

## Writing College Papers

This course will require you to write two essays based on the assigned readings and will not require additional research. While specific requirements will differ from course to course throughout your college career, you'll find that most of your professors will consider the following criteria when they evaluate your academic writing:

- Clarity of focus and logical organization
- Validity of content; depth of thought
- Effectiveness of expression
- Control of mechanics (Grammar, punctuation, spelling, format)

The following pages will offer a number of suggestions for writing effective essays.

### Focus and Organization

No essay can be successful without a clear focus (also called a thesis or a main point). In short papers like the ones you'll be writing, the thesis should be introduced almost immediately—certainly no later than the end of your first paragraph. An effective thesis sentence announces clearly the *central* idea to be developed in the rest of the essay. It is often a good idea to follow this with a sentence suggesting the major lines of argument to be used in your essay to convince your reader of the validity of your thesis. Consider this first paragraph:

American literature is filled with independent, John Wayne-type heroes, committed to the beauty of the simple life. Whether his name (and it is almost always a he) is Natty Bumppo or Ahab, Henry David Thoreau or Jake Barnes, this typical American hero stands at the center of our literature, chiding the rest of us for our petty dependence on people and on things, for our involvement in complicated relationships. So pervasive is this view of the ideal life that readers may be hard-pressed to locate another conception of the good life. One place to look for the rare opposite view is in the novels of Anne Tyler, where we find a recognition of the moral superiority of the complex, rather than the simple, life. For Tyler, the life woven out of complicated relationships can lead to triumphs unimagined by the hero of simplicity: a full emotional life; personal growth and change; and heightened creativity.

The thesis in this paragraph is the next to last sentence. The **final** sentence suggests how the paper will be organized (the writer will **first** discuss how Tyler develops the idea that the complicated life can result in a fuller experience of emotions; then how such a life can lead to personal growth and change; and then how it can increase creativity).

A paragraph such as the one above might work particularly well for an essay of **five** or ten pages, but if you were writing a shorter essay on this topic, you might want to get to your thesis more quickly. In that case, you could begin your paper like this:

While the stereotypical American hero is a John Wayne-Henry David Thoreau type (a loner pursuing the lofty simple life), Anne Tyler's novels offer another view of heroism. **For her, the heroic life is complicated, not simple, and it involves the hero in a tangle of messy relationships and dependencies.** The results, however, are triumphs unimagined by the pursuer of simplicity: a full emotional life; personal growth and change; and heightened creativity.

Note that in both versions of the introductory paragraph, the writer has established a clear thesis and has indicated the major lines of argument for the essay. In essence, this becomes the writer's contract with the reader: In the rest of the paper, the writer must not introduce anything that isn't relevant to this thesis or to these lines of defense. If, in writing your essay, you decide that you want to include other ideas outside your original contract, you will need to go back and enlarge your thesis sentence (or your statement of lines of argument) to include the new ideas.

Including in your first paragraph hints about how you will develop your essay ("a full emotional life; personal growth and change; and heightened creativity") makes organizing your paper easy: you will simply treat each of these ideas in turn. Remember that doesn't mean you have to spend precisely equal time on each idea: you might want to explain, support, and develop the first idea in three paragraphs; the second, in two paragraphs; the third, in four paragraphs.

## **Content**

Most of the papers you'll be writing in college will be, essentially, persuasion essays: it will be your responsibility to persuade your reader that the point you are making is valid. You can't do this by simply asserting ideas. Instead, you must explain and support the points presented. How you do this will depend, to an extent, on the subject matter at hand, but in general you will use some or all of the following methods: reference to examples (or facts or statistics) and explanation of their relevance to your thesis; citation of authorities (with the occasional supporting quotation); analysis (discussion of the causes, consequences, and implications of facts and ideas as they relate to your thesis).

Usually college papers are not simply summaries of ideas introduced in class or in your readings. Instead, you will be asked to apply ideas from class and from the readings to new situations or to relate the ideas from class in new ways. Thus, your college writing will offer many opportunities for original thinking. Always keep in mind, however, that originality must be grounded on valid support and clear explanation.

## Effectiveness of expression

The challenge facing all writers is to get the good ideas out of their heads and into the heads of their readers. To achieve this, effective writers keep in mind three primary rules: be clear; be clear; be clear. To help you achieve this clarity, work on applying the following Suggestions for Snappier Writing.

