

GUIDELINES FOR PAPERS AND TAKE HOME ESSAYS

Before you start writing your paper:

- **Always write an outline before you start writing any essay or paper.** Plan your introductory paragraph to include your thesis or, if you are doing any take home papers or exams, a brief statement of your answer to the essay question. Your outline should list all the evidence you have gathered to support your answers. If you think your argument is controversial, you may want to include responses to possible objections in your essay.

The importance of well-organized writing:

- Part of your grade will be based on your ability to communicate your ideas in writing. Thus you must try and present your ideas in a well-organized manner. (Your degree of intelligence is irrelevant if you are unable to present your ideas in a manner that makes sense to others.) Your answer **MUST** respond to all parts of the question and give relevant details.
- Your paper should begin with an introduction (see above) and end with a concise conclusion that states your answer again and summarizes your evidence.

Some basic rules for writing history papers:

- **Don't use sources out of context.** For example, if you are writing about the status of blacks in America in the 19th century, your evidence must be from sources on blacks in America in the 19th century. A quotation about the status of blacks in the 20th century is not evidence for an argument about 19th century blacks, unless you want to compare the status of blacks in the two centuries. Likewise, if you are writing about the treatment of blacks in the 18th century when slavery was becoming part of American culture your evidence must be from sources about slavery in 18th century America...not in Africa in 1830, or America in 1930, and not about the treatment of slave owners in America. I know it seems like common sense; nevertheless, every year I get papers that just have no clue what they are writing about.
- **Distinguish between primary and secondary sources.** A **PRIMARY** source is an original document (such as Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation) or an eyewitness description of an event (a newspaper account of Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg Address). A **SECONDARY** source can be a summary of an original document written by someone who was not the author (an editor's introduction to a book on Lincoln), or a description of an event based on other people's reports about it (Burn's account of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address) is a secondary source if you are using it to draw conclusions about Lincoln's views on slavery, but it is a primary source if you are using it to find the text of the speech. **TEXTBOOKS** are generally tertiary sources – that is, much of the information in them is drawn from secondary sources.

- **Take a critical approach to your sources.** Who is the author? How old is the book or article? Does the information appear to be presented from a balanced perspective, or is there reason to believe it may be biased in some way? You should evaluate all sources (primary, secondary, tertiary) to determine the author's perspective before deciding whether or how to use them.
- **Define abstract concepts.** If you are dealing with an abstract concept, such as "identify," define what the concept means to you and how you will use it in your paper. Remember using things without explaining them has the same effect on research as fog on shipping. They are more dangerous as people are usually unaware of their existence. What is true for research is usually true for writing.
- **State your thesis and your evidence clearly.** Speaks for itself.

Length problems

- **Oh No!** You've finished writing your paper, and you think it's pretty good, but its **TOO SHORT!** What do you do? Make the font size bigger? Increase the margin width? Add some more quotes?

Don't bother. Any reasonable computer-literate teacher who has functioning eyeballs can tell a font size of 12 from 14, especially if he has just read ten papers in 12 and comes across one that looks markedly different. Ditto for two-inch margins

Also, adding possibly irrelevant information to a well written, well-organized paper can ruin it. If the paper says what you want it to say in 4 pages instead of 5 (at font size 12 with 1" margins), and it is a good paper, leave it alone. If the paper is only 2-3 pages long, however, you should reconsider your answer.

- **Oh No!** Your paper is **TOO LONG** 8 pages instead of 5! What do you do? Reduce the font size and the margin width?

Please stick to font size 12. Those of us who wear glasses might get headaches while reading in small font. I do not mind reading a few extra pages as long as they contain relevant material.

If your paper is more than two pages over the recommended length, reconsider your answer. Have you included any information that is unnecessary for your argument? Is your writing style overly wordy?

When you think you're finally done:

- Use the computer's spell checkers and grammar checkers. In this age of computer editing devices, some kinds of spelling and grammar errors are absolutely inexcusable.
- Re-read your paper to yourself at least once. Look for spelling errors that spell-checkers do not catch. Don't trust grammar checkers either; they are notoriously unreliable. Use them, but use with skepticism.
- Ask yourself while you're going over your paper whether the main ideas are clearly presented, whether you have included all the evidence you need to support your argument, and whether you could do anything to improve the flow of the argument, the transitions, or the sentence structure. Some people find it useful to read the paper out loud as if explaining to an audience.

- If you know that you have problems with spelling or grammar, or if you have read your paper and you are not sure that it will make sense to anyone other than you, ask someone else to check over it with you. Don't wait till the last minute for this help; it can be crucial to your finished paper.
- If you find something wrong, take the time to fix it. So it's 11:30 PM and your paper is due 2nd period...that gives you one class period to fix that spot on p.3 where you used "to" instead of "too," and that awkward sentence in your conclusion. A mature attitude toward editing all papers can significantly improve your grade.
- Finally, of course it helps if you avoid procrastinating and actually finish the paper before it is due.

The form of the finished paper

The physical form and appearance of your papers is important. The following are important parts of the appearance that you should keep in mind when writing ALL papers in this class.

- **DATE DUE:**

All papers will have a due date; your paper is due on that day. The **ONLY EXCEPTION** is a **ONE-CLASS** grace period if a personal emergency comes up then I will accept your paper with **NO PENALTY**, the next class meeting. **I WILL NOT ACCEPT ANY** paper after that.

- **THE TITLE PAGE**

ALL papers must have a title page with an **ORIGINAL** title centered in the page. With your name, homeroom, class period, date due, my name in lower right hand corner. Your name must also appear in the upper right hand corner of each page.

- **APPEARANCE**

The paper must be neatly typed, double spaced on white paper with a one-inch margin on top, bottom, and sides of each page.

Make sure you use a dark, clear ink (your ribbon, ink jet, or laser cartridge wore out is not an acceptable excuse). If it is hard to read your essay, it will also be hard to follow your argument.

All pages, except for the title page, should be numbered.

Use standard 10 to 12 point font. (10 to 12 characters per inch)

Use either **New Times Roman** or **Arial** font.

- **REFERENCES**

In any formal essay or research paper you must document the information you use in the writing of the paper. This is to let the reader know the sources of the information you use and is accomplished through the use of citations and a bibliography.

- **STAPLE** your paper in the upper left-hand corner. **NO TURNED CORNERS LOOSE PAPERS OR PAPER CLIPS.** So if you have no stapler in your house now is a good time to buy one.