

Writing Papers

It is not unusual for college students to encounter writing difficulties. As a matter of fact, it is a very common source of academic stress and frustration. Despite these feelings students are often hesitant to seek help for several reasons. Some students believe there is no point in trying, saying "I've never been any good at writing." But remember anyone can improve their writing if they are willing to spend the time and energy. Other students find the personal investment and sense of ownership resulting from the writing process can make it difficult to seek help. It is not easy to hear that what you have written needs improvement, especially when you have put a lot of yourself into the process. It can be even more difficult when you've had successful experiences in the past and are hearing for the first time that your writing is missing the mark. It's easy to dismiss these messages as simply the "whims" of the instructor, and maybe they are. But if you get this message more than once, there is probably some validity in it.

The fact that you have visited this site is a good start for the most important step in improving your writing is being willing to try. The following section will include some writing tips as well as provide background on reasons instructors assign papers. It will also review the various forms these assignments can take and outline a process for writing research papers.

Step One: Why Do We Write These Papers?

There can be many reasons an instructor requires a written assignment, but almost all of them fall under one, or more often, both of the following:

Instructors want to improve your ability to think independently, and

Instructors want to improve your ability to communicate clearly.

Papers are often assigned as a means to develop your capacities to research, examine, analyze, and draw conclusions. College students can be faced with a variety of writing assignments, each with its own set of expectations and requirements. Here are some hints for attacking various kinds of writing assignments:

Essays or Compositions

- This is a format to discuss your own ideas on a topic. Expressing your own views does not mean that research is unnecessary. It is important to be well versed in the topic, as you must present an informed opinion or argument.
- Pay special attention to assignment instructions. They often will describe a particular format or topic for the essay.

- Always pay attention to spelling, grammar and organization!

Laboratory/Factual Reports

- Present factual information on the topic and avoid opinion or speculation unless you are specifically directed to include it.
- Be thorough, concise, clear, accurate and detailed.
- This is a factual report so avoid flowery language.
- Always pay attention to spelling, grammar, and organization!

Critique/Reaction Paper

- Determine what your reactions are and why you feel as you do. It may help to first discuss the topic with others.
- Be sure to describe what your reaction paper or the material critiqued is about.
- Before you write, list your reactions and organize them in a logical fashion.
- Always pay attention to spelling, grammar, and organization!

Position Paper

- Decide what your position is and state it clearly.
- Identify the arguments that support your position.
- Organize your arguments and state them in a logical fashion.
- Be sure to support your arguments with documented facts.
- Always pay attention to spelling, grammar, and organization!

Paper assignments are sometimes left open-ended to test your ability to determine a question and develop and execute a plan of action. In these cases, written assignments challenge you to take control of a process and work independently. Understanding the nature of this type of written assignment can help you feel at ease with the responsibility for planning ahead and controlling the process.

More obviously, papers are designed to improve your written communication skills. Most people are familiar with the need to attend to spelling and grammar, but some might overlook the importance of organization and clarity. It is important that papers read well, that they have smooth transitions, and that the arguments and facts are presented in a

logical fashion. Being able to communicate clearly in writing is an important facet of any degree program or career. So it is no wonder that instructors make written work a high priority. Papers that have all the right facts and ideas but lack attention to mechanics and organization never reach their full potential.

Step Two: How Do We Write These Papers?

Let's start by noting there is no one best way to write a research paper. Any process that results in well written, information filled documents is a good one. The following method is offered as one way to approach the assignment. As you gain experience with the process you will want to adapt and improve it to meet your needs and the requirements of your various assignments.

Try the following process next time you write a research paper:

- Be sure you understand the assignment. If you are unclear about certain aspects of it, ask. Don't guess.
- Select a topic, but be flexible with it. As you begin to learn more about your topic you may find that your original premise is shifting. As long as this refinement remains within the parameters of the assignment, this shifting is not a problem.
- Gather information pertaining to the topic. Use all appropriate avenues of research: consult books, magazines, journals, newspapers, Internet and video sources or even conduct interviews.
- Be sure to keep meticulous records detailing the source of the ideas, facts, and quotes as you collect them. This insures accurate attributions, but also makes completing the bibliography a much simpler process
- As you are gathering information begin to develop a list of subtopics and ideas. This list should expand and contract throughout the research process as the direction and content of the paper is defined and refined.
- As the research process nears completion, it is time to organize your information. You have probably already been thinking about this process as you gathered the data. Now is the time to take a look at your list of topics and ideas and begin to arrange them in a logical manner. Begin by grouping together related ideas and topics. Within these groups, statements and ideas might be reorganized to flow from general to specific. Once these sub-groups have been organized, determine the best way to link and present these groups. Will you organize them by complexity, importance, time sequence, or in some other appropriate fashion? Once you have determined the order, write it down! This is your working outline.
- Now is a good time to put your sources in order and link them to your outline. Use the working outline and organized groups to sort through and sequence your sources. This

means stacking your note cards, copied pages, marked pages and the like in the order you intend to use them so you have easy access to them as you begin to write. This process will help you keep track of references and make sure that you don't leave out important or powerful data.

- Start writing. Don't worry how it sounds at first; you're going to go back and refine it later. Right now it is just important that you get started.

- Most papers have three parts and purposes: an introduction (tell them what you'll tell them), a body (tell them), and a conclusion (tell them what you told them).

Introduction - capture the reader's attention, provide the main idea, and lead them into the paper.

Body - follow your working outline, develop your paragraphs, and attend to transitions.

Conclusion - tie your paper up, re-emphasize important points, and link them to your main idea.

- Now that you know what your paper is about, give it a title.

- Once you have first draft, set it aside. Come back to it in a day or so and re-evaluate it. Does it still make sense? Does it flow? Have you missed anything? Rewrite and make adjustments as necessary. Correct any errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Always pay attention to spelling, grammar, and organization! Many writers will go through this process multiple times.

- Once you feel you have done all you can, ask your instructor, a friend, or both to review your work and offer feedback. Consider their comments and adjust as you feel necessary.

- Prepare and submit your final copy.

One thing you'll notice - this process can't be done overnight. To write a good paper or produce your best work takes time. Plan ahead and give yourself the time it takes to do the job right. You'll be glad you did.

Step Three: Two Important Tips

Writing in college is often very different from writing you have done before. And unless you were lucky and did a lot of analytical and point-of-view writing in high school, you may find yourself a bit confused. As was said before, your visiting this site is a good start, but it is even more important for you to do two other things:

· Work closely with your instructors. Follow-up is critical to good writing. When you receive feedback on your writing, work further with your instructor to incorporate this feedback into your next assignments. Inquire about the instructor's willingness to review your work before it is submitted for a grade. The process of writing, reviewing, and revising can make all the difference in the world. When you find an instructor willing to engage in this process with you, take advantage of it!

· Seek the help and advice available in the Writing Center. This is a wonderful campus resource that can help you with all aspects of writing and that will tailor their offerings to your needs. The Writing Center staff can help you identify your weaknesses and will direct and support your efforts to improve. On top of all that, it's a free service.

It's impossible to improve your writing without the feedback of others. Even the most successful writers have editors! Be willing to take the time to get input and assistance from your instructors and the staff at the Writing Center. Your writing will soon improve.