

## General Paper Writing Guidelines

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The following are points to keep in mind during the writing process.

- 1) Focus. One of the most important prerequisites for a successful paper is a focused topic. Narrow a topic enough that you can deal with it in depth in the space you have. Make sure to inform your reader, in explicit terms, what your specific subject is. Stick to your topic throughout the paper, and be sure that it is clear to your reader how the particular points you are making relate to the paper's overall objective.
- 2) Making an argument. There are important differences between asserting a claim and making an argument. Make sure that you do not simply state what the claim is. Give your reader reasons for accepting (or rejecting) it. Also, you can usually make a stronger argument by raising some of the possible objections and responding to them.
- 3) Use of quotations. In many contexts—such as this course—providing quotations from texts is an essential part of making an argument. You can use texts both to provide evidence for a particular interpretation of an author and to provide an effective statement of a point. It is extremely rare, however, that a quotation can stand on its own. No matter how obvious the connection appears to you, it is almost always valuable to explain to your reader why you think this particular quotation supports the point you are making. In other words, do not just cite the text and leave it to your reader to interpret; interpret it for your reader. (This means that it should be extremely rare that you end a paragraph with a quotation.) Keep any quotation brief and cite only that which is absolutely necessary to make your point.
- 4) Transitions. Clear transitions perform the essential task of telling your reader how different segments of your paper are related, both to each other and to the paper as a whole. They are your chance to explain why you are moving from what you have just been saying to what you are about to say. Keep in mind that different kinds of transitions will be appropriate depending on whether you are moving between major sections of the paper, between paragraphs or between smaller points within a paragraph.
- 5) Gender-neutral language. It is now widely accepted that words such as “he,” “man,” “mankind,” etc. do not refer equally to both sexes. Using such words to refer to both sexes has particular connotations and consequently directs attention away from the substance of your argument. Also, gender-neutral language has become standard in many academic contexts such as journals. There are several strategies for negotiating this issue: a) avoiding sentence constructions which lead to situations requiring an abstract pronoun, b) neutral pronouns such as “one” or “they” (but watch for number agreement), c) alternate use of “he” and “she,” d) “he or she” and related constructions, and e) “s/he” and related forms. In place of “man” and “mankind,” words such as “humanity,” “humans,” and “people” often work very well.
- 6) Drafts. Having other people read drafts of your work can be extremely helpful. Readers often notice things that writers miss in their own writing. I would strongly suggest exchanging drafts with a classmate.
- 7) Mechanics.
  - a) Use consistent citations. You can use any of the standard formats (MLA, Chicago, etc.), but please use one of them. This makes it possible for your reader to refer back to the texts on which you are basing your claims.

Any idea that is not your own, whether quoted directly or not, should be properly cited. Failing to do so constitutes plagiarism, a serious academic violation. If you are unsure how to cite sources or what to cite, please refer to UB Libraries Plagiarism Guide (<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/asl/guides/plagiarism.html>) or ask an instructor.

- b) Include a complete bibliography or list of works cited. Again, you can use any one of several standard formats.
  - c) Double-space your paper (including footnotes and endnotes). That makes your paper easier to read and leaves room for comments.
  - d) Include page numbers. They make it much easier to refer to different points in your paper.
- 8) Proofread. Spelling errors should be virtually nonexistent. Though your reader can often decipher your meaning, the need to do so distracts attention from the point you are trying to make. I strongly recommend having someone else read your paper to help catch things such as missing words which we all fill in automatically as we read over our own work.