

HOW TO WRITE AN ACADEMIC PAPER

It can be daunting to start writing an academic paper, whether you know what you want to say or not. However, the following tips should help you in tackling the major hurdles you may face.

For an academic paper, you're usually expected to write somewhere between 10 and 20 pages. What an academic paper is *not* is a mini-thesis. Therefore, don't follow the main layout of a thesis, e.g., including an abstract, a methodology and a results section. If you're writing a report on an experiment you carried out then, of course, the last two sections – at least – are required. But, for a discussion paper based on secondary source material, they're not. However, you should always check with your professor or supervisor first to ascertain exactly what it is they're expecting from you.

For more information on different styles of academic writing, have a look at “**An overview of the main academic writing types**” in this series.

■ Understand your brief

First things first: know what your professor or lecturer wants from you. This may seem obvious, but it's very easy to end up on a tangent when you're unsure of exactly what's being asked. Different professors or lecturers will, undoubtedly, appreciate an issue or a topic in different ways, so it's vital from the off-set that you comprehend specifically what their angle is. For more guidance on understanding your academic paper question, check out “**Getting started: understanding the question and note-taking**” in this series.

■ Choose your referencing software

Before you start writing, get your referencing software sorted out. This will save you a lot of time in the long-run. There's nothing worse when writing than having to try and find sources you forgot to record at the start. This kind of software is a fantastic asset, so make sure you take advantage of it. For more information on referencing software, have a look at “**How to reference**” in this series.

■ Plan out your structure

This is possibly the hardest part. It may even feel like a waste of time when all you want to do is get some words down. However, once you have the basic skeleton of your paper, all you have to do is flesh it out. The outline doesn't have to be very detailed – you might be a writer who only requires a very basic plan – just decide what works best for you.

The *fundamental* layout of an academic paper is:

- ▶ introduction
- ▶ main body

▶ conclusion

As previously stated, unless specified by your professor or lecturer, you don't need to include elements like an abstract: this is more for longer pieces of writing like theses. Your main aim in a seminar paper is to provide arguments and counterarguments to the topic in question.

Using your notes, you can work out headings and sub-headings (see “**Getting started: understanding the question and note-taking**” for further guidance). You can then group your major and minor points accordingly. Then use these bullet points to create your overall outline. Always remember to keep your essay topic in mind and ask yourself: do these points support my topic area/question?

Creating a structure can be time consuming; however, once you've figured it out, it will, in fact, save you time in the long run by helping to keep you focused.

■ Writing the introduction

As its name suggests, the introduction is the part in which you introduce your reader to the subject you'll be discussing. Setting the overall direction at the beginning of your paper will allow you to lead your reader smoothly to your conclusion, and give them the motivation to want to do so in the first place.

First of all, you need to grab your reader's attention. Ways in which you can achieve this include starting with:

- ▶ a key fact
- ▶ a powerful image
- ▶ a quotation
- ▶ an anecdote
- ▶ a counterargument

This is your “**hook**” **sentence**, so make it interesting. Just be sure that what you choose is relevant to your topic. And don't jump straight in with your main argument: you want to build up to this.

The most important role of the introduction is letting your reader know what the topic of your essay will be. You can achieve this by providing the **context or background of your topic** so that your reader can get an understanding of how it fits within the grander scheme of things. It's like building a frame in which your topic sits. Through this, you can also justify why your topic is worth looking into in depth. Be careful not to go into *too* much detail: you only need to provide an **overview**.

With your introduction you should also make sure that your reader knows what the **central question or problem** is. Again, only provide an **overview of the main points**. You should also put forward your **main argument – your hypothesis**. This is what your introduction was building up to, so it's important that you state this coherently.

Once you've presented your main argument, you can provide a **brief outline** of your paper. This gives your reader a general idea of what to expect. The last sentence of your essay should introduce the next section so that your reader moves seamlessly into the body of your paper.

