

General Student Resource

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How To Write an Essay

Written assignments give you the chance to learn more about a topic through your own internal thought processes, through reading what others have said on the issue, or through conducting research and analyzing the findings.

Writing ability is not a genetic trait. Instead, it is a skill that can be learned and it is one that improves with practice.

Written work is usually assigned, therefore, with the hope that you will both learn more about a topic and improve your writing skills.

Reading — Thinking — Writing

Reading, thinking, and writing are interrelated. The best results in each of these activities are usually achieved through the interaction of all three.

Students sometimes see writing as the final stage in a process that proceeds as follows:

Reading › thinking about the reading › writing what was thought.
or
Thinking › reading about those thoughts › writing about what was read.

Instead, writing is one part of a messy process that repeatedly requires all three:

Reading
Thinking
Writing
Thinking
Writing
Reading
Writing

For a written assignment, this messiness means the steps required to complete the task should not be conceived of separately as “reading,” “thinking,” and “writing,” but should instead contain all of these activities.

Why am I writing this assignment?

This is a fair question to ask of any assignment. While academic success is probably a factor, it is perhaps more pertinent to consider what you—personally and intellectually—might gain from an assignment. Professors and instructors often design assignments to provide opportunities to think about or learn more about a topic that could only be covered briefly during class time. Written assignments are also a chance to develop your thinking, reading, and writing skills and to articulate an argument or position.

To these ends, there are three important stages to written assignments:

1. **Discovery**
2. **Planning**
3. **Presentation**

The writing process is personal and specific to each assignment. It is natural (and encouraged) that working on one assignment might require you to do each of these steps more than once.

Writing, thinking, and reading are part of each stage.

Step 1: Discovery

A helpful way to conceptualize the objective of an assignment—the outcome you will accomplish—is to ask yourself what you would like to *discover* about the issue or topic. The purpose of this stage is to find a specific avenue that you consider worth examining in more depth or your own position on an issue (but one that fits the requirements of the assignment). You should hope to answer some or all of the following questions:

What do you want to investigate?

What do you already know?

What connections can you make between the knowledge, ideas, and concepts you already have?

The following tools and techniques can help you establish what you would like to discover. Remember to read, write, and think in order to discover.

Familiarize yourself with the assignment: Read the instructions carefully several times.

Read the required or suggested materials. Think about the topic. Write down your thoughts, impressions, or any questions you have about what is expected.

Mind-mapping: If you are a visual thinker, clustering ideas in a map or a web can help generate ideas. Start with a word in a bubble on your page and then make links to other words in bubbles. This step can help you to find relationships and links between related concepts.

Brainstorming: Put pen to paper and jot down any ideas that come to mind. Don't edit or limit yourself. Just let your imagination go and see what you discover. This process can also be done verbally by talking with a friend or family member.

Read something! Read something, anything, about your ideas or topic. Let this reading guide you to other ideas and topics. See if it encourages you to find something you want to discover. What has been written on your topic? Get to know the subject. Good places to begin your reading are textbooks, which often offer general explanations or overviews of subjects, or encyclopedia entries.

Generate questions: What are the holes or gaps in your own knowledge that you might want to fill? Consider your subject from as many different points of view as you can think of and jot down notes and questions from these various perspectives. There are resources, such as the OWL Purdue list provided below, that can provide questions to get you thinking. In some cases, you will be provided with an essay question that you are expected to answer. In other cases, you will be expected to create a research question (see Step 2: Planning).

Enthusiasm is an important element of effective communication. The desire to communicate something can make that topic or issue (the thing that you discovered) interesting to the reader. To maintain your enthusiasm, invest sufficient time in the invention process.

Step 2: Planning

Planning is about *defining* a goal, making a *plan*, and *executing* that plan. Reading, writing, and thinking will all be part of each stage of planning.

1. Define your goal: What will your final product include? What will be its purpose? What would you like to discover or present? Your goal might be, for example, a question you want to answer or a position you will show to be correct.
2. Make a plan: Define how you will reach your goal. Plan out the minute and specific steps required. Your plan should be detailed. It should include the resources you foresee requiring and the order in which you will consult them. Your plan should also include possible strategies if you get stuck or if something does not work out. The best plans are time-specific, indicating when each step will be accomplished.
3. Execute the plan: Follow through on your plan.

If at times you feel like you are going backwards or retracing your steps, this is often a natural part of working through a project. The trajectory to a written work is rarely a straight line. It is more like a roller-coaster track, with bends, bumps, and loop-de-loops.

A note about plans:

Plans are improved with practice and experience. It often takes a few attempts before you become familiar with your own resources, processes, and time-management strategies. For your first few written assignments (or if there has been a considerable break since your last one), make the best plan you can, but as you execute it, keep note of your process. Note which steps you forgot to include or which ones were in fact several smaller steps. Be aware of how long each step took, so that you can allot the correct time in the future. A good plan will eventually put you in control of your own writing and research process.

Planning: The research question

Some assignments will provide you with an essay question to answer. In other cases, you will be asked to create a research question yourself. This research question should lend itself to analysis—rather than asking a yes or no question or “what happened?” your question should pose a *how* or *why* question. In either case, the goal of your research and writing is to answer this question and to present evidence that supports your conclusion. Your research question should also be feasible, meaning it can be answered in the time and page length allotted to this particular assignment.

