

Term Paper Guidelines

Length

You must show that you have done some serious research, but there is no length requirement. A paper of about 10 double-spaced pages (5 single-spaced) would be appropriate, but so would a paper that is 15 pages, so long as the pages are full of meat, not hot air. See the section on style below.

Content

Your paper should have a thesis (a proposition, an argument), which is the answer to your research question. The body of the paper will use evidence to convince the reader that the thesis is correct. A good paper will synthesize the literature, so that each paragraph makes a point, supported (probably) by various sources. A poor paper will make each paragraph a summary of a different source (x says this, y says that, etc.).

It is unlikely that the literature will present a clear picture (if it does, you should celebrate your good fortune). It is more likely that the evidence will be contradictory, ambiguous, or not directly relevant to your question. This is frustrating, but is also an opportunity to show your skill at interpreting what you read. Perhaps different results are due to differences in the circumstances surrounding the studies; if so, you should explain this. Perhaps you think that some results are simply stronger than others. If so, explain the limitations of the studies you find less convincing. If you find critical evidence lacking, explain the kind of evidence that would be needed to answer the question.

Style

In the words of Strunk and White (*Elements of Style*):

Omit needless words. Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

For more Strunk and White, see <http://www.bartleby.com/141/strunk5.html>. **Please read all of section III, Elementary Principles of Composition.**

Some other tips:

1. Use simple English rather than jargon.
2. Use the active voice (“I examined the results...” rather than “The results were examined”). See Strunk and White’s examples in section 11.
3. Avoid filler words and phrases (“it should be noted that,” “the fact that,” etc.).

Organization

There is no required organization, but there are conventions which make papers easier to read. The standard format for scientific articles, which may be appropriate if you have collected original data for this paper, contains five or six major headings: introduction, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion (sometimes the discussion and conclusion are combined). The introduction outlines the thesis (the argument you are developing) and gives enough background to make it clear why the issue is interesting. The methods section describes your procedure for collecting and analyzing data. The results section explains what you found out. The discussion can include a variety of things, including implications of your results, limitations, and ideas for future research. The conclusion is a brief summary.

If you have not collected your own data but are synthesizing material from the literature you have more flexibility; you will probably not have a methods section or a section labelled “results” but your introduction will be similar and a synthesizing discussion and conclusion is also helpful.

It is helpful to give the reader signposts about what is to come, both for motivation to make the organization transparent. You can put in signposts directly by including sentences like “In the following section, I will do x, y, z” You should also do this by making sure that the point of a paragraph is clear early in the paragraph (usually in the topic sentence) and that each paragraph follows logically from the one preceding it in the section. One good trick is to read through the paper reading only the first sentences of your paragraphs. Can you get a sense of the logic of the argument and the organization of presentation? (Like all stylistic rules, this is for guidance, not blind adherence).

Citing Sources

How to cite. Your paper should have a “References Cited” section rather than a “Bibliography.” It should include all the sources you used for your paper, and no sources that you did not use. Sources you found that were ultimately unhelpful are not included in the “References Cited.”

I am not fussy about the style you use for referencing. Typically, people in the humanities use the MLA system, whereas people in the sciences (including anthropology and psychology) use the “author date” system. In the latter, the author’s last name and the date of the publication are put in parentheses in the text like this (Johnson 2005) and the full citation is included in the References Cited section. If material is quoted directly, a page number is added in the text reference. See the text for an example of how this is done. The most important thing is that *you must give enough information to enable a reader to find the source.*

What to cite. Your paper is an evaluation and synthesis of ideas and facts that have appeared in print (you may have original data as well). The source of all those ideas and facts, therefore, must be cited. It may be helpful occasionally to use an author's exact words, but do not do this just out of laziness. Quoted material should rarely be more than a sentence or two. Common knowledge does not need a citation, but if it really is common knowledge you should think twice about including it (if everyone knows it, why include it in your paper?)

Turning in the paper

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If you need help

Send me an email (ecashdan@gmail.com) if you need help. Earlier is better than later, but later is better than not at all.