### Suggestions for Snappier Writing

#### TIGHTEN YOUR WRITING

*“Tightening” means cutting out all unnecessary words and phrases so that a reader can move smoothly and easily through your text.*

- Ask yourself, “Is this information really important?” If you’re not sure, delete it and see if its omission affects the essential “meat” of your sentence. If not, leave it out!
- Throw out all “empty” subjects (There is... There are... The fact that... It is..., etc.), then begin the sentence with its REAL subject.
- Circle all prepositions, then rewrite to eliminate as many prepositional phrases as possible.
- Circle all relative pronouns (that, which, who), then eliminate as many as possible.
- Check your writing for redundancies created by unnecessary adjectives and adverbs.
- Delete intensifiers such as “very,” “really,” “totally,” and “so.”

#### STRENGTHEN YOUR WRITING

*Strong writing is full of meaning yet brief and economical.*

- Change passive voice to active voice. Who’s doing what in your sentence? If you can’t tell, or if the “doer” is not the subject of the sentence, it’s written in the passive voice.
- Check for forms of the verb “to be” (is, am, are, was, were, be, been, being). Check for forms of “to have” (has, had, have). Re-write with strong verbs!

- Transform nouns with latinate endings (-ion, ment, -tion, -ance) back into verbs.

## CLARIFY YOUR WRITING

*Clear writing leaves no room for misunderstanding or confusion.*

- Eliminate jargon and replace it with plain language.
- Never use a long word when a short one will do.
- Never use several words when a single, well-chosen word will do.
- Take out cliches. Cliches are figures of speech that you are accustomed to hearing or seeing in print.
- Look for ambiguity. Ambiguous words and phrases leave more than one meaning.
- Use concrete, specific language.
- Add transitional words or phrases to guide your reader through your ideas. Double check to be sure the transition is necessary. If your ideas collide or shift direction abruptly, you probably need a transition.

Developed by J. Cording  
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## **Control of mechanics**

Before you turn in your papers, you will edit them scrupulously, eliminating errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Errors such as these distract your reader from your good ideas.

Since these are late-stage corrections, don't let concern about these surface problems slow the drafting of your essay. On the other hand, begin writing your essay early enough so that you have time to tend to these problems. Because of the availability of computer spelling checkers, college papers should be virtually free of spelling errors. In addition, college papers should be free of major sentence faults: sentence fragments, comma splices, run-on sentences. Study the examples of sentence faults below. The presence of such errors suggests that the writer lacks control of the basic sentence form.

## Examples of Sentence Faults

### 1. Sentence fragments:

The volcano on Montserrat suddenly awoke. **Which caused many to flee.**

The words in bold cannot stand alone as a sentence. Check all sentences to make sure that they have a subject and a predicate and that they would make grammatical sense on their own.

Correction: The volcano on Montserrat suddenly awoke, causing many to flee.

### 2. Comma splices:

a) The anniversary of the end of World War II has revived many memories, some are surprisingly joyous.

b) Stetson and Rollins both claim to be Florida's oldest college, however, we know that the Winter Park school was the first institution of higher learning in the state.

In both cases, the writer has tried to link two independent clauses (groups of words that could stand alone as sentences on their own) with a comma. A comma, however, isn't "strong" enough for that job. Independent clauses can be joined only by a semi-colon or by one of the following words: "and," "but," "or," "nor," "for," "so," "yet." (Note: "however" is not one of these linking words.)

Corrections:

a) The anniversary of the end of World War II has revived many memories, and some are surprisingly joyous.

Or The anniversary of the end of World War II has revived many memories, some surprisingly joyous.

b) Stetson and Rollins both claim to be Florida's oldest college; however, we know....

### 3. Run-on sentence:

Hamilton Holt brought many innovations to Rollins the Conference Plan was one of these.

The writer here has combined two independent clauses without appropriate linking words or punctuation. Corrections:

Hamilton Holt brought many innovations to Rollins; the Conference Plan was one of these.

Hamilton Holt brought many innovations to Rollins, and the Conference Plan was one of these.

The Conference Plan was one of the many innovations that Hamilton Holt brought to Rollins.

### **Format:**

All papers must be typed, double spaced, with margins of one inch on all sides. Use a regular (preferably Times New Roman), not a bold font, in twelve-point type. **At the top of the first page include your name, course number, and other identifying information in the upper right hand corner.** Give your paper a meaningful title that conveys the subject or focus of your paper. **Do not underline your title or put it in quotation marks.** The title should be centered at the top of the page just beneath the identifying information. Be sure to number your pages. Indent new paragraphs five spaces from the left margin; do not use block paragraphing. Do not insert extra lines between paragraphs; just double space throughout.