Planning and reading: Scholarly sources

Many assignments require that you use scholarly sources to deepen your understanding or support your position. Depending on the assignment, your final submission might present what you discovered or your position on an issue. To make the strongest case or to present the most convincing evidence, you need to base your ideas, analysis, and findings on the best available information. Scholarly published information—work that is clear about its methods and findings—is generally considered the most reliable. By using this calibre of evidence, you make your arguments more convincing.

A scholarly source is written by an expert in her or his field, has an argument, is based on original research, provides references, is (usually) from an academic publisher, and is fairly recent. Failure to meet any one of these criteria is often a sign that it is not an acceptable academic source. Standards vary from field to field, and in case of any uncertainty about the appropriateness of source, consult your instructors, as they are the final arbiters of what you may use.

Keeping in mind the idea of “discovery,” scholarly works are best used

- To add new information to what you already know.
- To change your mind about something.
- To complicate an issue.

Avoid using scholarly sources to simply restate what you already know. It is far more interesting to indicate to your reader why an author’s ideas were informative, helpful, or contrary to your own on the topic.

Research tools for scholarly sources

Textbooks: Textbooks are not usually very good scholarly sources (they often lack argument, original research, and sufficient citations). They are, however, very good research tools. A good textbook is based on variety of good scholarly sources chosen by the authors. Often at the end of a chapter or at the end of the book, they will provide

suggested readings or their reference list. Mining this for other works is an excellent way to start finding scholarly sources.

Library: A library has several tools at your disposal. You can search the catalogue for books or articles that are relevant. Libraries often provide subject guides (tailored to a particular field or course) through which you can access links to articles, books, websites, and tutorials on using the databases.

Online academic databases: Databases, like Google Scholar, JSTOR or ProQuest, compile published academic works and make them searchable. They are not themselves journals/periodicals, but they give you access to journals and periodicals. Their search engines can be particular, so try many possible keywords or concepts.

Planning: From chaos to order

Once you start researching or reading to reach your goal, you need to begin to compile your arguments and information.

- Read or analyze your sources carefully. Take notes. Reread or revisit them as necessary to consider what new ideas or different perspectives you see.
- Use similar techniques to the discovery process to combine what you have found: mind-map connections between themes or ideas and make lists of questions that remain or answers to previous questions. Consider what has not been addressed or needs further research. Talk out your ideas and arguments with a friend. This is also a good time to revisit the purpose of the assignment and to reread the instructions.

Use these techniques, paired with reading, thinking, and writing, to meet the goal you set yourself (proving a position, explaining a concept, answering a question, etc.).

Step 3: Presentation

The final step is to present your work. You need a combination of three interrelated skills: fluency, clarity, and correctness.

Fluency is your ability to express your understanding and analysis of the topic about which you are writing. This fluency relates to how well you understood what you read and researched. How comfortable are you with the issues at hand?

Clarity is your ability to clearly express that understanding. How well can you explain the ideas and important concepts? How well can you demonstrate your point? How convincingly can you use your evidence?

Correctness is your ability to meet the linguistic and professional standards of rhetoric and expression. Are you able to express your ideas in a way that meets how English, in general, is written, and how your field, specifically, presents information?

Fluency

- A high level of fluency requires devoting sufficient time and energy to the previous stages: discovery and planning.
- You need to have thought critically about your argument and position. You should be able to locate your work in a broader context.
- To work on fluency, concentrate on critical reading skills and analysis. Ensure that you are familiar with your topic. Imagine you are an examiner testing your knowledge of this issue: What questions would you ask? Could you answer them?

Clarity

- Clarity requires being able to outline all the elements required to meet your goal.
- Clarity is frequently aided by conceptualizing the audience for your paper. For what audience are you writing? What do they know about your topic? What do you need to explain to them or convince them of? What can you omit? Also, consider the position you are presenting. What is the tone you are taking on?
- Clarity depends on assessing the tone and purpose of the assignment and expressing them in the best way possible. Possibilities include being persuasive, explanatory, or descriptive. Each section of your essay—the body paragraphs—should relate very clearly to a piece of that goal.

Your thesis

- In many cases, you will be expected to make and support an argument or a thesis. Clarity means that your thesis is easily identifiable to the reader. Your thesis statement—one, two, or even three sentences that clearly capture your argument—should be found in the introductory paragraph to your essay. Your thesis statement should directly answer the essay question, whether that question was provided in the assignment or was created by you. The thesis should be specific and insightful, demonstrating the knowledge you have gained from your research.

Analysis/supporting your argument

- Most university essays will require you to be analytical in your thinking and writing. In other words, you will not simply summarize information or describe what happened, but you will analyze evidence in support of your argument. Remember, you will often be answering a “how” or a “why” question, so your thesis should answer that question directly.
- Clarity requires logic. Logic means that the conclusions made must flow from the evidence provided. For every argument (A), you should provide evidence (B) why that point is correct or that supports the claim. This should be followed by a discussion of the evidence (an explanation to your reader of why evidence B demonstrates A to be true).

Organization

- Every paragraph should have a single main point that relates to the purpose of the paper. This main point should then be supported by evidence (from research, for example, or from your analysis of primary document), followed by an explanation of *how* the evidence demonstrates the point you are claiming it does. Finally, there should be a final sentence summarizing the whole and hinting at the relationship between this point and the one in the next paragraph. Avoid paragraphs that do not have all these elements. Avoid paragraphs that make more than one main point related to your overarching purpose. See the resources below for a document with a list of possible purposes for paragraphs.
- Clarity also includes the accepted rhetorical devices of English writing, including an introduction and conclusion that do all of the following: succinctly state the topic of the paper; present the main position or argument; describe how that position will be proven or discussed (main topics of each paragraph); and contain a summarizing statement with a link to the first body paragraph in the introduction or a link to broader issues in the conclusion.

