

A Writing Guide for First Years

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GUIDE INTRODUCTION

Entering college is an enormous transition. In addition to lugging oversized suitcases and plastic bins up dormitory stairs, adjusting to dining hall food, and reconfiguring your bedtime to between 1:00 a.m. and 3:30 a.m., you must also rise to new academic standards. This might include getting accustomed to reading 150 pages in one night, learning to study for three consecutive exams, or figuring out how to stay calm when a presentation, a lab report, and reading response questions are all due on the same day.

While academic success in college is contingent upon many varied skills such as critical thinking, time management, self-discipline, and communication, the ability to write well is certainly one of the most important skills – both in college and later in life. Writing well essentially means that you can communicate clearly and concisely through essays, proposals, reading response questions, lab reports, and research papers. It is important that college students are able to produce these varied forms of writing at a high quality, relatively quickly, and without undue stress.

Trinity has recognized this importance in recent years and committed itself to improving student writing in three main ways: the first year seminar program, the wide offering of “Rhetoric 101” classes, and the Writing Center. This guide is designed to supplement the support that you receive on writing from these resources and through individual meetings with professors, mentors, or teacher advisors. It can help you start an essay, help you with specific features of an essay, or help you self-edit an essay. It has sections about formatting, writing introductions and conclusions, developing a thesis, and some other resources to aid you in the writing process. I developed this guide through my personal experience as a college writer and Writing Associate, and through my belief in and appreciation of the power of writing.

FORMATTING AN ESSAY

Whenever you turn in an essay, you take care to ensure that it is not wrinkled or stained and that it is stapled nicely. You should extend that same attention to the finer details an essay's appearance: the formatting. After a professor pulls an essay out of a stack, he or she is likely to form an immediate opinion based on how it looks. Is the font not distracting? Are the margins and spacing reasonable? Though this is more important to some professors than others, it is always better to err on the side of caution in terms of formatting so that the professor's first impression of your paper is either neutral or positive rather than negative.

Although there is no ultimate way to format your papers, here is a template you can use to get started if you are unsure.

Font and spacing: Times New Roman, Garmond, or Cambria are the most standard fonts used in college writing. Unless otherwise instructed, double space text (except block quotations), remove extra spaces before and after paragraphs, indent all new paragraphs using the Tab key, only use one space between periods and the next sentence, and use 12-point font.

Margins: 1-inch margins on all sides are the most standard, although the using up to 1.25 along the sides is also acceptable (this is usually the default in Microsoft Word).

First page heading: Double space, place on the left side of the paper, and include the student's name, the professor, the class, and the due date of the assignment in full (month, day, year). For example:

John Kim
Professor O'Donnell
Writing 101
January 1, 2015

*This format is standard unless the professor requires a title page.

Title: In The title of an essay should be aligned center and in the same font and size as the rest of the paper. It should not be italicized, underlined, in boldface, or in quotation marks. Capitalize words all key words in the title and all longer than four letters.

For example:

Unprecedented Growth in Africa in the 21st Century
How and Why Cats are the most Superior Pets
Vermont: a Beautiful Escape from Suburban Monotony

*This format is standard unless the professor requires a title page.

Page headings: Although not always necessary, page headings are especially helpful in essays longer than three pages. They can be created easily in most word processing programs. Headings should be at the top of the page on the right side with the student's last name and the page number in Arabic numerals. Be sure that headings are the same font as the rest of the paper.

Section headings: Especially in longer essays, section headings can be an effective way to designate subject transitions. There is no one-way to format headings, but be sure that there is consistency among all headings in the paper. Capitalize words all key words in the section heading and all longer than four letters. Examples of style are:

Part 3: Food's effect on Psychological Wellbeing

Section One: Introduction to Mediterranean History

Conclusion: Why Deforestation Matters

WRITING AN INTRODUCTION

Writing the introduction to an essay can be the hardest part of the writing process for several reasons. Maybe you've been thinking about the essay in your head for so long that it is hard to finally get out on paper, maybe you feel a lot of pressure to make it amazing and clever, or maybe its difficult because you have no idea what you will write in the rest of your paper but feel that you have to start somewhere.

Regardless of whether you experience these challenges in writing an introduction, you should spend time making it a strong and welcoming start to your essay. This is because the introduction is the reader's first impression of the essay, it serves as a guide to the rest of the essay, and, ideally, the introduction will make readers want to continue reading the essay.

