

Writing a Term Paper

University professors vary considerably in what they expect from student term papers. The following notes are therefore intended to provide guidelines which can be adapted to fit the requirements of your course and instructor.

1. PAY ATTENTION TO THE SPECIFIC ASSIGNMENT

All term paper assignments are not the same. The nature of the assignment will differ across departments within your university, and across courses and instructors within departments. Therefore it is essential to pay close attention to the specific assignment. Do not assume that a paper format that has worked well for you in the past will necessarily work this time around. **Keep in mind that if your assignment is a 'critical article review' essay, your job is to assess a particular chapter, journal article, or text within the confines of sociological thought, so treat this general advice with care – not all of it is applicable in that case.**

2. GET AN EARLY START

The sooner you start on the paper assignment, the more likely you are to find research material. Library resources will invariably be strained towards the end of the term. If you give yourself enough lead time, useful material is likely to emerge from newspaper and magazine articles, from other sources, from conversations with friends, and from random thoughts and observations that you might have.

3. SOURCES

There are a number of leads that can be pursued in trying to locate research material for your paper. Use the suggested readings in this and other recent texts, and work backward from the footnotes. Use the subject guide or catalogue in your library. Use the Canadian Periodicals Index, and go through the recent and as yet unindexed issues of journals such as the Canadian Review of Sociology, Canadian Journal of Sociology, or American Review of Sociology (these are only some examples). Keep a close eye on authoritative websites (Rabble, Counterpunch, Socialist Register), newspapers (The Globe and Mail, The Guardian, The New York Times), or magazines Adbusters, Briarpatch, Canadian Dimension, This Magazine, The Walrus, or Toronto Life. When you find one useful source, plunder its footnotes and bibliography to form new leads.

4. DO NOT REINVENT THE WHEEL

Your paper should draw upon the existing social science literature; as a term paper in an introductory course can carry only a limited amount of original research. What counts is your ability to apply existing knowledge and theories to the particular subject under examination in your paper.

5. CREATE A MEMORY BANK

Set up a file folder or large envelope for each assignment you face during the term. Then, whenever you have a thought or insight into the assignment, or whenever you encounter a possible source of research material, jot it down on a piece of paper and file it away in the folder or envelope (you can do this electronically on a computer if you like). Whenever you encounter something that might be useful, be it

in a textbook, website, journal article or newspaper, take notes (including the source of the information) and file them away. All the relevant material for each assignment will then be gathered together in one place, ready to be dumped out on your desk when the writing begins. Less material will be lost from a paper or computer memory than from a mental one.

6. RESPECT DEADLINES AND PAGE LIMITS

Take deadlines seriously, and frame your assignment within the paper limits set by your instructor. After all, in the "real world" projects have to be done on time and within specified limits. If you are asked for a fifteen-page synopsis by Friday, your employer will not expect a thirty-page synopsis by the following Thursday.

7. WRITE AT LEAST TWO DRAFTS

Do not expect to produce a good paper on the first draft. Allow enough time that you can write a rough draft and let it sit for a few days. Then go through the draft as dispassionately as possible, pretending, if you like, that someone else wrote it. Rewrite the sections that are rough, add new material, and **correct problems of style, substance, and interpretation**. Remember that rewriting in the early stages often entails substantial reorganization of the material, not merely correcting spelling and grammatical errors. Writing is a cognitive process, a way of thinking about your material and discovering what you want to say. Therefore do not be surprised if your paper changes considerably from one draft to the next.

8. A RESEARCH PAPER IS NOT AN ESSAY

A research paper must do more than present your own viewpoint. It should explore a particular theme or question through a marshalling of the available evidence. While it is acceptable to be argumentative, you should not stray beyond the bounds of the existing evidence. The argument should be derived from the evidence, or at least supported by it, rather than an expression of one's own beliefs.

9. THE THEMATIC STRUCTURE

A good paper pursues an explicit theme or thesis. This should be laid out as early as possible, perhaps in the introductory paragraph. **The main body of the paper should then develop this thesis or theme, and the concluding paragraph should link back to the introductory paragraph.** There is, then, a circular structure to the paper: you state what it is you intend to do, you go out and do it, and then you conclude by summarizing what you did, answering the questions posed in your introductory paragraph.

10. PAY ATTENTION TO STYLE AND ORGANIZATION

In the famous words of Marshall McLuhan, "the medium is the message." How you communicate your ideas will have a critical impact on their reception. **Do not expect your instructor to sift through awkward sentences, indifferent organization, and a sloppy style searching for intellectual gold.** Good ideas poorly presented are indistinguishable from poor ideas poorly presented.

11. DO NOT RUSH TO THE ATTACK

It is relatively easy and at times satisfying to attack, to condemn and deplore. However, while a moralistic stance *may* enrich a paper, your primary task is to *understand* the phenomenon, event, or personality under investigation. Why did something happen? What were the alternatives? Why were some options pursued and others avoided? Once you understand the complexities of the issue, then and only then are you in a position to render some judgment.

12. AVOID LOADED WORDS

Be careful in your use of words like genocide, lie, murder, deceive, catastrophic, and disaster. Strong words in a research paper are analogous to swear words in more common discourse; if overused, they lose their impact. If you call something a disaster, be sure that you really mean a *disaster* and not merely an unfortunate or unpleasant event. Readers are more impressed by firm but *reasonable* statements supported by evidence than by fervently held beliefs expressed in highly charged language.

13. DO NOT PLAGIARIZE

To plagiarize means to pass off the words *or ideas of* others as your own. In many schools, plagiarism can lead to automatic failure and even expulsion. If you use the words of other writers, enclose them within quotation marks and provide their source in a footnote. If you paraphrase other writers, you must still indicate the source of the material. There is no problem in using the work of other people, and indeed this is what much of the research enterprise is all about—building upon an existing body of knowledge and insights. However, where the work of others is used, ***it must be acknowledged.***

14. PARAGRAPHING

A good paragraph has its own internal structure and coherency. It explores a single theme or issue, and **the break between paragraphs is used to signify a shift in analysis or emphasis.** (A good check on the coherence of a paragraph is to read the first and last sentences; they should make sense together and should contain the essence of the paragraph.) Be wary of very long paragraphs—I once received a paper with a paragraph that stretched over five and a half pages! Paragraphs of over a page in length suggest some indifference on the part of the writer to organization.

15. SUBHEADINGS

Subheadings can be used to impose an organizational structure upon your paper. **They break up the paper into more easily digested chunks, and convey the impression that you have paid attention to the structural form and coherency of your argument.** It is essential, however, to provide some transition between the sections of your paper. Subheadings emphasize points of transition; they do not provide a substitute for transitions in the body of your text.

(Adapted from: Roger Gibbins, 1990)