

# Writing Papers

Here is a basic outline to use in writing papers for class assignments and essay tests:

1. **Introduction**—Opening Paragraph  
Begin with a general statement  
Narrow it down to the major idea (for thesis statement)
2. **Body**—Three Paragraphs of Development. In each paragraph  
Use transitions (repetition of key words and ideas) to connect paragraphs  
Develop the topic sentence with details, definitions, illustrations, comparisons, and contrasts  
Conclude the paragraph with a summary of the main idea
3. **Conclusion**—Finishing Paragraph  
Restate the thesis  
End with a general statement finalizing the discussion

## Writing a Rough Draft

**Brainstorm**—set a period of time (10 minutes) and write everything that comes to mind about the subject: what inspired you about the subject, what made you mad, what confused you, etc.

**Make a List**—make a list of everything you want to say about the subject. Don't be concerned with spelling, punctuation, or grammar at this point. After you finish the list, number the items in the order you want to present them. You now have an outline for your paper!

**Start Writing**—don't worry about the mechanics of writing in your first draft; just write what you want to say using your outline.

**Prove Your Point**—use specific examples for emphasis. For example, don't say someone is an author; list his/her credentials as well (Pulitzer Prize winner, professor at a prestigious university, etc.).

**Use as Many Paragraphs as You Need**—five-paragraph essays (introduction, three supporting paragraphs, conclusion) are not the only way to write a paper. You should remember these things, however:

- The introductory paragraph should contain your thesis statement. It usually comes at the end of the first paragraph.
- The ideas presented in the introduction should be in the order you will present them in the body of the paper.
- If you deal with one point in two paragraphs, try to use two paragraphs for the other points as well. However, don't add filler material just to take up space.

**Review the Introductory Paragraph**—many writers write their introduction after they have written the rest of the paper. Sometimes it is easier to introduce the material when you know exactly what you have.

## Writing a Term Paper

Writing a term paper doesn't have to be a horrible ordeal—just learn the system and get organized! Use the steps listed below for assistance.

**CHOOSE A SUBJECT**—most good papers are built around questions. Find some part of the text that interests you and examine it closely. Ask yourself some of these sample questions: Does it tell you all you want to know about the subject? Does the information seem accurate? Are there assumptions that need to be examined? Can two of the more interesting sections be interrelated in some way? In your paper you should attempt to write a well-organized answer to the question you decide upon. Do not choose a subject that is too general or you will have a difficult time in narrowing the paper and proving your point.

**FIND SOURCES**—it is suggested that materials that are more than 20 years old not be used unless the nature of the paper requires it (for example, examining older writings from a historical point of view). Make a list of subject headings under which you think you might be able to locate sources and then consult the card catalog in the library, the Internet, or guides to periodicals to locate possible sources.

**GATHER NOTES**—examine the sources you located, skim through them and locate the useful material. Make good notes of the material including quotes and information for footnotes. Make these notes on a separate card or sheet of paper. Be sure that you do not distort the author's meanings and do not ignore other facts or opinions that may not be in support of your thesis—be accurate and honest. Get facts, not just opinions, and compare the facts with the author's conclusions. In research studies, notice the methods and procedures and don't be afraid to criticize them if you do not feel they are objective or well-controlled. Remember to document your sources well. Write down the name of the publication, the date of publication, title of article, author, volume and page number, Web address, etc.—you don't want to have to go back and find them again!

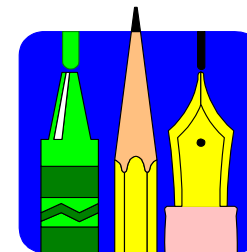
**WRITE THE ROUGH DRAFT**—using the information and tips supplied previously in this brochure, write your rough draft.

**EDIT THE PAPER**—you are now ready to polish the rough draft.

- Read it as if it were cold and unfamiliar to you. Wait a day or two after having written the first draft
- Read the paper aloud to be sure the language flows
- Check for proper spelling, phrasing, and sentence construction
- Check for proper form on footnotes, quotes, and punctuation
- Check to see that quotations serve one of the following purposes: show evidence of what the author said; avoid misrepresentation through restatement; save unnecessary writing when ideas have been well expressed by the original author
- Check for proper form on tables and graphs. Make sure that any table or graph is self-explanatory

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# Effective Writing Strategies



## Common Grammatical Errors and How to Fix Them

**Dangling Modifiers** are phrases or clauses that seem to modify a word it could not logically modify. Here is an example of an incorrect sentence: “Hopefully, the project will succeed.” “Hopefully” appears to modify the noun “project”, but how can a project be hopeful? To fix the sentence, you need to show who is really doing the hoping—“We hope that the project will succeed.” Another example is as follows: Incorrect: “Based on our observations, the project will succeed.” Correct: “On the basis of our observations, we believe the project will succeed.”