Correctness

- Correctness is your ability to meet the linguistic and academic standards of your field.
- Two common correctness issues are citations (the presentation of other people's ideas or work) and the use of formal written English.

Citation formatting

- Correctness includes the formatting of the document as whole. The use of other people's ideas and works, on which you based your arguments or analysis, should be properly referenced, according to the style required by the professor, department, or field of study. Correct references include the proper formatting of the citation and the proper incorporation of the evidence into the body of the text.

Paraphrasing and using direct quotations

- Generally, paraphrasing with a citation is a stronger technique than using direct quotes. Paraphrasing allows you to tell the reader what you think is important about the information provided. Direct quotes are best used when *how* something is said is important or meaningful. If *what* is said (information) is important, try to put it in your own words. Explain why that piece of evidence is significant to your point.
- When using a direct quote, never present the quote without introducing or including your own words in the sentence. Known as stand-alone quotes, they are awkward as they are sudden interruptions without explanation. Use phrases like "according to [Smith,]" or "Takahashi argues that," to provide context to the evidence.
- Avoid lengthy block quotes. The majority of each paragraph should be in your own words.

Formal written English

- Correctness generally includes spelling and grammar. Focus on the following goals:
 1. *Write Succinctly.* Avoid wordiness. Use one descriptive word instead of several smaller ones. Be aware that in written English, hesitations and caging arguments (seems, was probably, might have been) are avoided.
 2. *Write Coherently.* Sentences should have a subject and verb. Clauses should relate clearly to each other. Common issues include sentence fragments (a part of sentence without a main active verb) or run-on sentences (sentences with many clauses that are unclearly related). Aim for one main point per sentence.
 3. *Edit your own writing.* Never hand in a first draft of your written assignment. Many issues are solved by spending time thinking about your own writing. Read your paper out loud to yourself (a common cure for coherence issues). Think about being succinct. Consider whether you have been clear (clarity) and expressed your ideas and findings sufficiently (fluency). For more tips on editing your own work, see the “Editing and Proofreading Guide” at the end of this section.

Additional resources and external links

York University has developed an exceptional academic paper and research tool called Spark. It is freely available online and helps with all the levels of discovery, planning, and presentation discussed here:

<http://www.yorku.ca/spark/index.html>

The University of Washington Writing Centre has a useful page on paragraph function:

<http://depts.washington.edu/pswrite/parafunct.html>

A list of questions to help with the discovery process is available through the Purdue Online Writing Lab:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/prewriting/questions.html

For information on presenting your arguments logically, see:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/logic_in_argumentative_writing/logic_in_writing.html

or

<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/writingprocess/arguments3>

Editing and Proofreading Guide

Edit and proofread your papers. In other words, write more than one draft and allow yourself sufficient time to read your first draft carefully for errors or stylistic problems. A good plan is to read your paper aloud or have someone read it to you. Does it make sense? Does it sound as clear as possible? If you need a benchmark for comparison, try reading a few passages from a scholarly book or journal article out loud. Does your paper sound similar in its clarity and tone?

Be clear and concise in your writing. Have you stated something as clearly as possible? Have you said it without using superfluous words? Don't let your points get lost in convoluted prose.

Example of a wordy sentence: During this time period many workers were beginning to become involved in strikes.

A clearer sentence: At this time, workers began to engage in strikes.

Do you see the difference?

Avoid contractions (didn't, couldn't, wouldn't). They are generally inappropriate for formal writing.

It's = it is. Its = possessive. Since you should not use contractions in formal writing, the word "it's" should not appear in your paper.

Do not use the comma splice. A comma splice means that you have joined two complete thoughts, which should be separate sentences, with a comma instead of separating them with a period. A comma is used to separate different parts of a sentence, in order to indicate a "pause" in writing, whether for dividing items into lists or separating subordinate clauses (ones that can't stand on their own as complete sentences).

Example of a comma splice: It is almost eight o'clock, we don't want to be late for class.

Correct use: It is almost eight o'clock. We don't want to be late for class.

Do you understand why the first sentence is incorrect?

Do not use the second person. This means don't use the pronoun "you" in your writing. Doing so is informal and usually inaccurate. If you want to refer to a person in general, rather than a specific person, use a term like "an individual" or the third person impersonal pronoun "one."

Example of incorrect use: Between 1916 and 1927, you could not legally sell or purchase liquor in Ontario.

Example of correct use: Between 1916 and 1927, Ontarians could not legally sell or purchase liquor.

Be precise in your use of pronouns. Make sure that pronouns refer to someone or something specific. In addition, don't use a pronoun when it could refer to more than one person/group of persons mentioned in that sentence.

Example: Both Jim and Bob agreed that he was wrong.

Who is "he"?

Do not use the passive voice. Passive voice means that the subject (the person doing the action) is omitted from the sentence, and the verb is preceded by the word "was" or "were." Passive voice makes your writing imprecise and therefore less convincing.

Example of passive voice: The papers were graded.

But who graded them? Based on this sentence, we don't know.

