

Academic Writing 101

Presented by the Learning Commons

What makes a strong, readable paper?

This presentation will answer the above question by giving tips for the following parts of writing a paper:

- Starting off
- Finding your sources
- Developing an argument
- Structuring the paper
- Editing for style, grammar, clarity, and conciseness

Starting off: answering prompts

The most common way for a professor to elicit essays from students is by issuing prompts, but sometimes a professor will ask students to create questions of their own. These two forms of prompts require different approaches.

Essay #1 (1200 to 1500 words) for the *Republic* core course

1. Glaucon and Adeimantus begin Book 2 with a demand to hear a more convincing speech to the effect that justice is the greatest good for the soul. What does their demand, and the way they make it, show us about what they did or did not learn from the conversation in Book 1?
2. In Book 2, Glaucon objects to Adeimantus's city because he wanted luxuries. In book 3, he seems quite willing to forego them. Why?
3. How might Socrates and company adjudicate the contest between Homer and Hesiod? Do you see differences in the way the two poets are discussed? If so, how and why?

Prompts given by the professor(s)

Professors give out prompts to encourage students to spend more time with a particular question or with particular texts. When you receive a prompt, it is a good idea to ask the following questions about it:

- What does the professor think are the important things to think about with respect to the subject matter?
- What parts of the question matter to me? What parts are particularly confusing to me? What parts do I want to highlight in my essay?
- What sources will I need to answer this question?

Creating your own prompt

Sometimes a professor will ask students to create their own prompts. This often takes the form of developing a research question. Steps towards developing your own question may include:

- Finding a problem in the text or in the world that is actually something you want to work to answer and that you find genuinely perplexing and interesting,
- Avoiding questions that you think you already know the answer to,
- Stop developing your prompt once it's good enough to direct your research.

Finding Sources

Now that you've gotten clear on your question, the next step is to figure out what sources will be most helpful to you:

- If working with primary sources ask: What parts of the text or material is most pertinent to my question?
- If working with secondary sources ask: where can I find other writers thinking about similar issues? and, what do I want to do differently from these writers?

Developing your argument

Different writers have different techniques for developing an argument. These techniques vary mostly on the point of timing.

- Developing your thesis statement first and then developing the argument around it:
 - Pros:
 - Gives you clear guidance as you work through your material
 - Gives you an anchor point to refer back to throughout the writing process
 - Cons:
 - Can lead you to ignore complications and ambiguities in the text that would otherwise lead you to reform your thesis

Developing your argument, cont.

Another technique is to begin with a tentative thesis and then to reform the thesis as you write.

If your thesis statement takes the form “this essay will discuss...” (or uses similar verbs like “address,” “explore,” “compare,” “consider,”) you have probably developed a “placeholder” thesis. This can be helpful to get you going, but when you have written more, go back and ask yourself: what is the result of the exploration or discussion? Revise your thesis statement to indicate where the argument actually goes.

Structuring your paper

- Tips for starting on an assignment:
 - Re-read the assignment and essay prompts before you start to keep those in your thoughts while writing.
 - Next, re-read the texts that you are working with while gathering quotes. Having a list of relevant quotes down on paper is a good way to start writing. Additionally, writing down questions about the text(s) as well as connections you have made between these texts provides a good place to start developing an argument. Once you feel that you have a good understanding of the texts that you are working with, it's time to move from posing these questions to trying to answer one!

Structuring your paper, cont.

- Writing a Thesis statement:
 - You can start with a working thesis and perfect it after you finish your essay and solidify your argument.
 - A good thesis statement is clear, concise and poses an answer to a question that can be argued in essay length.
 - A vague thesis would involve an argument that is self-evident, such as “Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* discusses ethical theories,” or poses a question without any movement towards answering the question. “This paper will discuss Aristotle’s theories of the soul in *Nicomachean Ethics*” would also be an example of a thesis statement missing an argument.

Structuring your paper, cont.

- Writing an introduction
 - An introduction functions as an abstract of your paper, giving both the thesis statement at the end, as well as a conceptual overview of the topic you are about to address.
 - This is the place in which you can introduce the author, concept or text that you are working on.
- Structuring topic sentences
 - Topic sentences should function as the organizational backbone of your essay, both tying back to your thesis statement and furthering your argument with evidence and analysis of the text.
 - A good topic sentence introduces the smaller argument that you will make in an individual paragraph.

Structuring your paper, cont.

- Body paragraphs and in-text quotations
 - A good body paragraph will focus closely on the smaller argument made in your topic sentence for that paragraph.
 - It will also use textual evidence to develop upon and defend this argument, ideally with one or more citations per paragraph.
 - A quotation should relate to your topic sentence, and you should clearly analyze and explain the quotation's relevance to the argument made.

Editing for style, grammar, conciseness, and clarity

Editing is something you should be doing continuously as you write, but it is also good to have a method for the final editing period. Here are two main tips that are both forms of making sure your argument is clear:

- **Signpost:**
 - Signposting is when you say what you are going to argue, why the particular argument comes when it does, and generally when you indicate the overarching structure of the argument, rather than just writing plain arguments without meaningful transitions.

Example:

In what follows, I will show how Joyce's sentence length portrays key elements of personality for Stephen, Leopold, and Molly respectively.

Editing, cont.

- Avoid unclear referents:
 - It's important for the overall argument that it is clear what every sentence is talking about.
 - Words to watch out for are: this, that, these, those, which, who, whose, and everything else that refers to something else without explicitly naming it.
 - Make sure it is always clear what these words refer to.

Example:

Unclear: In the *Republic*, Socrates sees narration and imitation as two modes found in the epic. **This** is different for Aristotle. (It's unclear what *this* is.)

Better: In the *Republic*, Socrates sees narration and imitation as two modes found in the epic. For Aristotle, however, narration may be a form of imitation rather than a different mode.

Editing, cont.

If you're interested in the finer points of style, try checking out a style manual. Garner's *Modern American Usage* and Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* are classics. These will contain entries for most imaginable subjects.