or paper covers; simply staple your exam in the upper left hand corner.

Content:

- You will not do well on your paper unless you have an explicit thesis statement. I want you to say in your first paragraph “This paper will argue...” or “My analysis shows...” You should write it in present tense and be very explicit.
- You should have an introduction that introduces (briefly) your topic, the theoretical approach you are using, contains your thesis statement, and closes with a preview statement of the path your argument will follow. DO NOT give any analysis in the introduction. Similarly, you should have a conclusion that reviews the above information, without making new claims.
- Structure your arguments. If I ask you to define terms, do that first. If I ask you to talk about two or three specific strategies, deal with each separately--create sections and categories in your essay so that it is easy to understand.
- Develop your argument: All of your observations require explanation. Do not count on me to "know what you mean." You must explain to me why a particular example is good evidence for what you claim. For example, don't just say that a speaker's tone was "serious," throw in a quotation from the speech, and quit. Explain to me why that quotation illustrates a serious tone. That said, don't spend the majority of your time summarizing the speech/theory/etc.
- Borrowing a piece of writing advice from a colleague, don't be boring. Dwelling on the obvious is both uninteresting and unhelpful for demonstrating that you have a command of the material. For example, avoid making assertions like the following: "Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has male and female characters in it, and one of them is inside society and one is outside." It is far more illuminating (and interesting) to explore the “so what” your observations point to. Instead, ask: What kind of ideological or cultural work do these oppositions do? Does the play treat the opposition in a consistent manner or does it fall apart at some point? What implications does that have? Paying attention to the “so what” instead of stopping at the “here's this thing, here's that thing” banal sort of description draws our attention to what's important, remarkable, or captivating about your "text"—this is the payoff of good scholarship.

Research & Citations:

- I expect you to use sources. You can find good background sources and scholarly articles in the Mass Communication and Academic Search Premier databases (accessed through the Library). Under NO circumstances should you use Wikipedia or any other website as a source.
- If I have asked you to use published, academic sources, this means that you cannot use magazine or newspaper articles: though they may be interesting and credible, they are not tested, vetted academic research. This also means that conference papers do not count, here—your academic sources need to have been published in a peer-reviewed journal. In addition to these sources, you may have other material that you reference for context in the introduction, which might be a good place to integrate those interesting newspaper or magazine articles you found. Remember, though, that just because you found the material through a research database like Academic Search Premier, that does not mean it is academic scholarship: these databases pull material from a wide range of sources. Also note that just because a piece was published in a peer-reviewed journal, it isn't always research: beware of book reviews, for example. Yes, this means you will have to have some kind of minimal critical thought process when you are looking for research on your topic.
- If you are uncertain on how to paraphrase, direct quote, or block quote, give serious consideration to purchasing an APA or MLA style manual. They are cheap, and their direction could be invaluable to your grade, since I will expect you to be able to cite information correctly.

Automatic Red Flags:

- Fatal errors: If your paper has one or both of these issues, you cannot receive a grade higher than a "D."
 1. Page length: if I ask for a 4 page paper, this means it needs to be four full pages, not 3 pages and half a paragraph on the fourth page. This also means that your paper will be deemed too short if it barely meets the minimum, and has wider than allowed margins (for instance, 1.5 or 1.25 inch margins instead of 1).
 2. Minimum research requirements: you must have the minimum number of required sources. For a source to count, it must be cited and documented correctly in your paper and in your Works Cited list. If I have asked you to use only academic sources, this means that if you use newspaper articles, for example, they will not count toward the minimum number of sources.
- Automatic deductions: if your paper violates any of the Paper Writing Commandments (also known as the list of "Things You Should Not Do When Writing a Formal Academic Paper"), you will lose points. Yes, losing points because you forgot to change the margins is silly. So don't be silly and make sure that all the details are correct. In the professional world, job applications (as well as things like grant applications and business contracts) are routinely rejected for these types of minor errors—if you can't get the small stuff right, people assume you will be just as careless with the big stuff. Since I would like for you to go out into the world and get a job, I am helping you pay attention to the kinds of things that will help you professionally. You can thank me later (preferably with Prada or Balenciaga).
 1. Thou shalt not use contractions ("don't" instead of "do not" – contractions are informal and unsophisticated and therefore don't belong in a formal paper).
 2. Thou shalt not submit a paper without page numbers.

3. Thou shalt not submit a paper without a title page.
4. Thou shalt not submit a paper that is held together with anything other than a staple (no clamps, paper clips, and especially no plastic folders). I recognize that you may be trying to professionalize your work by submitting it that way (great!), but having to pull that material off to be able to grade your work and write feedback on it for you makes my life more complicated than it needs to be. Here's a life lesson: the people who get promoted at work are not the people who make their supervisor's life more difficult.
5. Thou shalt not submit a paper where your name is listed anywhere except the title page, where it should be (do not, for example, put your name in the corner next to your page numbers). Your name needs to be on the title page, and the title page only.
6. Thou shalt not use margins wider than those noted in the Syllabus.
7. Thou shalt not use fonts (anywhere at all in the paper or title page) different than those noted in the Syllabus.
8. Thou shalt not forget to format your citations properly (in APA or MLA format).
9. Thou shalt not use any sort of citation builder to create your Works Cited list. Or, if you do cheat and use one, do not bother whining to me about points you were deducted for missing or improper information. Here's another important life lesson: if you submit it, you are responsible for however it comes out, whether it was a citation builder's screw-up or yours (and, if you are using a citation builder, it still is your screw-up since you should not be using one at all).
10. Thou shalt not submit a Works Cited page deficient in any of the following ways:
 - i. hanging indent (if you don't know what this is or how to do it, look it up on the internet—looking up stuff like that is a great way to use Google, as opposed to trying to use it for research)
 - ii. alphabetized sources
 - iii. incorrect spacing (double space all entries, just like your body text)
 - iv. missing information (like volume, issue, page range, year)