Example of active voice: The professor graded the papers.

Example of passive voice: This argument was considered controversial.

Do you see why this sentence is problematic? Who considered this argument controversial? How might you fix this sentence?

Make sure your subject and verb agree. Quite simply, if the subject is singular, the verb takes the singular form; if the subject is plural, the verb takes the plural form.

Example of subject-verb disagreement: Each of the students were ready for class.

Example of subject-verb agreement: Each of the students was ready for class. ("Each" is singular).

Use words carefully. If you are not entirely sure what a word means, don't use it. Refer to a dictionary and thesaurus when writing. In addition, be careful in your choice of words. Is the word you have selected the best choice? Is there another word that could convey your point better? In addition, know your homonyms! There is a difference between "counsel" and "council," and between "sight," "site," and "cite."

Avoid vague language. Words or expressions like "things," "some people," "certain ideas," and so on, are vague and don't really tell the reader anything.

Do not use colloquial language or slang.

Avoid hyperbole. Don't use expressions such as "throughout history" or "there have always been." These are overstatements. In addition, avoid using labels such as "the women" or "all immigrants." No group is monolithic.

Pay attention to your introductory sentences. Don't waste time and space on empty phrases or lengthy preambles. When writing your first couple of sentences, ask yourself these three questions:

1. Does this matter?
2. Do I really need to say this?
3. Is this true? (see avoid hyperbole above)

Essay Checklist

Before turning in your final written assignment, be sure to evaluate your own paper and compare it to this checklist. You should be able to check off each of these items.

Introduction:

- My paper has a clearly stated argument that answers the essay question.
- This thesis is included in the introduction of my paper.
- My thesis is not simply an obvious statement of fact, but it reflects the knowledge I have acquired from my readings.
- My thesis is insightful and specific.

Body paragraphs:

- The body of my essay balances evidence with analysis of this evidence
- My argument is supported with specific evidence and an explanation of how this evidence supports the thesis I have outlined above.
- When direct quotations are used as evidence, I have used them selectively, and I have contextualized them and integrated into the body of the essay (i.e., direct quotations are not allowed to stand on their own).
- I have not used long block quotes.
- Each paragraph contains one main idea introduced by a topic sentence.
- Paragraphs end with a transition sentence, which guides the reader to the next paragraph.
- Paragraphs are logically organized (i.e., they introduce ideas chronologically, thematically, or in the order they appear in the introduction).
- My essay is not a summary.

Citations:

1. All direct quotations and paraphrased information are properly cited following the correct formatting.

Style:

2. My essay adheres to the conventions of standard academic English.
3. I have carefully proofread my paper and am not submitting the first draft.

General:

- I have read and followed all of the instructions on the essay assignment.
- My essay discusses all of the required readings or consults the minimum number of required sources.
- My essay fulfills the minimum length requirement.

How to Study

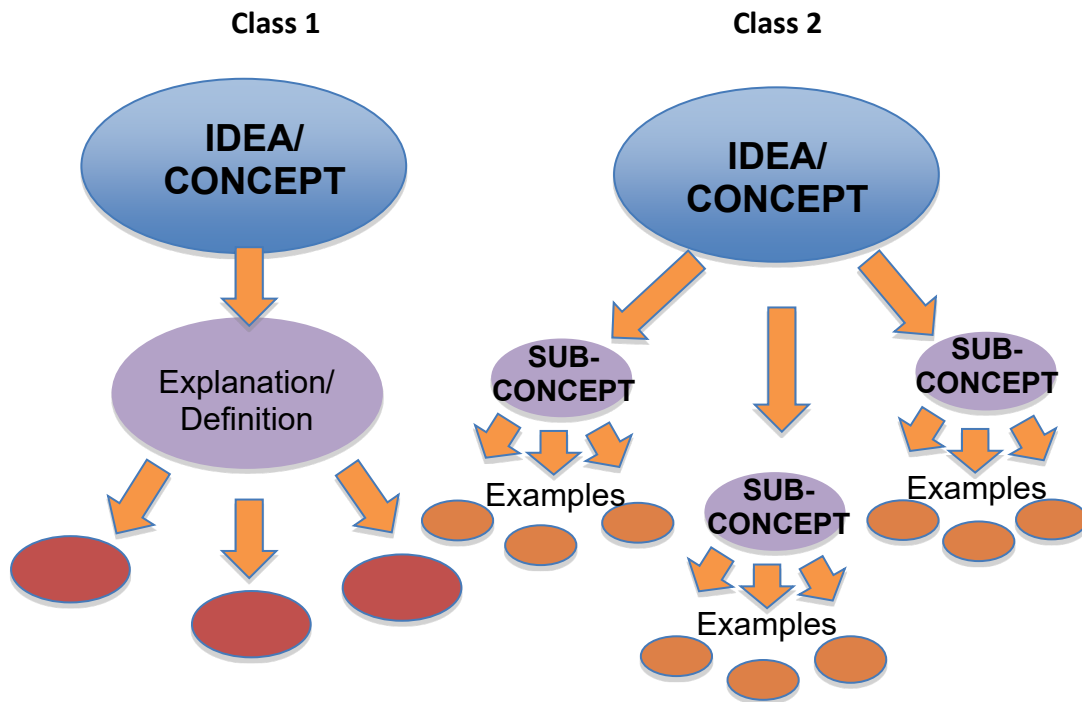
1. Information, learning, and testing
2. Reading actively
3. Taking notes actively
4. Studying for exams

1. Information, learning, and testing

To begin, let's consider how most readings and courses at the post-secondary level are structured and what you are expected to take away from them. Knowing what will be expected of you will help you pick out what is most relevant to know from all the information provided.

