Student Resources Worksheets

# Ten Rules (and Then Some) to Write By

For the research paper, but also applies to various writing assignments. Remember: you can think of each part of a long paper as a stand-alone essay and apply the 10 Rules+ each time you write a portion

1. **Never Plagiarize**! Realize that if you use someone else’s words, they must be in quotes, even if you have an in-text citation or a footnote. You also use a citation when you use another’s ideas. Also understand faculty member can easily spot someone else’s words. So, when you paraphrase, you must **not** be looking at the text you are citing. Moreover, you’re best off trying to paraphrase a large chunk of text into a much smaller number of words.
2. **Your paper (or section) can only be as good as your thesis is**. What are you contending? Is this something a lot of people care about and debate? If your thesis is “lame” (not important or of interest to others, not related to the question asked, or unclear), the paper won’t earn a good grade. And, if you supposed to be answering a direct question, your thesis must answer that query specifically. So, spend a lot of time finding an interesting thesis by developing a good answer to your question and looking closely at the readings and research you have to help you arrive at that response. Talk to your professor for help, too, if you are having trouble or doubts, *but only after you have done some working and thinking*. (Note that if you’re writing your paper in sections, each section has a kind of a thesis that answers the question of that part of the paper and is related to or necessary for asserting the thesis of the whole.) Your thesis always belongs in your introduction (of the section or the introduction of the whole paper).
3. **Your paper can only be as good as the quality of your linkages to your course materials and (when relevant) your research**. In Political Science, you are developing arguments based on concepts, theories, and ideas that others have advanced and that you thoughtfully consider. You can’t write a good essay or research paper if you haven’t adequately reflected on your readings or performed enough research. If your professor tells you to read Author X, then read her work! Also, use existing materials to help you find other important voices. While we want you to be creative, we do not want “creative writing” (making information and concepts up as you go). Moreover, to learn and then bolster your arguments you need to find others who agree with you as well as information that illustrates your points. Be sure to link your work to other sources of information, not simply what you know as an informed citizen. While your faculty member might be happy that you are informed, we are impressed when you show us that you have mastered the material of the course and, when relevant, have done a great job on your research.
4. **For longer papers, use section titles/headings to help you!** When you’re writing eight pages or more, your essay will likely have distinct sections, and you would be well-served to set them off with titles/headings which communicate not only the subject matter, but also ***the argument (i.e., thesis)***. Do not use generic headings (*e.g.,* “Analysis” or “Conclusion”), but the main idea of the section. Titles/headings help you focus on your argument and keep you organized.
5. **Always have an introduction to your paper and to longer sections of an essay**. An introduction introduces the section, tells you (and the reader) what the essay is about and why anyone should care about it. You include the thesis/hypothesis of your paper in the introduction. The introduction also provides a road map or an overview for the paper which allows you (and the reader) to know what you are arguing and what evidence you have in support of your contention. And yes, you explain your findings clearly in the introduction. Do not be a mystery writer. Reveal the ending in the introduction.
6. **Conclusions are important, too**. Write conclusions for your long sections and for all papers. They (at a minimum) remind readers of what you have argued and what evidence is very important to your ultimate findings. In longer papers, they also suggest the implications of your work for other related issues and suggest directions for future analysis or research.
7. **Most papers—even short ones—have conceptual and empirical sections.** The conceptual part develops the ideas and/or theories that are important to your argument. For short papers, these ideas typically come from class readings. For research papers, you have done scholarly research to find theories and you develop these ideas in the Literature Review. The empirical part is the *information* or *data* that allow you to evaluate your contention and/or convince you that your argument is viable. Again, for class essays, this information typically comes from course materials. In research papers, you perform research to find these data from outside sources.
8. **Carefully and properly cite your sources**. Cite the sources of all your ideas (not just your quotes) to avoid plagiarism. Consult the citation guide to write your entries so that you are following the style that your professor wants. Never make up a format.
9. **Read and follow the directions for your writing assignments; see your faculty member when necessary**. Read the directions and consult them before, during, and after you write. If you have a rubric (grading guidelines or checklist that the faculty may provide), use this too. If you don’t understand the directions or rubric or you are not sure how to proceed, make an appointment to see your professor to discuss the paper. Your instructor typically enjoys seeing you and discussing your substantive ideas; when you visit during office hours, be prepared with questions or issues to discuss. Visiting your institution’s writing center and bringing your rubric is wise at any stage of the writing process.
10. **There is no substitute for spending time on a project, as the amount of time is directly related to the quality of your paper.** Remember the research–writing–thinking spiral? The more time you spend on your paper, the better its quality. Start early and work on the paper often. Write your work in drafts and in sections, even if your faculty member is not making you turn parts of the paper in over the course of the semester. Writing and thinking are interactive and interrelated processes, and research (if you have to perform it) can enlighten you and force you to rethink and rewrite. Although we sometimes portray writing as one linear accomplishment (write one section, move on to the next, etc.), you will find that the process of working on your paper causes you to rethink and reexamine earlier contentions and assumptions. These reexaminations are valuable and show that you are developing a more complex understanding of your argument, concepts, and the other elements of your paper. Thus, your ideas need to ruminate, and you need time away from your work to make sure that it is “good” on a macro level (the ideas are sound, the overall structure is appropriate and logical) and on a micro level (it is well written and does not contain silly typing or other mistakes). Having an outsider read your paper—a friend or someone at the Writing Center—is always wise. In order for them to give you feedback and for you to respond to it, you need ***time***.