The following are some strategies for writing effective introductions:

- Start by thinking about the question you are trying to answer in your essay.
- Decide how general or broad your opening should be. Do you want to orient your reader through a broad anecdote and then focus in on the details later in the essay or do you want to hone in on specifics and then open up your topic?
- Don't be afraid to write a tentative introduction first and then change it later.
- Be straightforward and confident.
- Try something new and original.
- Open with an attention grabber.

While there are many ways to approach an introduction, there are also several approaches to avoid. In general, try not to open your essay by using a dictionary definition, by asking your reader a slew of questions, or by simply stating your thesis.

DEVELOPING A THESIS STATEMENT

In most traditional essays, the introduction paragraph will conclude with the thesis statement. Often called the most important element of an essay, the thesis statement tells the reader what the essay will be arguing. Ideally, a thesis is a single sentence that could be removed from your essay and stand alone as a compelling statement. Thesis statements should be concise, arguable, and significant. A good thesis serves as a road map to the rest of the paper as your main points flow from and support of the thesis statement's argument.

What kind of thesis you write will depend on what kind of essay you have been assigned. There are three main kinds of essays: analytical essays, expository essays, and argumentative essays. An analytical essay breaks down an issue or an idea to an audience, often with evaluation. An expository essay explains something to an audience. An argumentative paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim through evidence, this kind of paper is trying to convince the audience of the claim's validity.

To develop a thesis for any of these kinds of essays, try to plan through outlining and making simple notes to yourself and then condense these ideas into a single sentence that summarizes your argument. Another strategy is to ask yourself what would you say to someone who wants to know what you are writing about. This will likely give you at least a draft of a thesis to work with. Don't be afraid to try many different theses out. Even if they are just marginally different in terms of expression, the way a thesis is worded is more important than any other single sentence of your essay.

To test whether or not your thesis is strong, try asking yourself the following questions.

- Do I answer the original question of the assignment?
- Have I taken a position that others might challenge or oppose?

- Is my thesis statement specific enough? If your thesis contains words like “good” or “successful,” see if you could be more specific.
- Does my thesis pass the “So what?” test? If a reader’s first response to hearing your thesis is, “So what?” then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.
- Does my essay support my thesis specifically and without wandering? It’s okay to change your working thesis to reflect things you have figured out in the course of writing your paper.

To get a better sense of what a “strong” thesis is, compare and contrast the following examples.

Weak: The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different.

Strong: While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression in the Civil War, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.

Weak: Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel.

Strong: Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain’s Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave “civilized” society and go back to nature.

WRITING A CONCLUSION

After toiling over an introduction, refining a thesis for hours, and laboriously fleshing out body paragraphs, you still have to write the conclusion of the essay. Just like beginning the essay can be hard, ending an essay can be equally challenging. Maybe you feel like you've said so much and have no idea how to end it appropriately or maybe you feel a lot of pressure to leave a lasting impression on your reader. Whether you experience these pressures or not, conclusions are crucial parts of an essay. Your reader has made it through your entire argument and now has to transition out of this essay-world that you have created for them. The conclusion should guide them back to real life while reiterating your argument in a subtle and original way.

The following are some strategies or kinds of conclusions you might try:

- Return to the theme or themes in the introduction.
- Include a provocative insight or quotation from research or reading you did for the paper.
- Propose a course of action, a solution to an issue, or questions for further study.
- Point to broader implications.
- Ask yourself, "so what?" The answer to this question will give you some reasons why your argument should matter to the reader.

There are many ways to approach a conclusion and just like with introductions, there are also some techniques to avoid:

- Using phrases such as "in conclusion," "in summary," or "in closing."
- Stating your thesis in the conclusion for the first time.
- Introducing a brand new idea or subtopic in your thesis.
- Rephrasing the thesis statement without any expansion or elaboration.
- Making a sentimental, emotional appeal that is out of character with the rest of an essay.
- Including evidence (quotations, statistics, etc.) that should be in the body of the paper.

CITATIONS

The consultation of outside sources is an essential part of almost any essay written in college. Whether you are writing a literary analysis or a long-term research paper, it is likely that you will have to reference, quote, and cite frequently in your work. Aside from usually being required by professors and an excellent way to support your argument, citations are absolutely essential for a very serious reason: plagiarism. Plagiarism is when you use someone else's words or ideas without giving them credit. In the intellectual world it is a form of theft and can result in serious consequences at most academic institutions. Here are some guidelines for when to cite material so as to avoid plagiarizing.

- In direct quotations.
- To re-express someone else's point using different words (paraphrasing).
- When you use key words from a text that you have consulted in writing the essay.
- In reference to historical, statistical, or scientific facts.
- In reference to graphs, drawings, or other information and data.
- When you refer to articles or studies

You do not need to cite proverbs, axioms, sayings, well-known quotations, or common knowledge. If you are confused about what is or isn't plagiarism, it is important that you use the resources at your disposal such as reliable academic sites (like those listed below and at the end of the guide) or teacher assistants who can help you.