**Do not place your paper in a folder; simply staple the top left corner.** Be sure to complete all this work before coming to class. Remember: The paper is due at the very beginning of the class period.

### **Handling Quotations**

While you will refer in your essays to ideas and information from your texts (and in your third paper, from research sources), you should limit the number of direct quotations in your papers. Save those for passages that are so exquisitely or powerfully phrased that too much would be lost if you put the information in your own words. When you do use direct quotations, keep the following rules in mind.

1. Always quote the original exactly (except as indicated in 2 and 3 below).
2. Use the ellipsis to indicate that you are omitting words from a quoted passage.

\* If you wish to omit words within a quoted passage, use three spaced periods:

Rovit argues that in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Robert Cohn is Jake Barnes's "secret sharer," a person who "suffers. . . ignominy in order to demonstrate to Jake the dangers inherent in 'letting go' and 'falling into the pit of self-deception.'"

\* If you wish to omit words at the end of a quoted passage, use four periods, spaced after the first one:

Rovit says of Robert Cohn: "He is the secret sharer who suffers cruel and comical ignominy. . . ." Developing this idea that Robert is Jake's double, Rovit points out their multiple similarities: they both love Brett; they both reject the aimless life embraced by most of those around them; they are both idealists.

3. Use square brackets to interpolate material into a quotations (corrections, additions):

Pat Tendust wrote: “When Lincoln died in May [actually April] of 1865, the reins of government fell to Vice President Johnson.”

4. Always introduce quotations. Never merely throw them out to your readers, leaving the quotation to stand alone. In addition, give a one sentence interpretation or clarification of the quote used. Instead, make all quotations a part of a sentence. Do not write this:

A number of stories that carried Scott Fitzgerald’s name were actually written by his wife, Zelda. “The stories attracted considerable notice at the time.”

5. If the quotation is less than four lines, introduce it and type it as part of your regular text:

Nancy Milford has made clear that a number of stories carrying Scott Fitzgerald’s name were actually written by his wife, Zelda. Today it seems odd that Zelda would be willing to sacrifice recognition of her talent on the altar of Scott’s fame, but she made such sacrifices repeatedly—and not in obscure publications. Indeed, as Milford observes: “The stories attracted considerable notice at the time.”

6. If the quotation is more than four lines, introduce it and set it apart from your regular text by indenting it five spaces inside your regular indentation. The quoted passage should also be single spaced.

Scott Fitzgerald apparently never pretended to himself that his contributions to these stories were anything more than what they really were. He later wrote:

...I had nothing to do with [“A Millionaire’s Girl”] except for suggesting a theme and working on the proof of the complete manuscript. This same cooperation extends to other material gathered... under our joint names though often when published in that fashion I had nothing to do with the thing from start to finish except supplying my name.

7. Often it is more effective to quote important words or phrases from a research source rather than the whole quotation. In that case, integrate the quoted material into your sentence pattern, making sure that it fits your syntax and that you have acknowledged your indebtedness with quotation marks and a footnote citation:

According to Carlos Baker, Robert Colin of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* was “the pathetic good guy,” while Earl Rovit sees him as “the most despicable character Hemingway ever created.”

8. Usually, you will want to present the ideas you have gathered from your research sources **wholly in your own words** (giving credit, of course, to the original source for the ideas you found there):

Scott Fitzgerald apparently never pretended to himself that his contributions to stories such as “A Millionaire’s Girl” were anything more than what they really were: suggestions about themes and help with final proofs.

### **Documenting College Papers**

In academic papers, the rules governing documentation are very strict. You must give credit for all words and ideas not your own. The one exception involves ideas in the public domain—information that is common knowledge or purely factual information over which there is no dispute and no “ownership”: the date of Lincoln’s death, the distance between the earth and the sun, the atomic number of nitrogen. In addition, in this class you may treat ideas developed in class discussions and in lectures as ideas in the public domain. (In some courses, professors want you to acknowledge the sources of ideas from lectures. Check with your professors.) Study and follow the guidelines below.

- I. The documentation for this course will use the MLA format. Obtain a copy of the newest edition of the MLA Handbook or use reliable online citation sources such as PerdueOwl.
2. Remember: In academic papers, the unit of documentation is the sentence. That means that an intelligent reader should be able to tell the source of the information in each sentence in your paper. Any sentence that does not contain an attribution is assumed to be composed entirely of your own words and your own ideas. If you put a citation at the end of a paragraph without any internal references to sources within the paragraph, that means that only the last sentence of your paragraph comes from that source. You must cite material throughout the paragraph.

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