**Words or Phrases to be avoided at all costs:**

* Proof/prove—if you want to be certain and perform proofs, take courses in Mathematics
* “Due to the fact that”—use “Because” instead
* “The reason is because” or “The reason why”—substitute with “The reason is”
* “It was the”—avoid passive voice (in all its forms); change to active voice with the noun doing the action. Change: “The move was blocked by an intransigent group” to “An intransigent group blocked the move.”
* “Based off of”—use “Based on” instead
* “In regards to”—substitute “Regarding” or “With regard to”
* “Said” as an adjective. Think of “said” only as the past tense of the verb “say.”
* “Common people”—use “ordinary people” or “citizens” (unless you are really trying to make a distinction between nobility and commoners)
* “You/your”—avoid second person pronouns; don’t have a conversation with the reader
* Contractions—generally avoid them
* Its’—NOT A WORD. The possessive of “it” is “its,” and yes, this does not follow the normal possessive convention.
* “This” or “These” as sentence subject or on their own in the text—these pronouns are too imprecise; find a noun to express your idea
* Homonym confusion: For example, know when to say there, their, or they’re; two, to, or too; write or right

In general, say things **simply** and **directly**, seeking to minimize the words that you use to make your point. Avoid complex language and words that you don’t really understand. When writing, imagine that you are making a presentation, and your goal is to communicate your views as clearly and concisely as possible. Your essay is an effort at precise communication that anyone paying attention can understand. In particular, be sure that your verb (the action) really matches what you are saying. To illustrate the problem with too many words and the “right” verb, look at this example,

“*There are four schools of thought that strive to deliver reasons for the mass uniting of these people in opposition to the government*.”

Isn’t

“*Authors make four different arguments to explain why popular mass movements emerge against a government*”

more concise (23 vs. 15 words) and easier to understand? Also, don’t be afraid to write X argues, claims, asserts, contends, maintains, and so on when representing what our different authors say. In fact, practice using those verbs and naming your authors. Also if your work had two or more authors, be sure to mention them all. Don’t just mention the first author because all of them contributed, and never transpose the order in which the authors are listed. Last, watch your prepositions, for example, not “the *strength to* this argument” but “the *strength of* this argument” and not “decision to *interfere to* support” but “decision to *interfere with* the intention to support” or change the verb “decision to *intervene to* support.”

Also remember: In American English, punctuation belongs INSIDE quotes, even if it wasn’t there originally. (British English is different, so you might see articles published in the UK that use a different style.) Article titles are NOT italicized, but book and journal titles are. (Typically, you don’t need to name an article or book in your text.) To make a dash, use **two** hyphens side by side—and it magically transforms. (Well, your word processing program will make this transformation. (The magic won’t happen if you use a hyphen without putting spaces around it.)

AND: Font size for endnotes/footnotes is usually smaller than the rest of the paper. Typically, you will write your paper in 12 point for the paper and 10 point for the notes, if you need them. When you write using in-text citations, you do NOT have to use footnotes unless you are making a comment (which undergraduates usually don’t choose to do).