

## The Fundamentals of Academic Writing

*There's more to writing a good essay than avoiding grammatical mistakes. You need to plan your paper carefully and make sure you have argued your point to the best of your ability. Let's explore how you can write an essay that defends your thesis statement well.*

### Write an Insightful Thesis Statement

To begin, make sure your thesis is excellent. This is the idea you're defending throughout the paper.

- Since the thesis is the foundation on which you'll build everything else, you want it to be compelling.
- Is the thesis specific enough? Is the thesis something you can really defend? Does any of your research contradict the thesis? Is your thesis too obvious?
- See if you can get your teacher to look at your thesis statement before you write the rest of your paper. If there's something wrong with it, fixing it beforehand could save you a heck of a lot of time—and your grade!

### Put Your Thesis Statement Front and Center

I'd recommend putting your thesis statement (a sentence or two) at the end of your first paragraph. This will give you time to introduce your topic before making the bold claim you hope to defend.

### Map out Your Essay First

Outline your paper before writing it. Or for smaller assignments, at least have a clear idea as to where you're going before you start.

- To outline, I often find it helpful to list the different points I want to make to defend my thesis. Depending on the length of the paper, these could be three main points, five, ten... it can vary.
- I then take the various quotations and pieces of evidence I found in my research and group them based on what arguments of mine they're related to. For example, if I were writing about global warming, then money-related statistics would go under a bullet point about how curbing climate change could help our economy.
- Specifically, I list each quotation or piece of evidence as a bullet point under the relevant argument. Looking at the groups that form, I get a sense for how to split up the paragraphs.
- With the different paragraphs coming to fruition, I get a better idea as to how to arrange the entire paper.
- I do not waste time with "official" outline formatting like using Roman numerals for big points and that sort of thing.

- You may not need an outline for a tiny paper, but you always need to consider what each supporting paragraph will be about and decide where your research fits in.

### **Always Stick to Your Thesis**

Every paragraph should clearly relate to your thesis statement.

- If it isn't obvious how a certain paragraph is relevant, ask yourself how you can tie your points and quotations to the thesis more clearly. Remember, quotations and citations are your evidence, so it should be clear how they make your argument more thorough and convincing.

- You may even consider scrapping the irrelevant paragraph entirely.

- I'd also suggest jotting down your thesis statement on a note card and having it next to you as you write so you'll always be focusing on it.

### **Work Closely with the Literature**

In literature classes, work very closely with the text you're analyzing. Be sure to cite it often. Do not just go off on your own tangents: you must be able to support your claims with specific parts of the literature itself. *Evidence is everything.*

- Citing specific scenes and quotations is often more convincing than giving vague summaries of huge passages.

### **Balance Quotations and Analysis**

I would not recommend quoting huge blocks of text all at once. If you need to analyze something, then break it down into smaller pieces and analyze each piece in detail. For example, don't just cite an entire monologue in a Shakespeare play and then tell what you think of it overall. Quote a few lines, explain and examine them, quote some more lines, analyze those, and so on. This will deepen your analysis and make your argument clearer.

### **No Quotation is an Island unto Itself**

When using quotes, especially ones from a novel, make sure you aren't ripping them out of context. You should briefly explain the context to the reader.

### **Don't Guess Who**

Make sure it's clear who is saying the quotation. Is it the narrator? Is it a certain character? Is it a researcher whose work you've read?

- You can introduce someone quickly with phrases like, "As the mild-mannered Aya Kinimoto warns her brother . . .," or "Miles Oak, a biology professor at Miller University, claims that . . ."

- Once you have mentioned a certain researcher once, you can stick to their last name throughout the rest of your essay, assuming nobody else you're citing has the same last name.
- Plays do not have narrators—only playwrights, stage directions, and characters.
- Poems have speakers, not narrators.

### **Explain Every Quote**

Don't just drop a quote in your paper and expect it to speak for itself (unless it's quite short and simple). You have to explain it! Act as if the reader simply can't understand a piece of literature or research article without your help.

- For more information, please check out my guide called "Quotations in Academic Papers."

### **Let Your Essay Do the Talking**

Your writing should be able to speak for itself.

