

Advice On Writing Seminar Papers

In this class our primary focus will be on writing thesis-driven analytical essays. The best way to develop one's ability to write these essays is to write them and receive feedback. This document is meant to be an aid to this process and a supplement to the resources of the writing center.

Topic

The topic of a paper is the subject matter it concerns. Paper topics should relate directly to one or more texts from the course. For example, the topic might be the temptation in the Garden of Eden. It is usually helpful to decide on the topic you are writing about before you decide what your thesis will be. Your writing will explore different positions and ideas. Your writing about these things will often lead you to the articulation of your thesis.

Specific paper topics are not assigned in this course. Formulating your own topic helps sharpen your sense of what can be accomplished in a given amount of space. It more often happens that students in FYS pick a topic that is too broad than a topic that is too narrow. It can be surprising how sharply focused a 5-page essay must be. The example from the previous paragraph is, in fact, too broad. A more appropriate topic would be to look at the relative faults of Adam and Eve in relation to the temptation. Sometimes, as you write, you realize that there are more nuances in the topic area than you thought. This gives you the opportunity to sharpen your focus still further, say by looking at the way that Adam and Eve each relate to God in their respective roles in the temptation.

Thesis

Your paper's thesis is the specific claim that you are defending. Your thesis should be *interesting*. What this means is that a reasonable, informed person might disagree with you. Your thesis needs to be tailored to the length of the paper. It would be implausible to claim that you have proven the immortality of the soul in a 5-page paper. It would be more plausible to claim that you have refute one objection to Plato's argument for immortality based on opposites.

Evidence and analysis

Your main objective as a writer is to support your thesis with evidence. Evidence can take the form of reference to texts and analytical reasoning. You should avoid "proof-texting," the uncritical use of a quotation as evidence for your position. Always discuss the reasons why the passage to which you are referring supports your position. If there are other ways the passage might be interpreted, acknowledge this and give the reader reasons to prefer your analysis of the passage. In explaining your reasoning to the reader, explicitly describe all of the logical steps that you are taking.

A highly effective way to increase the analytical content of your papers is to consider objections to your position and reply to them. This will make your writing more persuasive to the reader and give you the opportunity to engage in rigorous critique of your own position. It may sometimes happen that you think of an objection to your position that makes you think your position is wrong. Do not despair! If you are convinced that your previous position was wrong, you can simply change your thesis ("Someone might try to argue that p. However, this argument is vulnerable to the following objection..."). Another possibility is that you are unable to think of a persuasive reply, but you do not want to relinquish your position. It is appropriate to raise an objection to a position you hold without being able to reply ("For those who want to assert p, the following objection must be confronted."). Never respond to this situation by simply not mentioning the objection! Your reader

may think of it.

Note that considering objections to a position makes it much easier to write about an author with whom you agree. It allows you to strengthen that author's position by presenting solutions to objections that have been or might be made against the position.

Sources

The main argument of your paper should be *original*. This doesn't mean "original in the history of human thought," but rather "original to you based on what you have read." This means that the more external sources that you read, the more difficult it will be to generate a convincing argument. For this reason, you are encouraged to seek out peer-reviewed external sources minimally if at all at the beginning of the semester. As the semester goes on, you may choose to look at more sources, keeping in mind that a five-page paper cannot deal with very many texts. Please consult with me if you have any questions about what an appropriate external source would be for your chosen topic. All sources used -- including texts from the class -- should be appropriately documented (no footnotes, please).

When presenting someone else's argument, interpret her position so that it makes the most sense that it can. This is not to be nice. It is in your best interest: for if your interpretation is not the strongest possible, your criticisms might be easily avoided by a stronger interpretation.

Audience

The audience of your paper is your intelligent roommate who is not in the class. Thus your paper should be intelligible to someone who has not done the reading for the course.

Introductions

Your introduction should give a brief explanation of the topic you will be examining and state your thesis. It can be helpful to provide some clues about the particular direction you'll be taking in your argument. An introduction needn't do more than this. In particular, your introduction doesn't need to convince the reader that the topic material is interesting. We can assume that your title, explanation of the topic, and thesis statement will make your paper interesting to anyone who is disposed to be interested by it.

Conclusions

If you haven't stated, developed and argued for your position by now, it's too late. But be sure to wrap up: remind the reader where you've been, and perhaps suggest where things might go from here. To keep things interesting, you might want to summarize from a fresh perspective, or emphasize a theme you haven't explicitly treated in the main body of your paper.

Some notes on style

It is possible to write serious academic prose cleanly and crisply. You may use "I," "you," and contractions, and you may use simple diction and examples. The goal in our writing is not always to write like the authors we are reading.

One of the most important aspects of style is *explicitness*. Explicitness is *saying exactly what you mean*; and saying exactly what you mean involves thinking about what *every word* means. This may sound simple, but it is actually quite difficult. After you have finished your first draft, look for all the passages that might be misinterpreted and clarify them.

Every paragraph should be focused on a central idea. It is almost always helpful to mention this idea in the first sentence. If you are having trouble writing a substantive paragraph, refrain from adding new ideas to the paragraph. Instead, increase the depth of your analysis and be more explicit in your explanations regarding the original idea.

Once every paragraph contains a single idea, you can organize your paper by ensuring that the ideas of each successive paragraph flow together and that the overall structure of ideas supports your thesis in a logical way.

When you use technical vocabulary, let the reader know precisely what these terms mean. Once you define a word, stick with it -- don't use synonyms, because this reduces clarity.

Don't stray from the topic in order to fill up space (or for any other reason). If you are having trouble filling up space, explain more and analyze more. To get started on this, you can do some response journal-style brainstorming.

Addition by subtraction: sometimes the most effective editing involves deletion. If there's a way to say something in less space, do it!