Guide to Developing and Writing an Academic Paper

What Makes for a Good Scholarship?

Clear purpose: What work are you doing and why are you doing it? *What do you want to know? What do you want to do?*

Build on relevant theory. Learn the state of knowledge about your topic. What are the seminal books, primary journals, and conferences where new work is presented? Identify the experts in the field and speak to them.

Be organized: Develop systems to:
- record your work, thoughts and conversations
- track what you read (citation manager)
- store and organize your data

Get specific: What specific question(s) will you try to answer? What is your hypothesis? How will you test it? How will you know if you're right? How would you know if you're wrong?

Collect relevant data from a variety of sources
- What data would enable you to answer your question(s)?
- What data is available? How will you try to collect it?
- Can you *triangulate* (i.e., use several approaches to answer a given question, thus providing much more confidence in your findings)?

Before you begin to write:

Identify your *audience*. Who do you want to read the paper? Why would they be interested? (Rarely is your professor the actual audience; rather ...imagine your instructor as representing the actual audience whom you hope can benefit from what you have to say.

Think about your central question and thesis. What specifically do you hope your audience will know after having read your paper that they had not already known? (If you have more than one main idea, you probably need more than one paper.)

What Makes for a Good Academic Paper?

Good papers will provide strong, clear answers to all of these questions:

1. What problem have you analyzed and why should we be interested?

2. What are your findings?

3. How do you explain your findings? What evidence and theory has led you to your conclusions?

4. How do your findings and your analysis compare with received knowledge? Do your findings support, supplement, or contradict existing theory?

5. What does your analysis reveal that you had not known prior to the study and/or that readers would not have known before reading the paper?

Good papers help readers understand the answers to these questions through careful logic, organization, use of evidence, and clear, concise writing.

The **Levels of Development** chart on the next page provides a profile of various paper qualities and corresponding grades. The only paper grade that counts is the one that goes on the final version of the paper; you will have the opportunity to revise an assignment...

Developmental Rubric for Academic Papers

(Grade)	Argument / Purpose	Organization / Structure	Theory/ Data / Evidence	Writing Style
Exem-plary (A)	Reader comes away knowing something new and worthwhile. Value is palpable. Paper provides an unexpected insight and/or raises important, unanticipated questions. Argument is demonstrated compellingly and memorably	Main points clearly and conclusively demonstrate thesis, and are supported in turn by clear, sub-points. Every paragraph supports the main argument in a coherent way. Clear transitions/clean flow between paragraphs and sections.	Theoretically sound points and assertions supported by concrete evidence drawn from primary research or reliable, cited sources. Smooth back and forth between theory and data	Concise, precise paragraph and sentence constructions and word choice. Meaning consistently clear. Phrasing is strong and memorable.
Accom-plished (B+/ A-)	Purpose is clear and passes most "strong thesis" tests: ♦ Clearly, succinctly stated? ♦ Answers the question? ♦ Debatable? ♦ "So what?" ♦ "how and why?" ♦ Specificity?	Reasonably well organized, but argument may be incomplete, include tangential sections and paragraphs or fail to follow a consistent logic.	Some solid theory supported well by evidence, but not consistently achieved throughout the paper.	Generally readable, but may lack clarity or brevity, or may be weak in style or tone.
Devel-oping (B- /B)	Beginnings of a central topic and analysis, but though ideas and text may hint at a worthwhile argument, thesis and purpose are neither stated, nor apparent.	Organizational logic apparent, but with serious structure shortcomings in coherence, comprehensiveness, consistency or concision.	Some good data/ theory, but not enough. May include unsupported generalizations, or provide data without clarifying its significance.	Legibility compromised due to grammatical, typographical and word choice errors, mistakes, indirectness, redundancy, excessive wordiness,
Begin-ning (C)	A series of observations, quotes, or stories may be related, but author does not describe a central question or develop an analysis.	Structure is a series of related observations, without clear or explicit reason/logic for their presentation (may be symptomatic; without a well-framed argument, there's no path for evidence to follow)	Author tries to make general points and support them, but theory is weak, unclear or absent; evidence lacks specificity, aptness, vividness, sourcing or is misinterpreted.	Legibility difficult due to extensive errors in grammar, usage, spelling, and/or punctuation; nevertheless, with effort a reader may infer the writer's meaning.
No Credit (F)	Little evidence of converging on a central question or analysis	The reader cannot follow the line of thought. Paper lacks coherence in parts and whole.	No theory, no evidence or inapplicable evidence	Paper is incomprehensible due to constant and glaring errors.

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Paper Presentation Basics

Format

Name, Date, Title up front

Header or Footer with page number, title and version #

Margins *at least 1"* on all sides. Double space to leave room for comments, corrections and annotations.

Be kind to older eyes: Font size at least 11 points (12 better)

For longer reports, provide an *Abstract* and if there are multiple appendices, charts or tables, a *Table of Contents*

Use consistent heading styles; Large and/or bold for primary headings, not quite so large for secondary headings, etc…

Overview and Introduction

Your readers are busy; they need to be able to read your work quickly with the opportunity to delve greater in depth as their interest and time permits. Your introductory paragraph(s), should communicate why your reader should care about what you have to say, your principal findings and key points.

Structure and Text

The basic idea of a paper is straightforward. You develop and clearly state a *thesis* (e.g., the key to Sandler O'Neill resilience was moral purpose) and organize the entire body of the paper to explaining/demonstrating your thesis; elaborating on its meaning, and, to a lesser degree, exploring its significance

All papers have structure. Every section of your paper should coherently support the thesis in a way both you and your reader can explain. Sometimes you will want to make structure explicit through headers. In academics, it's particularly important to explain how you've come to know what you know, so commonly you'll want Theory/Background and Methods as well as main argument points.

Keep the material concise and flowing. Eliminate anything not directly relevant to making your thesis and key points.

Assertions and Evidence

All assertions should be supported by evidence: most convincingly these come from citations of rigorous research or primary data collected for the project – interview, observational, survey, archival, or quantitative measures. Examples from personal experience may also be used if clearly identified as such. Source data and additional elaboration should be put in appendices.

Figures, Photos, Charts, Tables and Appendices

Graphics can often effectively and efficiently communicate ideas in ways that words cannot. In such cases, use them!!

Appendices, charts, and tables must be labeled and explicitly referenced in the text. Include a key as necessary.

To ensure comprehensibility, try to make each graphic comprehensible as standalone items so that if a reader sees it out of context, they can still understand what you are trying to convey. Likewise, do your best to make text comprehensible independent of all graphics so as to help ensure clarity within the overall context.