

Writing Good Papers

CONTENT / FOCUS

Goals

(academic)

- + Well-developed thesis statement that clearly indicates focus and forecasts general organizational plan for the essay
- + Unique topic or unique treatment of topic
- + Intelligent, conscientious point of view
- + Clear understanding of audience
- + Topic effectively narrowed to one area of investigation
- + Introduction invites further reading and clearly indicates focus of essay
- + Conclusion effectively summarizes main ideas and/or conveys writer's sense of overall relevance of topic

(technical writing)

- + Clear in-text references to illustrations
- + Reliance on facility and professional standards

(journalism)

- + Solid and clear lead sentence
- + Reliance on facility and professional standards

Avoid

- Vagueness of subject matter (ambiguous point of view)
- Unnecessary hedging (indication that you're 'not sure' about something); for example, "I mean," "I think," "like," "sort of," etc.)
- Stating the obvious
- Racist, sexist or any other discriminatory language
- Straying from the topic
- Over-generalizing
- Making assumptions about reader bias or knowledge of topic
- Libelous or over-opinioned claims (*journalism*)

SUPPORT / ELABORATION

Goals

(academic)

- + All general points suitably backed up by reasons, examples, evidence
- + All ideas clearly explained
- + Adequate range of recent research materials (secondary sources)
- + Proper use of in-text citations and bibliography in accordance with MLA or APA format as summarized in the Little, Brown Handbook
- + Proper balance between secondary research and primary analysis (i.e., your own and other's writing)
- + Adequate treatment of opposing views, alternate perspectives

(journalism)

- + Accurate use of sources for commentary / information

Avoid

- General statements that cannot be proven or demonstrated
- Logical fallacies (begging the question, false analogy, oversimplifying, personal attack, straw man, etc.)
- Out-dated research materials
- Relying too heavily on outside material
- Plagiarism (intentional or unintentional use of an outside source without proper documentation)
- Grammatical tangles associated with incorporating support materials at sentence level (see "CONVENTIONS")

ORGANIZATION / COHERENCE

Goals

(academic)

- + Sophisticated organization of main segments to reflect desired emphasis (as indicated by thesis)
- + Paragraphs arranged in the right order to reflect logical development of ideas; i.e., reflects organization of a solid outline
- + Effective use of paragraphs divisions to reflect direction changes
- + Effective use of transitional devices within and between paragraphs to cue progressions from point to point
- + Overall sense of coherence between paragraphs (i.e., everything related and proceeds in an understandable order)

(journalism)

- + Inverted triangle (pyramid) structure, with lead paragraphs
- + Hierarchy of information, referring to lead paragraph
- + Paragraph brevity

Avoid

- Tangential, unnecessary paragraphs (paragraphs not relevant to discussion)
- Awkward jumps between paragraphs
- Awkward jumps between sentences within paragraphs
- Over-burdened paragraphs (paragraphs that overlook opportunity for effective divisions)

CONVENTIONS

Goals

- + Clear, fluid sentences / varied sentence structure
- + Appropriate diction (formal / informal)
- + Confident writing voice
- + Precise and varied choice of words (strong vocabulary)
- + Effective use of punctuation to facilitate good reading
- + Concise expression
- + Use of active voice
- + Consistency of verb tense
- + Consistent use of formatting standards (in accordance with the Little, Brown Handbook or those used by the professional journals in the field)

Avoid

- End-stop errors (fused sentences or comma splices)
- Redundant sentence structure
- Fragments (sentences lacking a subject or verb)
- Dangling modifiers (modifying clauses without attached subject)
- Overuse or misuse of punctuation
- Passive sentences (overuse of verb “to be”)
- Awkward and unexpected tense changes (from past to present)
- Misspelled words
- Confusing words (“to” and “too”; “there” and “their”)
- Problems of agreement between pronoun and antecedent
- “ESL” errors (missing verb, preposition or article; tense confusion)
- Inappropriate use of slang or idiomatic language