- If you ever read your paper and find yourself trying to make sense of what you're trying to say, that shows you're not being clear enough.
- Remember, your reader can only read what you wrote down. Otherwise, they have no clue what's going through your mind. If something needs additional clarification or needs to be reworded for it to make sense, then do so right in your paper!
- This might seem obvious, but since you're the one who wrote the paper and knows what you're thinking, it's easy to assume the reader will be able to guess what you're thinking.
- If something you wrote can be misinterpreted, then it will be misinterpreted.
- If something you wrote seems kind of confusing to you, then it will definitely seem confusing to the reader.
- Write as if you're doing *everything* you can to explain your point.
- Here's one way of looking at it. Imagine you have a chance to win a million dollars, and all you have to do is come up with the perfect way to defend your thesis (your argument). You have to mail in your paper, though. So, it's your job to make sure you've cited all the sources you possibly can, have analyzed all the relevant quotations in the novel (if this is an English paper), and squashed any counterarguments people might make against your claims. If you fail to do this, you won't get any second chances to explain yourself.
- Alternatively, ask yourself, "If I handed this paper to a random Joe Schmoe or Jane Doe, could they read it and understand my point even if I didn't stand around to answer their questions?"
- Heck, you could ask yourself, "If my parents ever wondered what I'm studying, could I send them my paper and have them understand the argument I'm making?"

- This is part of the reason why having someone else edit your paper can be incredibly helpful: they'll come in with a fresh perspective. If something's confusing to them, then you probably need to revise a certain section to make your point clearer.

- Let me say it again for emphasis! Your writing should be clear enough that it explains your points without any need for further clarification.

### **Keep Your Comparisons Dynamic**

When writing a paper that compares and contrasts two topics (say, two characters), do not discuss one topic in its entirety and then discuss the second topic in its entirety, leaving it at that.

- When comparing two things, you must do more than just talk about each: you must clearly and actively compare them!

- Typically, an effective means of structuring such a paper is to discuss a certain attribute as manifested by both of the topics before moving on to another attribute.

- For example, if you have to contrast two political parties, you could look at one party's view of war and then discuss how the other party's views differ from this. Once you're finished comparing and contrasting their views on war, then you can move on to their views on other subjects. That way, you are constantly comparing and contrasting the two parties rather than just describing each in isolation.

- Here's another example. Let's say you have to compare and contrast two characters, one named Nick and another named Paul. In theory, you could describe Nick's career, Nick's marriage, Nick's relationship to his children, and Nick's beliefs; then you could describe Paul's career, Paul's marriage, Paul's relationship to his children, and Paul's beliefs. However, it would just come off as, "Here's a description of Nick, and now here's a description of Paul." Instead, I'd recommend describing Nick's career, Paul's career, Nick's marriage, Paul's marriage, Nick's relationship to his children, Paul's relationship to his children, Nick's beliefs, and Paul's beliefs. That way, it's easier to consistently point out how each element essential to their character is similar or different.

- It's not like you need to alternate between each character in such a regular pattern, though. Like here, you could describe Paul first in one paragraph, Nick first in another, etc. This is just an example.

- Be sure to acknowledge that all topics will have some similarities no matter how different they are, and on the flip side of the coin, all topics will have differences no matter similar they are. Acknowledging this ambiguity will allow your teacher to see that you understand the complexities of our world. So don't ignore anything crucial, even if it's a little tricky.

### **Think, Don't Regurgitate**

Unless you're told otherwise, your writing should *analyze* the topic, not just summarize or talk about it. The following points will help explain how you can do exactly that.

## **What Do Literary Devices Accomplish?**

When analyzing literature (whether it's a novel, short story, poem, or something else), do more than point out literary devices. *Explain their significance.* What does the literary device add to the work?

- For instance, if you read the sentence, “Zelda is like a butterfly,” do more than point out it's a simile. Congratulations: you know the definition of a simile. Actually explain *how* Zelda is like a butterfly by citing various examples from throughout the text. What traits do you associate with butterflies (e.g. delicacy and freedom) and in what scenes does Zelda exhibit these traits? How does this contribute to our understanding of her character?

- And here's another example. In some Greek play, a god speaks about a destroyed city using personification, which means using descriptive terms as if the city were human. I pointed out in my English class that, by giving the city more human-like qualities (such as “wounds”), the playwright arouses our feelings of pity for its destruction and makes us angrier at the people who caused it. After all, it's easier to feel close to a human than to an object, and personifying an object almost makes it human. Not to blow my own horn, but my specific answer impressed my teacher.

