

Writing Papers

1. Select a Topic

- Discern the type of paper you need to write.
 - Your instructor may make it clear: “Write a 10 to 15-page term paper” or “I need a 3-page response piece.” However, it is vitally important to realize that the professors at this school want a thought-provoking and insightful paper, not a simple summary of the mechanisms of DNA replication, for example. Professors want to see you use your head, not just repeat facts from books.
- You may or may not receive a specific topic from your professor or TA. In either case, you are responsible for deciding the content of your paper.
 - Your content needs to be something pertinent to the topic assigned, manageable in the length of paper expected, and something in which you are interested.
 - Avoid choosing a topic that is too broad, as it will be difficult to do the topic justice in the paper. (For example, it wouldn't be fair to write about the entire French Revolution in a two-page response paper.)
- Present a topic, give the history and background, outline the issues or debates relating to it, and come up with your own conclusion(s). Not all papers will require an in-depth analysis or thesis proposal, but it is important to show *insight* into the topic.
- Don't be afraid to consult with your professor or TA about your topic.
 - He or she may be able to give you advice about the topic, narrow it further, direct you toward resources, or prevent you from delving into an irrelevant aspect of your paper. (It is a good idea to have a working outline for this meeting.)

2. Take Notes and Research

- Once you have selected and narrowed down your topic, begin your research (this does not mean Google it a couple times).
 - Go to the library, search the catalog, search the periodicals, and search the databases.
 - If you are not sure how to do a search, ask a reference librarian. The MSE Library has reference librarians that specialize in various subjects. They are full of knowledge and very helpful.
- Keep your references as current as possible unless you are using historical, original sources.
- After gathering your sources, decide which ones will be helpful and which ones are unnecessary. Start your bibliography or works cited.
- Take notes of what you read.
 - The most popular and beneficial way is to use note cards; title each card, note the source, write the idea or fact down, and DO NOT clutter the note card.

3. Organize Your Ideas

- As you take and review your notes, pay attention to key areas in your topic, natural divisions, or conflicts. Use these to start your outlining process. Your outline should, among other things, set forth your *purpose* and the direction your paper is taking.
- It is imperative that you have an organizational scheme to your writing; no professor wants to go on a safari through your thoughts about a topic, but would rather have you lead him or her on a systematic path from the introduction of your topic or thesis to the logical conclusion.
- Follow an outline pattern. You can use a chronological order or a logical and methodical order, leading to your own conclusions. Decide which is best for the topic you are handling.

4. Write Your First Drafts

- Use the outline you wrote to write your paper.
- Be sure to document your sources either in footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical references (MLA and APA are the most popular.) For examples of the proper forms go to: http://www.ccc.commnet.edu/mla/practical_guide.shtml or <http://www.ccc.commnet.edu/apa/>.
- DO NOT PLAGIARIZE! If you're unsure of the proper citation method, ask.
- Keep your audience in mind.

- Is your paper going to be read or critiqued by your classmates, your professor, or a group of professionals?
- Tailor your writing to your audience.
- Follow a logical form for your writing: introduction, thesis statement or point of view, main points or arguments, contrary arguments if appropriate, analysis, conclusion (or some similar outline).
- Obtain a style guide and follow the guidelines listed.

5. Proofread

- Proofreading is the most important thing you can do to improve your paper. Read through and honestly critique your paper.
 - Does your thought process flow?
 - Do your arguments make sense?
 - Could you better analyze the opposing view?
- Check for grammatical and spelling errors. Don't trust your document software's (like MS Word's) automatic spelling and grammar check.
- *Slowly* read your paper ALOUD.
- If possible, have a trusted friend look over your paper with you to provide an extra set of eyes and an outside opinion.

6. Final Draft

- Your final draft should reflect all the stylistic and substantive changes you've made throughout the writing process.
- Make sure you followed any specific formatting directions given by the professor.
- Give your paper a title. Make it interesting!
- Include a cover page with papers of significant length or just your name, the date, the class and/or professor's name at the top of the first page.
- Include your bibliography or works cited. Ensure that your references in the body of the paper are correct.
- HAND IT IN ON TIME!
- If submitting electronically: print a copy for your records. When emailing it to your instructor, ask him or her to email you confirming that he or she received it and opened it successfully.

Special Tips

- Research Paper
 - If you are assigned a research paper, it is important to actually do some research. Usually the topic is some sort of question; make sure you answer it.
 - Once you have gathered the information and presented it, show some insight. Look at the different views of the issue, take a side, and support your position.
- Technical Paper/Lab Report
 - Usually this type of paper requires a more formal style.
 - Consult with your TA or professor on how to write a lab report.
- Essay/Response/Opinion Paper
 - Essays usually require more of your own opinion, backed by research or materials learned in class.

Paper Writing Resources Available

- Johns Hopkins Writing Center is a valuable resource: <http://sites.jhu.edu/writingcenter/index.html>
- Helpful websites:
 - <http://nutsandbolts.washcoll.edu/nb-home.html>
 - <http://webster.commnet.edu/mla/index.shtml>
 - <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/toc.shtml>