

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. The main goal of it is to walk one through the basics of writing an interpretive or literature-focused paper. It is *not* meant to help you with writing papers outside of the literature (and maybe art-based) humanities. So, if you want help with papers in your philosophy or history or social science classes, this guide may contain advice that is worse than useless. (I have written a separate guide on writing philosophy papers, and one on providing critiques to humanities & philosophy papers. You can download them from my course webpage.)

And yes, I'm terrible at proofreading. (Do as I say, not as I do, etc., etc.) Corrections are always welcome.

ABOUT YOUR PAPERS

1. What's your goal?

Your goal is to teach the reader of your paper something about a text, story, poem, play, etc. that he or she doesn't already know.

2. How do you do it?

Well, think about how the masters do it with stuff that everyone already know really well. For example, Aeschylus takes 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. You aren't writing a play, but the project is largely the same. Perhaps the most common ways to teach your reader something about a text you have both read is to either (1) show the reader possibilities about which he or she is previously unaware of or (2) that illuminates something about the framework or structure of the piece that he or she might not have seen.

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, Capitalist, 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. In short, the more stuff you know, the more interesting your writing can be, and ergo, the better your paper writing grades are likely to become. 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 text. Are events duplicated? If so, is there anything interesting about their divergences or when the parallel events occur? Authors will oftentimes play with structural features in this way, taking the same event, emotion, mood, or relationship and substituting the characters. So, for example, Odysseus is pissed at people taking the property of what rightly belongs to his sons. But early in the story it was Poseidon who was pissed at Odysseus for eyeing the land and property of Poseidon's son (the Cyclops). Think about cases where there are stories within stories. Look for self-referential features (Homer's blind poet works this way: Homer is telling us the story, but in that story Tiresias (the blind seer) is telling us the end of the story, but all the characters are ignoring it). What's going on there? Your paper can talk about and illuminate those interesting structural features by (1) identifying when they occur, and (2) reflecting on what the motivations of the author might have been, and (3) what such parallels, self-reference, or other structural features of the story add 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 BIG 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 had better be there by the time you turn in the paper.

5. Are you confusing the history of your working out an idea with effective presentation of that idea?

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, and all are solvable. 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 write something for the first time, it is usually without the whole picture in mind. One function of writing is 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. Here's why: your readers really don't care about the historical genesis of your ideas. In particular, what I want to know is how, after thinking about it, you now 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 all killer, no filler. 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, this is work. But it is also worth doing.

6. Is your paper properly formatted?

The key here is to remember that your professor 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:

Title page. You should have a separate title page with your name and the title of the paper on it. This should be the only place your name appears on the paper. (So no, don't put your name in the header next the page number, or anywhere else I'm likely to see it when I'm grading.)

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. Seriously, do all of this. It is not optional.

Page numbers, dagnabbit! If I want to refer to a particular page, I don't want to have to count up all the pages every time.

Don't cheat on your margins. I 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 me one inch, all the way around.

Footnotes are fine if you want to use them. Just make sure they are at the bottom of the page and not the end, so I don't have to flip back and forth all the time.

No folders or plastic covers. It just makes transporting the papers a bigger pain.

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).

Article titles go in quotes, book titles are underlined, or better, italicized.

Avoid quoting unpublished things, including handouts by me. Instead, go for the chunks of text that gave rise to the contents of these handouts.

Use a printer with sufficient ink!!!! Be kind to your grader and s/he will be kind to you.

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.

ABOUT YOUR GRADES

I. Overview

I am sometimes told that I am a hard grader. Maybe this is why. I start with the presumption that your paper is a 'C', and that you work up or down from there. What I mean by 'C' is what it is supposed to mean: it signifies that you have a satisfactory command of the material. Roughly, a C range paper gets most things right, only minor things wrong, and demonstrates an adequate grasp of the issues. The conventional "repeat the stuff in class or the text or what the professor says" is a reliable way to get a 'C' grade. I'm okay with that if you are. 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 unique and good contribution to the issue is. For an A range paper, I have to have a clear idea about what your unique and excellent contribution to the issue is.

My goal is for you to improve, and to become a better writer and thinker than you were when you started the class.

2. Comments on the papers

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. Just don't waste my time asking for questions you don't intend to ever look at.

If there are 2 or more paper writing assignments in this class, I will automatically put comments on your first paper. READ THE COMMENTS CAREFULLY, THINK ABOUT THEM, AND PAY ATTENTION TO THEM!!!! Here's why: if you don't, I am less likely to be generous on your next draft, paper, or piece of work. That is, I'm going to be alarmed if I evidently put more work into thinking about your paper than you put in to thinking about how to learn from my comments. The whole point of the comments, besides trying to, you know, teach you something is get any difficulties or problems addressed right away, before they have a chance to do real damage to your GPA. For any final paper, I will not put comments on it unless you indicate an interest in receiving comments on the first page of the paper.

A quick note about things you can get penalized for:

- Being off-topic or failing to fully complete the assignment
- Not defending the claims you are making.
- Ignoring stylistic and formatting requirements.

Frequently, I will use a grading rubric and scrawl comments there. Sometimes, there will be brief comments written on your paper. Longer comments will be numbered, and you will find them on the attached sheet of comments with your grade. Other times you will find more extended comments at the end of your paper, scribbled in my impossible to read

handwriting.

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

If this is your first paper in a class with multiple assignments, then hey, this is just the grade on the very first paper of this class. This is not that large a portion of your final grade, and it usually takes people a while before they learn to write respectable papers of the sort required by this course. By the end of the course, I expect that most people will be pretty successful at writing excellent humanities papers, so don't freak out if you got a lower grade than you are used to getting. You are undoubtedly very bright and will learn how to do this very quickly.

If this is the only paper grade for the class, it ain't the end of the world. A paper grade is merely a reflection of what you did on this particular paper at this particular time. Think of it as an important learning opportunity. You now know to talk to your professor or grader before you write your paper, to swap papers with classmates to get help improving your paper, and to do multiple drafts of a paper if you want it to show your best work.

4. You are still unhappy.

If you do have serious problems, think my comments don't make sense, or still don't understand what you can do to improve, by all means come talk to me. I can't help you solve anything unless I know you need and want help.