Most post-secondary courses evaluate your ability to understand and apply the concepts presented in class and in the assigned reading, or acquired through activities or experiential learning. Generally, courses are structured around a number of key concepts or ideas related to particular learning outcomes. Each individual class or week of a course often represents one particular idea or concept (or one set of ideas and concepts).

Here are two ways in which many classes present their key information:



In Class 1, an idea is presented, it is explained or defined, and examples are given. In Class 2, the main idea or concept is perhaps more complex and is best understood

through smaller sub-concepts. Each of these sub-concepts would be defined or explained and examples given. Frequently textbook chapters are presented in the same way. Alternative examples of structures might include the presentation of an idea but a reliance on experience or practical activities in which students create or identify the examples themselves.

How does this help with exams?

In most exam or test situations, you will be required to know **two** orders of information:

First order: The broad ideas and concepts that were emphasized throughout the course.

Second order: The examples or specific instances used to explain and understand those concepts.

Frequently, you will be given one order and asked to provide the other. For example, the question might state one of the big ideas or concepts and ask you to provide examples of that idea, indicating how they demonstrate the big idea. Alternatively, you might be given a specific example and asked to relate it to the concepts presented in the course.

How does this help with taking notes?

Consideration of both of these orders should be part of all your reading, note-taking, and studying processes. When you take notes on your readings, during class, in the field, or while performing a practical activity, along with the information itself, you should note which order it belongs to:

First order: Arguments, major themes and concepts, key theories, hypotheses, opinions.

Second order: Specific examples, experiences, results, evidence, anecdotes.

Identify to yourself what kind of information you are noting. Using a format that works for your learning style, chart, list, draw, or talk through the relationship between the information presented.

As a bonus, your memory recall will improve the more you can create connections and relationships between pieces of information.

2. Reading actively

To read actively means to ask questions about what you are reading and how it is presented. This kind of reading allows you to retain more of what you read and makes it more useful to you as a student and as a professional.

The goal of active reading is to allow you to understand everything you read in such a way that you can

- identify its main thesis and arguments and how they are supported;
- discuss qualitatively how the argument was constructed and to think about whether and how this was useful; and
- relate it to broader themes (relating to the course, your future profession or personal experience) or to think about how it would be useful in an assignment or test.

Active reading steps:

1. Pre-Reading: Survey the article, ask questions, look at headings and subheadings
2. Reading: Marginal notes and highlighting, vocabulary and keywords, reference list.
3. Summarizing and Evaluating: Write up your notes (include comments, questions, ideas or connections you have about the reading).

1. Pre-reading

Are you reading for a particular purpose? You will want to know, before beginning, where you are going and what you need to know. This will make your reading faster and more effective.

Survey the article: Look through it. Read the introduction and conclusion briefly. Be aware before starting what it seems to be about.

Ask questions: Know what you want to know by the end of the reading. Write a list of questions you hope to answer or things you would like to know. The list might include: major questions or issues, thesis, main arguments, kinds of evidence, audience, author's position, theorists or ideas used to support their work, your own opinion of the piece.

Note headings and subheadings: If there are headings or subheadings, read them and write them in your notes as a guide or map to the main sections (and consequently, the main points) of the reading.

2. Reading

While reading, you want to balance speed with accuracy and comprehension.

Remember the two orders of information and look for them as you read.

Margin notes and highlighting: Like pre-reading, notation should be done with a purpose. Don't jump headlong into highlighting. Remember that the goal is for you to understand the information you read and to be able to use it effectively afterwards. Use a combination of marginal notes—scribbled in the reading, written on a separate paper—and highlighting.

- Read through a short section or paragraph. On the first read, do not highlight. If marking in pencil, mark the margin quickly. Try not to stop the flow of reading. Try to understand what is being presented.
- After reading, go back and highlight what seemed important, look particularly for restatements of the argument of that section, often near the very beginning or end.
- Don't highlight unless you can answer the question: why is that word (or why are those words) important?
- Try to jot summaries of each section in your own words as you read them. What was the major point? What seemed the most important?

Vocabulary and keywords: Keep a list of key terms and concepts (write out their definitions) and words you are unfamiliar with (look up a dictionary definition). You can jot the word down or circle it as you read.

Reference list: Note any authors, writers, artists, or works that would be helpful to read later. If you see information that you think might be useful or seems particularly important, keep note of its original source.

3. Summarizing and evaluating

Write up your notes

Combine your highlighting and marginal notes to fill out your notes after you are done.

Try to note the overall argument as well as the specifics used to support that argument. Indicate any of your reactions to, thoughts, or opinions on what was presented.

When note-taking, ALWAYS indicate where you got your information. ALWAYS indicate to yourself in your notes whether it was your own words or those of the author's. This practice should become a habit.

3. Taking notes actively

To get the most out of classes, consider each class like a physical or verbal reading. Like your textbook readings, a class has objectives, an argument, and uses evidence to support its argument. It will present both orders of information.

Follow the same active reading steps for lectures:

a. Pre-reading: Before class:

- Survey the class outline and the readings.
- Ask questions: What do you already know about this topic? What are you most uncertain about?

