

Rules of Thumb for Paper-Writing¹

State the main thesis of your paper at (or near) the beginning. You can begin with “I will argue that...”

Stay focused. Your paper should first describe the data (the material, the information) you’re working with, and then analyze and assess it. Conclusions should conclude the paper, so don’t introduce new material in them.

Take the material you’re working with seriously. You may disagree with it, but do not dismiss it out of hand.

Avoid making vague and sweeping generalities, for example: “Mexican families are more close-knit than families in the U.S.” Vague generalizations add nothing. Stick to the points you can *convincingly* make, which means points you can support with citations, data, references to authoritative sources (this can be you—your own experience—if you make it clear what your source is), and the like.

Write clearly. A piece of writing reads best when sentences vary in length, but if you feel insecure about your writing ability, use short sentences. Avoid page-long paragraphs and be careful to signal transitions. If a sentence goes on for more than 5 lines, find a way to divide it up; if a paragraph goes on for more than 20 lines, find a way to divide it up; if one section of the paper seems disconnected from the previous one, put in a sentence or two that links them. Put things as simply as you can. Write in the first person. This is not a creative writing course, so avoid elaborate formulations, esoteric words, purple prose, neologisms (invented words) or inversions of the natural order of words in English sentences. Your writing should draw readers’ attention to the ideas you’re trying to express, not to the words you have chosen to accomplish this.

Include some stylistic variety. For example, don’t start every sentence with the subject. Avoid passive constructions. Doesn’t “Joe carried the bucket” sound better than “the bucket was carried by Joe”? Limit your sentences that start with “It is” and “There is.” If you begin a sentence with “This,” *make sure* that what “this” refers to is crystal clear.

Avoid overly long quotations. Paraphrasing is a good skill to cultivate, just be sure to correctly reference the speaker or writer you’re paraphrasing.

When you finish writing, read your paper out loud, preferably to a friend. If it doesn’t sound right, it won’t read right. This technique helps a lot in catching mistakes. If the structure of the paper isn’t clear, outline the paper, paragraph by paragraph, and 99% of the time you’ll see what the problem is.

Do a spell check.

Applying these rules of thumb will require that you spend some time editing your paper after one, or more than one, drafts. But the additional time will be worth it. Not only will the papers you hand in be better written, you will eventually start to edit as you write.

¹ These suggestions derive from a similar document written by Professor Joshua Cohen for his course on “Justice.”

Properly cite all the sources you use. This means making sure the reader knows who is the author of the ideas you are presenting and where they can be found.