

How to Write Humanities Papers That Don't Suck

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Note: *This guide was originally written for freshman students in my Ancient Greek and Roman Literature & Culture class a long, long time ago. It presumably reflects this purpose in ways that may limit the generalizability of the advice. It certainly is not meant to be a guide to writing papers outside of the literature-oriented humanities. So, if you want help with philosophy or history or social science papers, this guide may contain advice that is worse than useless. And yes, there are doubtlessly errors in it—corrections are always welcome.*

I. ABOUT THOSE PAPERS

1. Your goal: You want to teach the reader of your paper something about a text, story, poem, play, etc. that he or she doesn't already know. You can do this as an *interpretive* exercise, or as *analytical* exercise.

2. How do you do it?

Well, think about how Aeschylus makes familiar stories interesting: he has the basics of a story from a handful of lines in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, but then he constructs a complicated back story, filling in events, motivations, and so on. Roughly, your goal is to use the text that you and the reader are both familiar with, as a framework for filling in details that will either (1) show the reader possibilities about which he or she is previously unaware of (interpretive work) or (2) that illuminates something about the framework or structure of the piece that he or she might not have seen (analytical work).

3. Fine, but how do I *that*?

With respect to (1), or the approach that emphasizes unexpected possibilities: focus on some aspect or theme: sex/gender, class/economics, race/ethnicity, individual/society, morality/self-interest, nature/civilization, divine/profane, life/death, practical/theoretical, psychological, sociological, philosophical, etc., and develop that. For example, think about reading the *Odyssey* as a story that is at least partly about a growing Greek sophistication about human psychology, temptation, and so on. Or think about what it tells us about gender roles. Give a Freudian, feminist, Marxist, psychological, etc. reading of it (i.e., pick a theoretical framework, and throw it at the book). This last part will become easier with the more philosophy or general theory you learn in school. Heck, it becomes easier the more history you know. Moral of the story: the more stuff you know, the more interesting your writing can be, and ergo, the better your paper writing grades are likely to become. At any rate, there are lots of ways to go about accomplishing the aim described in (1), but the basic idea is to use a theme or theoretical perspective to provide the materials that you use to fill in details.

With respect to (2), or the approach that illuminates the structure or framework of the story: Keep track of structurally similar features in the stories: are events duplicated, with just the characters changed (Odysseus pissed at people taking property of what will be his sons, Poseidon pissed at Odysseus eyeing the land of the Cyclops)? Are there stories within stories? Self-referential features (Homer and the blind poet, or Homer telling us the story and Tiresias telling us the end of the story, but us ignoring it)? Talk about that, what the motivations might have been, why it is there, what it adds to the story. This can be combined with a theoretical reading, of course.

4. What is your THESIS? If you can't point to it in your paper, you've got problems.

Every good college paper needs a thesis claim, a (usually) one sentence statement of what the paper is going to claim or show. Think of it as a single-sentence summary of the main idea of the paper. It needs to be clearly located by the end of the first paragraph.

The more interesting your thesis sentence is, the more interesting your paper is likely to be. This isn't a guarantee of perfection: you could have a great idea that is poorly executed, and there are papers that are way more interesting than they initially seem. Still, an interesting thesis that is adequately developed goes a very long way in a paper.

Note that when you start writing a paper, you may not know what you will end up saying. That's fine. Just make sure that what you turn in has been re-written so that it appears to have been written from the ground up with complete clarity of vision. So, if you start writing without including a thesis, it better be there by the time you turn in the paper.

5. Don't make the *history of how you developed your ideas* the *order of presentation* of those ideas

There is an all-too-common tendency on the part of students (and some professors!) that involves the following sequence of events. The writer writes an essay, usually not knowing where it is going to end up. After lots of tortured writing, the writer comes to some sort of conclusion about what he or she is trying to say, checks the word count, inserts fluff as necessary, and prints the thing out to turn in. There are several problems with this approach. First, get rid of the fluff. Second, realize that virtually no paper is as good as it should be on the first write-through. When you initially write something, it is usually without the whole picture in mind. We oftentimes write to figure out what to think about something. Once you've written out your ideas, though, you need to go back and re-write the paper with the completed thesis and evidence in mind. Every sentence in your paper should be constructed with an eye towards how it contributes to your thesis. If it doesn't, it should be in there, *even if it played a role in how you came to think about the main claim of your paper*. I don't care what the historical genesis is of your ideas. I want to know how, after thinking about it, you now come to regard the pieces of your paper as best hanging together. It isn't likely to be the way you first got to those ideas.