## **Poems have Layers, like Onions and Ogres**

If you're analyzing a poem, then be sure to read it many times so that you can dig deeply into it.

- Analyze the diction, structure, and tone.

- What do we know about the speaker—and how does the poem reveal this information?

- How do the little details and literary devices add to the big picture?

- Consider what every line, image, and metaphor contributes to the work, to the message, to the theme. Don't assume any of it is random: poets spend hours and hours and hours getting their wording perfect.

- If you learned about a certain poetic device or technique in class, then you should probably mention the poet's use of it in your paper. After all, if a teacher thought a literary device was important enough to lecture about it, then they probably want you to point it out when it appears.

- If there's a part of the poem you flat-out don't understand, try asking for help from your teacher or a friend. Also try looking online. If all else fails, just keep reading it until it makes more sense. And if you're still confused, well, try focusing on easier parts of the poem in your paper. If you can't gloss over the confusing part, then you're just going to have to take your best shot at deciding what it means.

## **I Write; Therefore, I Am**

Do not be afraid to use the first-person when it seems justified.

- Some teachers and standardized test graders are still under the delusion that academics never use the first-person, but that's not the case, not even in college-level research journals.

- Using the first-person can help if you're using your own experience as an example or if you want to emphasize that something controversial or dubious is your opinion as opposed to a fact.

- Do not rely much on phrases such as "I think," though. You could make yourself sound like a wishy-washy writer who didn't research enough to make a point confidently. Besides, we know it's you writing this paper. So, don't abuse the first-person.

- Do not use the phrase "I feel like" when expressing an opinion. You *feel* emotions, whereas you *believe* statements. "I feel like the government should increase the minimum wage" makes your belief sound like a random feeling rather than a dedicated conviction.

- Be sure to ask your teacher for their opinion on the first-person first, though. Ultimately, they're the ones doing the grading.

### **Facts Speak Louder than Opinions**

Be careful that you don't get too opinionated. Everything should be backed up with evidence.

- If you want to express a debatable opinion (and if your teacher is fine with the first-person), introduce it with something like "I believe..." or "Personally, I am confident that..." Depending on what type of paper you're writing, though, your opinions may be irrelevant. The teacher might just want the facts.

### **Counter Your Opponents**

Anticipate all counterarguments to your thesis, especially if it's about a controversial subject.

- For instance, if you're going to write a defense of pacifism, you have to do more than show how war kills people and tears apart families—everyone knows that. You'd better give responses to common arguments in favor of war (that is, against pacifism). You would have to explain why you don't believe war's a "necessary evil," as many people who disagree with you would argue. You have to explain why you think the costs outweigh the benefits.

- Pretending nobody has any arguments against you sure won't be very convincing.

- And always remember to treat the opposing viewpoints with respect, even as you refute them. Insulting people who disagree with you will just make it less likely for them to take your arguments seriously. Mocking them with sarcasm and such will turn people away rather than convince them to listen to you.

- Try reading your paper from the perspective of someone who is being paid to prove you wrong every single chance they get. How well would they do?

- For more on argumentation, check out the book *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. Although it's primarily intended for college students, it's accessible enough for high schoolers to read as well. And if you really want your papers to shine, I'd say it's worth the time to read it.

- Even if your topic isn't a controversial issue, there could still be people who disagree with you. For example, someone might interpret a piece of literature differently than you do, so you should explain (with evidence) why you believe your interpretation is the most accurate.

- With some topics and papers, especially ones where you just explain a concept rather than argue a point or analyze something, there will hardly be any counterarguments to address—if any. So, you don't always have to worry about this. Also, you don't need to conjure up incredibly stupid counterarguments for you to refute: just think of what reasonable people might say against your ideas.

### **Make Your Own Arguments**

If your paper is supposed to include many different sources, be sure that you're combining their points to make a point of your own.

- If you're mostly citing one source, then moving on to another, then moving on to another, that's a red flag. Are you just rewording and summarizing other people's ideas? Your research is supposed to allow you to synthesize what you've read into a new conclusion of your own. At the very least, you shouldn't approach the topic the exact same way everyone else has.