**Inconsistent Verb Tenses**—make sure you use tenses consistently in sentences. The following sentence changes tense from past to present: Incorrect: “Government officials said that they are correcting the problem.” Said is past tense and are correcting is present tense. The correct sentence should read “Government officials said that they were correcting the problem.” If the action of the dependent clause is completed before the action in the main clause, use past-perfect tense. For example, “Government officials said that they had corrected the problem.”

**Noun Strings**—try to avoid long strings of nouns that show no grammatical relationships among the many nouns. Incorrect: “Army Fiscal Year 1990 Apache Helicopter Spare and Repair Parts Budget Request.” To correct add possessive case and prepositions: “The Army’s Fiscal Year 1990 Budget Request for Spare and Repair Parts for the Apache Helicopter.”

**Faulty Agreement in Number**—this problem occurs when one tries to avoid the sexist use of pronouns. For example, “Each student must clean their own room.” “Each” is singular but “their” is plural. There are two possible options to fix this sentence: “Each student must clean his or her own room” or “All students must clean their own rooms.”

**Unclear Antecedents** -when using “this,” “which,” or “it,” make sure there is no question about what the pronoun’s antecedent is (the noun a pronoun refers to). Unclear: “The company needs accurate data for its estimates. This is the purpose of the task force” or “The company needs accurate data for its estimates, which is the purpose of the task force.” To make the passages clearer, change them to: “The company needs accurate data for its estimates. Providing such data is the purpose of the task force.” In the following sentence, the antecedent for “it” is unclear:

“When the government workers who should be classed as administrators are enumerated, it reaches staggering proportions.” Revise to eliminate the vague pronoun: “When the government workers who should be classed as administrators are enumerated, the total is staggering.”

**Use of “that” and “which”** - use “that” if the phrase following it is necessary for the meaning of the sentence: “The book that I lost will cost me \$25.” Use “which” and commas if the phrase following it is not necessary for the meaning of the sentence: “The book, which I bought last year, is now lost.”

## Common Punctuation Errors and How to Fix Them

**Comma Splices**—the following is an example of a comma splice:

“Japan will design the aircraft, the United States will provide the technology.” The sentence can be revised the following ways:

\*Separating the clauses into two separate sentences:

“Japan will design the aircraft. The United States will provide the technology.”

\*Linking the clauses with a semicolon:

“Japan will design the aircraft; the United States will provide the technology.”

\*Linking the clauses with a comma and conjunction:

“Japan will design the aircraft, and the United States will provide the technology.”

An example of the most commonly seen comma splice, conjunctive adverbs, is:

“In the past, the team has had a difficult time winning games, however, the new coach has made many helpful improvements.”

Conjunctive adverbs (however, therefore, moreover) or transitional phrases (in fact, in addition) must be used with a semicolon when they connect two independent clauses. The sentence should read:

“In the past, the team has had a difficult time winning games; however, the new coach has made many helpful improvements.”

**Compound Sentences**—when two independent clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet), a comma must connect the two clauses.

Incorrect: “Wordsworth is an English poet and Cather is an American novelist.”

Correct: “Wordsworth is an English poet, and Cather is an American novelist.”

Some information in this brochure is taken from materials from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and from the Academic Resource Center of Sweet Briar College.

**Numbered Items Within Sentences**—when numbered items have internal commas, separate them with semicolons. For example: “Before a loan could be made, the committee had to determine that (1) the borrower’s earning power, together with the security pledged, (internal comma) ensured loan repayment; (2) the loan was needed to avoid adverse economic effects; and (3) credit was not available elsewhere.” If there are no internal commas in the numbered items, you need only commas to separate the items. For example: “The meeting will address three areas of concern for the students: (1) housing and visitation policies, (2) curriculum requirements, and (3) clubs and organizations.”

**Commas In a Series**—when using three or more parallel words, phrases, or clauses in a series, be sure to add a comma before the coordinating conjunction that connects the last two elements of the series. For example: “The program included sessions on time management, study skills, oral presentations, and writing papers.”

**Commas With Dates**—use commas to set off the year when a specific month and day are given: “In a May 17, 1985, memorandum the director discussed the new personnel policies.” When only the month and year are cited, do not set off the year with commas: “In a September 1987 letter, the President proposed a solution to the problem.”

**Punctuation With Quoted Material**—commas and periods always go inside quotation marks; colons, semicolons, and footnote numbers go inside quotation marks only if they are part of the quoted material. The following are correct examples:

The director said that “the new policy was ready for implementation,” but the committee disagreed.

The director believes that “the new policy is ready for implementation”; however, she made her recommendation without studying the entire proposal.

The committee has published the results of its study in a paper entitled “Employee Morale..”<sup>2</sup>

If a question mark is part of the quotation, it goes inside the quotation marks:

As a part of our study, we asked agency officials to respond to the following question: “Do you plan to retire within the next 5 years?”

A question mark follows the quotation marks if it applies to the entire sentence:

Are our conclusions going to be in our testimony “Aid to Central America”?