To summarize, the overall layout of your introduction should be as follows:

- ▶ hook sentence
- ▶ state the context
- ▶ state the central problem and main points
- ▶ state your hypothesis or main argument
- ▶ provide the overall layout of your paper

Your introduction shouldn't be too long. However, it should be proportional to the whole of your paper. For instance, if your limit is 15 pages, then stick to no more than one page or so.

The introduction is the first part of your seminar paper, but it doesn't necessarily have to be the first part you write. Many people find it easier to write it at the end, once they know exactly what it is they're introducing. However, it can be useful to get something down on paper if only to help you focus. Plus, if time runs out faster than you'd expected – as it often does – at least you have a rough draft completed.

■ Writing the body paragraphs

The body of your essay is where you discuss your main arguments. The general way to structure your arguments is to use your strongest or most significant first. However, this depends on your topic: it might make more sense to lay them out chronologically instead.

As well as arguments for your hypothesis, you should include **counterarguments**. For more information on writing counterarguments, read the paper in this series entitled "**How to write a counterargument**".

The most important aspect to bear in mind is that the sections that make up the body of your essay have a **common thread** to them: you can't view them as separate entities in themselves. You need to lead your reader through your mind process – they need to be able to understand why you argue as you do –, therefore, only use relevant examples.

For guidance on constructing paragraphs and their main components, have a look at "**How to write paragraphs**" in this series.

■ Writing the conclusion

Your conclusion is, in a sense, the most important part of your paper: this is the last chance you have to get your reader to understand – if not agree with – the standpoint you've taken throughout your paper.

Bring together the main concepts you discussed: don't simply summarize them. Remind your reader of your main hypothesis. Don't be tempted to add any new information. Your conclusion shouldn't include any citations either, only your own interpretations and analysis.

You should also **demonstrate the importance of your findings**: what do they add to the wider context you described in your introduction? Do they fill a knowledge gap?

As with your hook sentence, end your paper with a **strong concluding statement**. This could be by showing how your findings are significant. Another way is to relate your conclusion to your introduction.

To summarize, the main parts of your conclusion should be:

- ▶ reiterate your problem statement and hypothesis
- ▶ being together the main ideas and concepts
- ▶ end with a concluding statement

■ **Revising and editing (and re-editing)**

You need to view revising and editing as part of the overall writing process (i.e., not an additional task if you happen to have extra time remaining). Writing as much as possible until you reach your deadline is not advisable: you should give yourself time to read through (and re-read) what you've written.

Revising your work is more than simply proofreading for grammatical errors and spelling mistakes: it's about revamping your first draft into a new and improved paper. As you look through your work, ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ Did you answer what was asked?
- ▶ Is the focus of your research clear?
- ▶ Have you properly introduced and explained all the concepts and theories you discussed?
- ▶ Are all your arguments sound?
- ▶ Could someone use a counterargument against any of the points you've made?
- ▶ Have you included enough sources to support your arguments?
- ▶ Have you used the appropriate concepts, theories and terminology?
- ▶ Have you included enough of your *own* original thought and ideas?
- ▶ Are your sentences clear? Do you need to include more/less words?
- ▶ Have you made clear where you've directly quoted a source?
- ▶ Are all your sources properly cited?

Some additional tips to revising your work include:

- ▶ **Print out your work.** Reading from a paper version can help you to spot mistakes that you may have missed on the screen.
- ▶ **Read aloud.** Of course, this is more advisable if you're in the comfort of your own home (fellow students in the library may not appreciate it). Check the flow and meaning of your sentences and paragraphs.
- ▶ **Get feedback from your peers, friends and family.**
- ▶ **Re-check the paper requirements** and, if possible, have a look over the grading criteria.

Once you've revised your paper and are pleased with the overall content, you can **edit** your work. Editing aims to make your writing more concise, and easier to follow and understand. There are a number of issues that you may come across while attempting to edit your work. Below are a few of the most common ones.

- ▶ **Wordiness:** do you need four sentences to describe a concept, or could you only use one? This issue is dealt with in more detail in "**How to write concisely**" in this series.

