

Paper “Tips”

Since the paper will be graded on style as well as content, you may find the following suggestions useful. On the general question of how to structure your paper, I favor the traditional structure: an introductory paragraph that states clearly what you are going to discuss; a well-organized discussion that follows the plan laid out in the introduction; and a conclusion that sums up the results of your research and presents your own thoughts on the subject. Dividing the paper into sections is usually a good idea. Other structures may be successful in the hands of a good writer, but they are more often formulae for disaster. Another troublesome point is the proper mix of reporting the results of your research and presenting your own opinions; some of each is necessary for a good paper, especially in the context of this course. Remember that you **must** relate the topic to the course in some way. For most topics, you will have to do this yourself, usually after you have presented the results of your research.

At more detailed levels, you should pay attention to the organization of each paragraph (start each paragraph with a topic sentence), your sentence structure, word choice, spelling, and punctuation. If you have your paper typed by someone else, it is your responsibility to proofread it and correct any typing mistakes. I will list below some common, but inexcusable, errors.

1. Incomplete sentences. Which both of these are. Each of these examples would be a serious mistake in an otherwise perfect paper.
2. Run-on sentences are also bad, these are also serious mistakes. You can save yourself by learning when to use semi-colons.
3. The use of slang or colloquialisms isn't appropriate and really pisses me off. Contractions don't belong in a formal paper. Writing is not the same as talking.
4. There is no excuse for misspelling words; use a dictionary.
5. Remembering that, in general, commas come in pairs to set off parenthetical comments, that they are used to separate a series of elements, and that they cannot, by themselves, connect two independent sentences will help you to avoid red ink. For a quick test, see if you can identify the subject and verb of the preceding sentence.
6. While we are on the preceding subject, learn the difference between preceding and proceeding, effect and affect, most and almost, principle and principal, less and fewer, feel and believe, its and it's, and all the other commonly misused words (“hopefully” is a disaster waiting to happen).
7. Avoid the indefinite use of the word “this” to refer, for example, to a whole previous sentence or idea. This can be solved by starting this sentence with “this problem.”
8. “Avoid excessive use of direct quotations, unless you find the exact words very apt or striking. It is better to cast the thought into your own words.” (Evans 97).

More Tips for Papers

1. When writing on controversial subjects, avoid both of the following extreme approaches: first, a one-sided paper; second, a paper that only reports the opinions of others. A good middle ground is to present accurately and fairly both sides of the issue and then to end the paper with your own conclusion.
2. Avoid writing that sounds like advertising. The paper is supposed to be a research paper.
3. Avoid cliches and opening lines like, “Man has wondered about extraterrestrial life since he first gazed up in wonder at the stars.”