

WRITING A PAPER or ESSAY

Your papers will be graded, in part, on your ability to convey ideas clearly and concisely. Please pay close attention to the style, organization, and details of your writing. The following may be helpful to review before you write your papers. If you have trouble with writing, talk to your professor. You are also invited to use the Writing Center (222 SSB). Appointments can be made online at <http://mywco.com/umsl>.

The Main Idea

What is the organizing idea, theme, or question for the paper? The main idea should be introduced *early*. It should be the thread around which you organize and structure the entire paper. Often the main idea does not become clear until you begin writing. This process makes it essential to re-draft the paper at least twice.

For example, your main idea may be that there is disproportionate focus given to sheltering the homeless and not enough emphasis given to preventing homelessness. Your paper should present the idea and provide evidence. Or, in another example, your main point might be that the communities you observed for class seem to have different standards of living. Some areas have very expensive housing; another area has modest homes and a few run-down apartment houses. If this is your theme, build your paper around it. There are other differences you also noticed. Access to public services are different too. Commerce is different in the two areas. This way your paper begins to build on a theme. It will keep your reader engaged.

Note: Every paper should also have a title and it should reflect the main idea

Outline

Follow an outline when you write. It need not be extensive, but it is an essential way to get (and stay) organized.

Begin Writing

Don't worry if it isn't perfect the first time around. Remember, writing is linear. Write about one thing at a time, then go on to the next point.

Subheadings help orient the reader and divide the major points in the paper. They sometimes help writers keep on track. You can always omit subheadings later if you (or your professor) don't like them.

Paragraphs are effective if it says what it is about (topic sentence), and then discusses. Don't cram more than one main idea into a paragraph. Your reader does not know what you are thinking; help her along.

Evidence

Make sure to justify assertions. The evidence may include personal observations, but be sure to say this. Provide evidence from your own research and from other scholars/writers to justify the claims.

Citations

Most instructors prefer endnotes (but check with each one). Cite the sources in the text of the paper (author last name, date of publication, and page number – see ASA style). These refer to full citations in the bibliography or reference section at the end.

As a general rule, cite the source if it is someone else's idea or work that you are using. Otherwise you may be accused of plagiarism, which is a punishable offense at institutions of higher education (See UMSL Bulletin under Student Conduct and Title IX, <http://bulletin.umsl.edu/studentconduct/>).

Quotations: When direct quotations add *pizzazz* to a paper; they are a welcome addition. But *don't use them* when they simply refer to the obvious, or cite facts and figures. In such instances, *summarize in your own words* and cite the original source.

Bibliography/References

For a *research* paper, you *must* have a bibliography. Use APA style.

Re-write, Re-write, and Then Proofread

It is best to re-read a day or two after the first draft is written. Watch sentence structure, tenses, and pronouns. Re-organize the paper when necessary. This is often a good time to draft a new and better introduction and conclusion.

Remember it is crucial to be *accurate*, *precise*, and *honest*. It is fantastic if you can also be original, creative, and insightful.

Proofread. It is better to correct a few mistakes by hand than to turn in a paper with typos.

Remember the difference between *their* and *there* and *they're*. *It's* means *it is*, not *its*.

In sum, writing is about communicating ideas to a reader. After doing research and thinking about a topic, write with care. Your reader may know very little about the topic and will look forward to learning something new and interesting. Try to make it worth their while!