- Note headings and subheadings, if provided in advance, for example, in the class slides.

b. Reading: During class

- Margin notes and highlighting: Pay attention for the two orders of information. Try to note both the larger concepts and ideas and the specific examples. Listen for the beginning and end of sections and lists (like you would look for the headings and subheadings of a reading). Try to listen for the major point of each of those smaller sections.
- Vocabulary and keywords: Note keywords and vocabulary you are not familiar with. If you don't get the entire definition in class, consult the readings or speak with the instructor after class.
- Reference list: Keep a running list of works mentioned in class that might be of use or are interesting.

c. Summarizing and evaluating: After class

- As with reading, take time after lecture to complete your notes. Use shorthand during class and fill it out afterwards. It might be that after hearing all the information (or its summary at the end of class) you will be better able to understand what went on at the beginning.
- Consult with your classmates. Compare what each of you thought was important. Discuss what seemed most important and why. A variety of opinions will help you all understand the lectures.

4. Studying for exams

There is no replacement for time

- Studying takes time. The more productive time you spend studying, the better prepared you will be for your exam.
- To make your studying productive, sleep, eat, and exercise sufficiently.
- Memory works best when it is reinforced over several sittings. Study the same information more than once.

Review

- Reread the syllabus.
- Reread all your notes.
- Look over PowerPoint slides.
- Create additional notes or flash cards for terms or concepts that are giving you trouble.

Organize your notes thematically

- List all the main topics that will be covered on the exam and key ideas covered either in text or in class. Refer to the syllabus.
- List all the subordinate details you can think of for each main topic.

- Brainstorm with friends to ensure you have all the relevant pieces of information.
- Try to think of possible questions for each area. List possible examples or pieces of information that would be used to answer that question.
- Practise relating the different orders of information to each other.
- Remember that large, thematic questions (such as comprehensive essay questions) and short-answer questions reinforce each other; the specific material discussed in the short-answer questions will serve as examples to answer the broad question, and the comprehensive questions will help you see how these specific examples fit together.
- If your course covers a historical period or is organized chronologically, build a timeline so that you can visualize the sequence of events.

During the exam

Avoid panic. Panic is unproductive.

Watch your timing. The time spent on a question should correlate to its value. If a question is worth 10 percent of the exam, aim to spend 10 percent of the exam time on that question.

Skip difficult questions and come back to them at the end. Don't miss a question you could answer easily because you spent too much time on a difficult one.

Additional resources and external links

Taking notes:

Harvard University has an excellent review of research and insights for students and instructors on note-taking techniques:

https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/hilt/files/notetaking_0.pdf

A popular note-taking technique is the Cornell Note Taking System (covered briefly in the Harvard handout above but in more depth on the Cornell website):

<http://lsc.cornell.edu/how-to-study/taking-notes/cornell-note-taking-system/>

MIT has two useful pages on taking notes in lectures and on readings:

<https://firstyear.mit.edu/tutoring-support/study-tips/maximizing-lectures-recitation/taking-lecture-notes>

and

<https://firstyear.mit.edu/tutoring-support/study-tips/tooling-and-studying/tooling-and-studying-effective-reading-and-note-taking>

If you would rather not read about reading, there are videos:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEqkeAfbJh4>

Taking exams:

Ryerson University has a wealth of tools to help you organize your studying time, study effectively, and take exams:

<https://www.ryerson.ca/tedrogersschool/success/learning/how-to-study/>

The DETER strategy is one example of an exam-taking strategy:

<http://www.how-to-study.com/study-skills-articles/DETER-strategy-for-taking-tests.asp>

Queen's University has some useful studying and exam suggestions:

<http://sass.queensu.ca/exams/>

How to Cite Sources (APA)

The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA) is a guide for all aspects of writing. It provides a standardized way in which to present academic information (APA style), used most frequently in the social sciences and health sciences. It outlines how all information in a paper should be organized and formatted and how to clearly and correctly indicate that you have used other people's research, ideas, findings, or work in your own research and writing. There are four major ways in which the APA's recommendations should be used:

1. Setting up your paper
2. Writing clearly
3. Citing sources
4. Compiling a reference list

1. Setting up your paper

The APA 7th edition style requires the following elements:

Title page

- The title of the paper, your name, your institutional affiliation (department and school), course number and name, instructor name, and assignment due date, centered.
- The title of the paper should be written in boldface and centred in the upper half of the page.
- A page number, at top right. The cover page should be numbered 1.

Abstract

- A brief, comprehensive summary of the contents of the paper, no more than 250 words
- An abstract is usually not required for college or undergraduate papers, unless you are conducting original research. Consult with your instructor for confirmation.
- The abstract is presented on its own page, entitled Abstract (capital *A*) centered and bolded, at the top of page, on the second page, and includes the running head (with the title of the paper. If it is more than 50 characters, the running head should show a shortened version of the title). The abstract is presented as a single paragraph, double-spaced, without paragraph indentation.

Body of paper

- The paper's title is bolded and centered above the first body paragraph.
- Each page of the paper should include the page number on the top right.
- In general, double-space all parts of an APA Style paper, including the text, block quotations, table and figure numbers, titles, and notes. Do not add extra space before or after paragraphs.

- If you are using a sans serif font, APA recommends 11-point Calibri, 11-point Arial, or 10-point Lucida Sans Unicode. If you are using a serif font, APA recommends 12-point Times New Roman, 11-point Georgia, or normal (10-point) Computer Modern (the default font for LaTeX).
- Use 1-in. margins on every side of the page.

