

Advice on Writing Academic Papers

Before you write:

- As you read the sources you will be using for your paper, take notes on the main ideas (I find it helpful to jot down notes on index cards, along with an author's last name, page #, and a general subject heading). Not only will your notes make writing the paper easier, taking notes on what you read is a good way to check for understanding. In other words, if you read a page or two and are unable to identify and sum up the main idea(s), it's a sign that you may not have understood what you read (in that case, you need to go back and reread the material).
- If there is a line or passage that you find particularly well-said or compelling, write it down in your notes as a quotation to use for your paper (again, make sure you make a note of the author and page #, so you can cite your source when you write your paper).
- Before you write, look over your notes. Organize your notes according to main ideas (if you used index cards, group the cards according to topic). Next, consider how these main ideas fit together. Arrange your ideas in a logical sequence.

When you write:

- Do not write with your books/sources open in front of you. Only use your notes. If you find it impossible to write without the book in front of you, this indicates you don't understand the material. Writing without your books/sources in front of you also helps ensure you don't plagiarize.
- Strive for a style that is simple and straightforward. Delete unnecessary words—if a word does not significantly add to the meaning of a sentence, get rid of it!
- When possible, use the active voice rather than the passive voice. For example, instead of "It was said by Smith that. . ." write "Smith said. . ."

After you write (and before you write the final draft):

- Read your first draft out-loud to yourself. Pay attention to clarity and organization. Listen for awkward-sounding sentences. The paper should flow, with clear and logical transitions between points and ideas. Re-write whatever sounds awkward or unclear. If necessary, rearrange and/or add sentences and passages to make an idea clearer or to make a transition between ideas clearer.