

Some advice on writing term papers

A few tips to avoid common mistakes (From Dr. Cusack)

I have noticed that students make many of the same errors in writing term papers. Here are a few pieces of advice to help you avoid those errors.

- Use a spell checker.
- Make sure you are using the word you think you are using. Spell checkers cannot help you with this. Common mistakes include
 - Your verses you're
 - Their versus there
 - its versus it's (and many other possessive versus contraction confusions)
- Read what you write. It may sound stupid, but I often find simple mistakes that would have been caught if the author read their paper before handing it in.
- Have someone else read your paper. It is very easy to miss your own mistakes, and having another pair of eyes look at your paper will help find those errors you didn't see. When you are reading your own paper, it is too easy to read what you thought you wrote, not what you actually wrote.
- Seek advice from writing experts. *All* great authors have editors! It is often the case that a good editor makes or breaks a book or article. There is no shame in getting advice from those who have more experience writing than you do. I always have my colleagues read my articles before submitting them anywhere.
- Do not write like you speak.
- Use commas, hyphens, semicolons, etc. where necessary. In general, if you pause, add a comma. If you want to really emphasize, use a hyphen instead.
- Do not over state things, make things sound more grandiose than they really are, or over sensationalize.
- Generally you want to avoid use of the first person (I and we).
- Usually, you want to avoid use of the second person (you).
- Make sure the subject and object of your sentence agree.
- Make sure your sentences are full sentences (Do they have a subject and a verb?).
- Make sure that long sentences follow a clear train of thought, and that there is agreement in person, tense, etc. throughout.
- Do not use really long sentences that go on and on forever, since it can be really hard to follow what you are trying to say, especially if what you are trying to say can be broken up into multiple sentences, and this is particularly difficult if the sentence is not composed of just a single thought, like also not using run-on sentences and making sure that if you have a long sentence it "agrees" throughout so that they can follow what you are trying to communicate, and if you want to make it readable, they should certainly not change "person" mid-stream because that doesn't make a lot of sense like when you say one thing and then add another idea and finally start talking about something else, and using paragraphs when appropriate. I hope you get the idea.

Writing a Good Research Paper (From Dr. McFall)

The important part of a good research paper is that it has a "thesis," whether this be a particular viewpoint that you are taking, or whether it is an analysis of the facts and issues raised by a particular topic you have chosen to examine. While it is quite clear that "position papers" need such a thesis, it is equally true that "survey papers" include a thesis statement as well. Without a clear thesis statement, it is difficult, if not impossible, to write a paper that does not seem like a somewhat random series of facts and information. This is true even if you do a great job writing transition sentences. The reader needs to know what you are trying to communicate through the paper. A good number of the papers that I have read in the past lacked such an organizing theme. Simply stating a thesis statement during the introduction would have improved many of these papers.

Below is a list of questions David Klooster of the English department uses when evaluating papers related to this idea of having a thesis statement in your paper. I find these questions particularly helpful. You should use these criteria when self-reviewing and peer-reviewing your own papers. If you feel you can answer each of these questions with a "yes," then I suspect you will have written a good paper!

- Can the reader discern a central claim (a thesis, a research finding, an interpretive claim, an argument) which is supported with appropriate evidence?
- Does the paper maintain a consistent focus on this central claim?
- Does the opening of the paper indicate the question or problem to be considered, and does it establish an appropriate rhetorical mode between the writer and the implied audience?
- Does every part of the paper advance the central claim in a discernible and effective way? Do the sentences and paragraphs form an effective sequence, drawing the reader along through a logical and reasonable argument?
- Does the paper develop its ideas with effective examples, analysis, comparisons, evidence, or other convincing explanations?
- Does the conclusion leave the reader with a sense of why the central claim is important, why it matters? If appropriate, does it suggest ways the central ideas can be applied, or what the implications of the idea might be?

Responses to Grading Papers (Dr. McFall)

The following are excerpts Dr. McFall sent to his students after grading term projects a few years ago. They may be helpful as you think about writing your paper.

Good writing requires multiple steps of reading and revising. It does not seem likely that these steps took place in a good number of papers. Many things that were on the written page would seem to me to be quite unlikely to come out in a conversation--they just didn't seem to make much sense. Conversely, there was a good amount of writing that sounded too much like a casual conversation. When writing a research paper, as much as it may seem "more interesting" or "less dry," it is important to maintain a more formal tone in a well written research paper. It is certainly a challenge to do that in a way that maintains the reader's interest, but it is certainly possible.

Spell checkers have definitely changed the world of paper writing! I don't think I saw more than one or two actual spelling mistakes, where the sequence of characters on the page did not make up a valid word. On the other hand, I saw a large number of cases where the word appearing in a particular portion of the paper was inappropriate for its context. If you are not a person who is good at seeing these kinds of things, I suggest having your paper read over by someone who is before turning it in. I believe there are opportunities available to you in the Academic Support Center to work on this type of thing.

Be careful to make sure that you are matching up the subject and verb in a sentence appropriately. I read many times that technology is growing--what does that mean exactly? It is more accurate to say that the **capabilities** of technology are growing. While it is tempting to try to spice up papers with words that sound good, it is necessary to make sure that those words are used appropriately. Check out your dictionary if you're not sure exactly what a word means!

Many paper authors struggled to construct complete sentences. A sentence that starts with Although, Which, However, and other words such as these are the prime suspects. If you begin a sentence with this type of clause, there must be a separate subject and verb following the clause, generally appearing after a comma. I marked most of these in individual papers. Also, be careful not to combine too many ideas into a single sentence; I encountered a number of run-on sentences in papers I read. Finally, each individual paragraph should have its own topic. I frequently encountered paragraphs that covered multiple ideas, sometimes taking up close to a full page!

I hope you find these comments useful; if at any time you want to discuss how you could improve your writing with me, I would be happy to do so. Have a great summer!