### **Write a Conclusive Conclusion**

Do not make the concluding paragraph a mere rewording of your introduction. Also, try to make it a bit more than a paragraph-by-paragraph summary of your paper. Find a way to tie your most important points together and perhaps even leave your reader with a powerful message.

### **Give Credit where It's Due**

Cite everything properly.

- As you research for a paper, keep your sources organized so that you can consult them later when you need to cite them.

- If you quote something, you'd better acknowledge who said it.

- Remember that changing a couple words isn't paraphrasing.

- *Absolutely never dream of plagiarizing.* I know it can be tempting if you're desperate, but if you get caught, it'll be put on your record until you graduate. When you go into new classes, the teachers will recognize you as the cheating little scumbag you are (no offense), which isn't a spectacular first impression. And in some colleges, you'll get kicked out if you're caught plagiarizing even once!

### **Follow the Citation Guidelines**

Make sure you use MLA format, APA format, or whatever citation format your teacher wants.

- If you're using MLA, I'd strongly recommend getting the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Unless your teacher says otherwise, make sure you're using the newest edition. It's not very user-friendly, but it's the most authoritative and comprehensive source on MLA in the whole wide world.

- No matter what citation format you're using, make sure you have a reliable book or website explaining the ins and outs of it well.

- Websites like EasyBib.com can help you format your works cited page, but be aware that they're capable of making mistakes. Check over what they generate for you.

### **Your Essay's too Short? Go Deeper.**

If your paper is not long enough, don't waste time trying to fool the teacher by making it look longer than it really is. Most teachers are aware of the tricks students use to "expand" their papers, such as playing with the margins. There are plenty of legit paths you can take instead.

- For instance, go into more detail concerning the elements that you have already discussed. Clarify anything that might be ambiguous. Delve deeper into your analysis.

- You could also go back to the subject you're analyzing and see if there's anything else you could use to support your thesis. Is there another argument or piece of evidence you haven't discussed yet? Are there any other perspectives on the issue you're tackling? If you're analyzing literature, are there any major parts of the text you haven't examined yet?

- Also consider if there are any counterarguments you should anticipate.

- Ultimately, if your paper's too short, that's a sign you aren't going deep enough. Don't just restate the obvious.

- If you can't think of anything more to say, try doing more research or asking your teacher for help.

### **Give Yourself Time to Edit Your Essays**

Do the paper early so you have time to revise!

- I know many students suffer from a severe case of I'll-just-stay-up-all-night-the-day-before-and-do-it-then-it-is, but you should cure yourself of this horrendous disease.

- You probably won't see much improvement in your writing abilities if you never revise your work carefully. Revision truly makes you see how well you're writing and what, exactly, you need to do to improve. Research has shown that you learn much more when you find mistakes on your own rather than have a teacher point them all out for you.

- Plus, revision is most effective when you've had some time to distance yourself from your work. You're more likely to spot gaps in your logic or see where you're making assumptions. So you're better off finishing the paper many days in advance, waiting a day or two, and then going back to revise with a fresh pair of eyes.



- If you're having trouble motivating yourself, then set deadlines for yourself (research done by day X, outline done by day Y, etc.) and have someone, perhaps your parents or friends, check up on your progress. Reward yourself if you stay on an effective schedule.

- There are other reasons why you should do papers early. Let's say you end up sick the night before the paper is due, or your neighbor decides to throw a huge party that makes it impossible for you to concentrate. Or let's say there's a family emergency the night before. Or let's say your computer acts like a brat and refuses to work. Guess what? You're screwed!

- I'm not saying you need to complete your papers a month before they're due, but I am saying you should leave yourself some wiggle room.

- To learn how to revise your papers well, check out my guide called "The Revision Process."

### **Print or Submit Your Work on Time**

Don't try to print something out at the last minute either. Believe me, one day, your printer will betray you and refuse to work when you need it most. Don't let it win the battle: print early!

- Even if you're submitting the paper digitally, give yourself extra time to do so in case the Internet throws a temper tantrum as the final minutes tick away.

### **Save Often!**

Save your document often. And before you shut down the computer, back it up on a flash drive or cloud drive. Always back it up somewhere.

**A piece of writing that clearly makes compelling points through specific evidence is the kind that can persuade your readers to agree with you... and earn a good grade.**

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