References

- The references are presented on a separate page.
- It is titled “References,” with a capital *R*, bolded and centered at the top of the page.
- Double-space all reference entries. Use a hanging indent.
- Alphabetize them according to the first listed author. All authors’ names should be inverted (i.e., last names should be provided first).
- Give the last name and first/middle initials for all authors of a particular work up to and including 20 authors.
- When referring to the titles of books, chapters, articles, reports, webpages, or other sources, capitalize only the first letter of the first word of the title and subtitle, the first word after a colon or a dash in the title, and proper nouns. The exception is for journals: capitalize all major words in the titles of journals.
- Italicize titles of longer works (e.g., books, edited collections, names of newspapers, and so on) and of journals.
- Do not italicize, underline, or put quotes around the titles of shorter works such as chapters in books or essays in edited collections.

2. Writing clearly

There is one whole chapter in the APA 7th edition manual (chapter 4) devoted to writing style. Writing is an important part of the APA style. The APA style places particular emphasis on presenting ideas in an objective tone and avoiding biases. They warn against wordiness and encourage authors to be as specific as possible about their arguments and evidence.

3. Citing sources

In a written work, all the information, ideas, and words presented are **assumed** to be your own. It is your ethical responsibility to indicate to your reader any and all information, ideas, data, images, or words that are not your own. Failure to do so—pretending that someone else’s work is your own—is plagiarism.

Plagiarism is “the act of presenting the words, ideas, or images of another as your own” (APAstyle.org).

In most cases, assignments ask you to combine your own ideas and knowledge with those of other people. Citations help differentiate between your own ideas and arguments and

those of others. Each formatting style, such as APA, has its own standards for how this information should be shared with your reader.

APA uses a parenthetical style. The information regarding where you got your information is provided to the reader in the body of your text, in a shortened form, in parentheses. In addition, there should be a reference list, discussed below, which provides the full information about each of the sources mentioned in your text.

Steps for in-text or parenthetical citations:

1. Collect the information you need.
2. Identify the amount and types of authors and whether this is the first time it has been cited in the text.
3. Assess how the citation will be introduced in the text.

1. Collect the information you need

- The following information is included in citations (as opposed to the Reference list, which is discussed in the next section):
- Author(s) name(s)
- Year of publication
- Page number, if it is a direct quote. Use the abbreviation “p.” (for one page) or “pp.” (for multiple pages) before listing the page number(s). Use an en dash (–) for page ranges.

2. Identify the amount and types of authors and whether this is the first time it has been cited in the text

- How many authors are there? Are they people or organizations?
- If there is no author, the title is used in the in-text citation.
- Is it the first time you have cited this source? Sources are cited differently the first time from every subsequent mention. More information is generally included the first time. More abbreviations are used after the first time.

3. Assess how the information will be introduced in the text

- The information presented can be paraphrased (in your own words), as a short direct quote (the words from the source), or as a long direct quote, over 40 words.
- The information can be presented with or without the use of a signal phrase. A signal phrase is a few words in the text that tell the reader the source of the information. Most often, this is done by including the names of the authors: Slinger and Gill (2015) have demonstrated that...
- All the required information needs to be included in each citation. If some of the information is found in the same sentence, it does not need to be included in the parentheses.
- Consult Table 8.1 of the APA guide.

Number of Authors	First Parenthetical Citation	Subsequent Parenthetical
One work by one author	(Smith, 2015)	(Smith, 2015)
One work by two authors	(Smith & Jones, 2015)	(Smith & Jones, 2015)
One work by three or more	(Smith et al., 2015)	(Smith et al., 2015)
One work by group author with abbreviation	(The College of St. Scholastica [CSS], 2015)	(CSS, 2015)

Examples of cited paraphrased material

Signal phrase:

Higuchi and Donald (2002) state part of diagnostic reasoning is clinical inference: the process of drawing conclusions from related pieces of evidence.

No signal phrase:

Part of diagnostic reasoning is clinical inference: the process of drawing conclusions from related pieces of evidence (Higuchi & Donald, 2002).

Examples of a cited short direct quote:

No signal phrase:

Potter and Perry (2009) suggest that “decision making is a product of critical thinking that focuses on problem resolution” (p. 151).

Signal phrase:

In the process a decision was made, that is, “a product of critical thinking that focuses on problem resolution” (Potter & Perry, 2009, p. 151).

Example of a cited long direct quote (more than 40 words)

When you face a problem or situation and need to choose a course of action from several options, you are making a decision. Decision-making is a product of critical thinking that focuses on problem resolution. Following a set of criteria helps you make a well-reasoned decision. For example, decision-making occurs when a person chooses a fitness consultant.

To make a decision, the person has to recognize and define the problem (need for physical activity), assess all options (consider recommended trainers or choose on the basis of proximity to the person's home). The person has to weigh each option against a set of criteria (e.g., credentials, reputation, experience), test possible options (interview potential trainers; assess safety of equipment), consider consequences of the decision (increased fitness; risk of injury), and then make a final decision. (Potter & Perry, 2009, p. 151)

Although the criteria follow a sequence of steps, decision-making involves moving back and forth between steps when all criteria are considered.

[Note: Proper line-spacing for all of the examples above would be double-spaced, including the indented text of the long direct quote in the final example. The formatting has been modified for the purposes of this demonstration.]