Once you have decided what needs to be attributed, you must still do the actual citing. It is first necessary to know what style your professor has assigned (MLA, APA, and Chicago are the most common style) and then how to create appropriately formatted in-text citations and reference lists, bibliographies, or works cited. This is when resources such as the OWL (Online

Writing Lab) at Purdue are helpful as it gives detailed descriptions and also examples of almost any citation situation possible.

To actually generate citations there are two main options. You can hand-cite by following examples or you can use a citation generator. Some of these services online (such as easybib.com) are more reliable than others. One of the best generators is RefWorks, which every Trinity student has an account with through the library. RefWorks is especially helpful for four reasons: you can store all of your citations there indefinitely through your account and create folders to contain the citations for different projects, most academic journals found online have an automatic export to RefWorks feature that puts all the information into your account with two simple clicks, RefWorks can connect to Microsoft Word and format your in-text citations for you as you are working on a draft, and it can reconfigure your citations itself depending on what style you need.

The three main citation styles:

APA, the American Psychological Association style, is most commonly used to cite sources within the social sciences such as psychology, education, or urban studies.

MLA, the Modern Language Association style, is most widely used for subjects within the humanities such as English or history.

Chicago Style is for any academic subject and is often selected based on the personal preference of professors.

Although many students save citations until last when writing essays, they are truly easiest when done as you write. Get into the habit of using the rule, “cite as you write,” to save you time at the end of the essay writing process and from facing dire consequences if you cite incorrectly because you are rushing or fail to cite at all.

Content for this section was adapted from http://www2.lib.unc.edu/instruct/citations/index.html?section=why_we_cite

QUICK TIPS FOR COLLEGE ESSAY WRITING

- When in doubt about formatting, length, distribution of material, citations, or the assignment itself, never feel embarrassed about asking your professor, mentor, or teacher advisor.
- Try making an outline before writing the essay, even if it changes later.
- If you experience difficulty in maintaining clear structure within body paragraphs, be sure that you are using topic sentences to start every paragraph. Write them ahead of time in sequence within your outline. Topic sentences should serve as mini-introductions to each point in the essay and should include key language from the introduction or thesis.
- Pay attention to redundancy. Check that you aren't saying with five sentences what could be said with two.
- Don't be afraid to try something new. If a sentence isn't going well make a space in the document and try it over. If the second try comes out better simply delete what is below and move on. Similarly, copy and paste a paragraph pesky paragraphs to the bottom of a document and try them over again. With this technique you are able to start fresh without losing your work or original idea.
- After writing your essay, go back and make sure that the structure is clear and makes sense in terms of the order of points. This technique is sometimes called reverse outlining and can be very helpful for ensuring that you have stayed focused within body paragraphs and that all material in the essay is relevant to your argument.

A CHECKLIST FOR ESSAYS

- Is my essay formatted consistently and appropriately?
- Do I have an introduction?
- Is my introduction intriguing, informative, and does it clearly lead to the rest of my essay?
- Does my introduction include an indication of the main points of my essay using key language that will recur later on?
- Do I have a thesis?
- Is my thesis concise, significant, and contestable?
- Is everything that comes after my thesis directly relevant to it?
- Are my body paragraphs arranged in the most logical sequence possible?
- Does each of my body paragraphs have a topic sentence?
- Do my topic sentences cue the reader to transitions and orient them in the new subject without diving straight into giving evidence in support of my argument?
- Do I wrap up each of my paragraphs neatly?
- Do I have a conclusion?
- Does my conclusion end my essay in a way that is relevant, answer or address any questions I raised previously, and prompt further thought
- Is my essay cited according to the assigned style?
- Do I use the word “I” to convey my position on an argument when I shouldn’t be designating my own opinion?
- Do I have a bibliography or works cited page?

FURTHER RESOURCES

For formatting:

http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/revising_the_introduction.htm#

APA: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

MLA: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

Chicago: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/01/>

For introductions:

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/introductions/>

http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/preparing_to_write_and_drafting.htm#

http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/revising_the_introduction.htm#

For thesis statements:

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/thesis-statements/>

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/1/>

For conclusions:

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/conclusions/>

http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/revising_the_introduction.htm#

Other useful tips:

https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/PDF/twelve_common_errors_uwmadison_writingcenter_rev_sept2012.pdf

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/685/>

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/writing-anxiety/>

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/should-i-use-i/>