Think about how you learned geometry. No one made you read Euclid or any other historical piece that took you through the historical evolution of thinking about geometry. Instead, you were taught the stuff that you needed to know, and the history of how those ideas were brought about is simply removed from the story presented to you. Your papers should be something like that— all the unnecessary history should be removed from the version of the paper you turn in. If you don't do that, your paper is likely to suck because it will be weighed down by lousy, useless, or irrelevant material.

In short: A well-constructed paper is a lean thing, without excess flourishes. You have to go back and re-write sections, cut stuff out, and so on to edit your paper down to the parts that don't suck. Yes, it ain't fun. But doing a good job with this sort of thing isn't always fun.

6. Before you turn it in, properly format the paper

The key here is to remember that your professor, TA, or grader is going to have to do a ton of grading, so anything you can do to make his or her life easier is going to be smiled upon. Here are some basic things you should do, even if you are uploading this to a web-based service.

1. Proof-read. First, you spell and ideally grammar check your paper. Then, you read it through. Then, you have someone else look at it. Then, you make a bunch of corrections. Finally, you run it through spell/grammar check again.
2. My rec: don't put identifying marks on each page, and if you include a cover page it is usually best at the end. Why? It makes it easier to do unbiased grading.
3. **Page numbers, dagnabbit!** If we need to refer to a particular page, we don't want to have to count up all the pages every time.

4. Don't cheat on your margins. We know when you are doing it and you know when you are doing it, so don't even waste time foolin' around. These things stand out after you have been looking at academic papers all your life. **Just give us one inch, all the way around.**
5. Footnotes are fine if you want to use them. Just make sure they are at the bottom of the page and not the end (i.e., footnotes good, endnotes bad), so we don't have to flip back and forth all the time.
6. No folders or plastic covers if you have to turn in a hard copy. It just makes transporting the papers a bigger pain.
7. Citations: Do them properly, i.e., according to some standard format. As long as you are using one of the major citation formats (e.g., MLA, APA, Chicago Manual of Style), and you use it consistently, you will be in great shape. The basic principle with citations is to let me know where you are getting the quotes you use and on what page the person is making the strange claim that you are attributing to them. You shouldn't have to do too much quoting, but when you do, do it right (i.e., in a fashion where your reader can easily verify that you aren't making it up).
8. Article titles go in quotes, book titles are underlined, or better, italicized.
9. Avoid quoting unpublished things, including handouts by me. Instead, go for the chunks of text that gave rise to the contents of these handouts.
10. If turning in a hard copy, use a printer with sufficient ink!!!! Be kind to your grader and s/he will be kind to you.
11. If the assignment is based on the number of words, you should do a word count on your paper and put it on the first page of the paper.

II. ABOUT THOSE GRADES

1. General Remark:

Grading involves humans, so there is some variability here. A rough rule of thumb is this: a C range paper gets most things right, only minor things wrong, and demonstrates an adequate grasp of the issues. If you want something in the B range, you have to do some that takes your paper beyond the material we read and discussed in class. After reading your paper I should have a clear idea about what your good unique contribution to the issue is. For an A range paper, I have to have a clear idea about what your really great unique contribution to the issue is.

2. Comments on the papers

1. *If there is only one paper assigned in this course, and you want to receive comments on your paper, then indicate this at this top of the first page of the paper. I'm happy to put comments on your paper if you plan on reading them, so if that is you, don't hesitate to ask.*
2. If there are 2 or more paper writing assignments in this class, I will put comments on your first paper. *For the last paper, I will not put comments on it unless you indicate an interest in receiving comments on the first page of the paper. However, **for the first paper, READ THE COMMENTS CAREFULLY, THINK ABOUT THEM, AND PAY ATTENTION TO THEM!!!!*** Here's why: if you don't, you will get punished with impunity on your next draft, paper, or piece of work for not taking into account what they say. I put a lot of comments on this first batch of papers, to try and get any difficulties or problems addressed right away, before they have a chance to do real damage to your GPA. If you don't pay attention to them, I guarantee you that your grades will only get worse.

3. A quick note about things you can get penalized for:
 - Being off-topic or failing to fully complete the assignment (duh!).
 - Not defending the claims you are making.
 - Ignoring stylistic and formatting requirements.
4. Comment formats can vary by grader; talk to your TA or faculty person if you are unclear about what the comments mean.

4. So you don't like the grade you got . . .

- A. A paper grade is not a reflection on you, your moral character, the success of your parents and family, or the viability of your genetic code. It is merely a reflection of what you did on this particular paper at this particular time. It should be a learning opportunity. For example, maybe the lesson here is to talk to your TA, or to read independently, or to swap papers with classmates to get help improving your paper, and to do multiple drafts of a paper if you want it polished.
- B. If, however, you are unclear what went wrong, or after talking with your TA and following any direction listed in the syllabus, you are still unhappy with the results, then come and talk to the professor.