- ▶ **Repetition:** by reading through your paper in one go, you should be able to see if you repeat any ideas. Consolidate or delete sections in which you repeat yourself.
- ▶ **Word choice:** ask yourself whether you've chosen the best word to convey your message. Could you find one which is more concise?
- ▶ **Sentence structure:** read through each sentence carefully and consider whether it's well-constructed and comprehensive. Does it clearly state what you intended it to?
- ▶ **Don't only depend on the spell/grammar checker:** use your own acumen to decide if a sentence states what you want it to.

Ideally, you should give yourself enough time to forget about at least some of the contents of your paper before you revise and edit it. If you read it straight after you've finished writing it, then you're still too involved in the content and have no chance in appreciating it as a reader might, and, most importantly, less chance in spotting any mistakes.

■ Proofreading

The final stage is **proofreading** your paper. This is where you look for any grammatical, spelling and formatting mistakes.

- ▶ As with revising, it's advisable to abstain from looking at your work for at least 24 hours.
- ▶ Again, print out your work and read through a paper copy.
- ▶ Use a pen to point out each word to keep you focused, and think about each sentence carefully, bearing in mind grammar, punctuation, spelling and meaning.
- ▶ It can help to read from the last sentence to the first!

Once you've corrected any mistakes, print out the new version and proofread it again! This will definitely require time management, but – as with revising and editing – you should regard proofreading as part of the overall writing process.

■ Writing tips

- ▶ **Read and write/type at the same time.** Don't find yourself reading and reading without getting anything down on paper.
- ▶ **Don't be ambiguous** when you explain something. In other words, explain ideas and concepts clearly, making sure that there's no possible double meaning in your explanations. This may mean that you need to use three sentences instead of two.
- ▶ Make sure you **use the words with the correct meaning.** It can be tempting to look up synonyms in the thesaurus in order to vary your vocabulary, but make sure that you use the dictionary to double check what a new word means.
- ▶ **Avoid clichés and slang.** You're writing an academic paper, therefore, you should only use formal language. See "**Academic writing style tips**" in this series for more information.

- ▶ **Avoid personal pronouns**, i.e., “I”, “my”, “me”. This will help make your writing sound more objective. For more guidance on this issue, have a look at “**Active versus passive voice**” in this series.
- ▶ There’s no longer any excuse for **spelling mistakes**. Whatever software you use to compose your essay, they’ll be a spell checker. *Always* make sure you check your spelling before you submit your work. However, *do not* rely on it exclusively. Thanks to the autocorrect function, you may not notice that the word you wanted has been replaced by another word – spell check won’t mark these as errors.
- ▶ **Consistency** is also very important. This refers to:
 - how you choose to format your headings
 - the font you use and the size (for the main text and for headings)
 - whether you use US or UK English spellingBeing consistent may feel like additional work, but, if you’re hoping to get published one day, you’ll be expected to pay attention to details like this.
- ▶ Back up your arguments using a range of **sources**. This is an academic piece of writing and so you’ll be expected to use academic sources. See “**Sourcing academic materials**” in this series for more guidance.

■ Formatting tips

These are only *general* formatting tips. Make sure that you follow any specific guidelines provided by your professor or supervisor.

- ▶ Include a **cover page** that at least states the title of your paper, your name, your professor’s or lecturer’s name, the name of your course, and the deadline date.
- ▶ If you decide to use **tables and/or figures**, make sure they’re relevant to your topic. In other words: don’t use them as space fillers.
- ▶ Don’t forget to add **page numbers**. If you have time, also consider adding a header. This can simply include your name and the title of your essay.
- ▶ Unless instructed otherwise, **double space** your text (or at least use 1.5 spacing).
- ▶ Use **twelve-point size** for your text. And stick to fonts like **Times New Roman** or **Arial**.
- ▶ **Justify** or **align your text to the left** (apart from headings).
- ▶ Unless instructed otherwise, use a **paper clip or a plastic folder** to bind your pages. Avoid stapling.
- ▶ **Give yourself time** to properly format your paper (it can take longer than you think it will).