4. Compiling a reference list

Every source cited in the body of the text must be included in “References.” No works not cited may be included.

The best way to ensure that you have all the information required in the references is to keep a record, in the proper APA reference list entry format, for every research source you read or consult.

Steps for compiling a reference list:

1. Collect the required information.
2. Assess the type of document you are referencing.
3. Find the correct format for that type of document.

1. Collect the required information

The information included in an entry in a reference list is:

- Author(s)
- Date
- Title of the specific piece/part you used (article/chapter/webpage title)
- Title of the book or journal
- Location (Publisher of book or volume; the issue, pages, and DOI [Digital Object Identifier] of journal/website)

2. Assess the type of document you are referencing

- The required information is formatted according to the type of document in question.
- Common types include digitized (online) journal articles, books, chapters of books, and websites. For a full list of possible types, consult the APA guide or OWL Purdue.

3. Find the correct format for that type of document

- If you cannot find a reference format that matches your document type, the APA specifies that you should find the format for the document that most closely resembles the document you are using and that presents the most pertinent information.

General formats and examples

Periodicals (Journal Article)

General Format – with DOI

Author, A. A., & Author, B. B. (Year of publication). Title of article. *Title of Journal*, volume number(issue number), page range. doi:0000000/000000000000 or <http://dx.doi.org/10.0000/0000>

Example:

Brownlie, D. (2007). Toward effective poster presentations: An annotated bibliography. *European Journal of Marketing*, 41, 1245–1283. doi:10.1108/03090560710821161

Book Chapter

General Format

Author, A. A., & Author, B. B. (Year of publication). Title of chapter. In A. A. Editor & B. B. Editor (Eds.), *Title of book* (pages of chapter). Publisher. DOI (if available)

Example

O'Neil, J. M., & Egan, J. (1992). Men's and women's gender role journeys: A metaphor for healing, transition, and transformation. In B. R. Wainrib (Ed.), *Gender issues across the life cycle* (pp. 107–123). Springer.

Book

General Format

Author, A. A. (Year of publication). *Title of work: Capital letter also for subtitle*. Publisher. DOI (if available)

Example

Calfee, R. C., & Valencia, R. R. (1991). *APA guide to preparing manuscripts for journal publication*. American Psychological Association.

Websites

General Format

Author, A. A., & Author, B. B. (Year, Month Date of publication). *Title of page*. Site name. <http://Web address>

Example

Angeli, E., Wagner, J., Lawrick, E., Moore, K., Anderson, M., Soderland, L., & Brizee, A. (2010, May 5). *General format*. Purdue Online Writing Lab. <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

If the page's author is not listed, start with the italicized title. Additionally, include a retrieval date if the page's content is likely to change over time.

Title of page. (Year, Month Date). Site name. Retrieved Month Date, Year, from URL

Example

Tuscan white bean pasta. (2018, February 25). Budgetbytes. Retrieved March 18, 2020, from <https://www.budgetbytes.com/tuscan-white-bean-pasta/>

Additional resources and external links

APA style:

<http://apastyle.apa.org/>

OWL Purdue is the best resource for using APA. It provides excellent and accessible information about using APA (as well as other styles):

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html

For a list of possible electronic sources and their APA formatting, see:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/reference_list_electronic_sources.html

OWL Purdue also provides excellent research and citation guidelines, and other essay writing resources:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/resources.html

APA practice citations

For each of the following excerpts,

- a) Paraphrase and cite the provided text.
- b) Quote the text directly and cite it.
- c) Provide the reference list entry.

[Note: some information provided may not be required]

Example 1. “electronic toys may have a negative impact on the quality of parent-child interactions.”

Type of source: Journal article

Authors: Michaela B. Wooldridge, Jennifer Shapka

Article title: Playing with technology: Mother-toddler interaction scores lower during play with electronic toys

Publication year: 2012

Available online: 20 July 2012

Journal name: Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology

Volume: 33

Issue: 5

Page range: 211–218

Page of specific excerpt provided: 215

Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2012.05.005>

Example 2. “Concern with the social determinants of health is not new.”

Type of source: Chapter in an edited book

Author: Dennis Raphael

Chapter title: Social determinants of health: Key issues and themes

Book title: Social Determinants of Health: Canadian Perspectives

Editor: Dennis Raphael

Edition: Third

Publication year: 2016

Chapter page range: 3–31

Page of specific excerpt provided: 3

Publisher: Canadian Scholars’ Press Inc.

Answers

Example 1.

- a. Wooldridge and Shapka (2012) found that children and parents interacted in less positive ways when exposed to electronic toys.
- b. The conclusions of the study were that “electronic toys may have a negative impact on the quality of parent–child interactions” (Wooldridge & Shapka, 2012, p. 215).
- c. Wooldridge, M.B., & Shapka, J. (2012). Playing with technology: Mother-toddler interaction scores lower during play with electronic toys. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 33(5), 211–218.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2012.05.005>

Example 2.

- a. There has been a long-standing concern regarding the social determinants of health (Raphael, 2016).
- b. According to Raphael (2016), “concern with the social determinants of health is not new” (p. 2).
- c. Raphael, D. (2016). “Social determinants of health: Key issues and themes.” In D. Raphael (Ed.), *Social Determinants of Health: Canadian Perspectives* (3rd ed., pp. 3–31). Canadian Scholars’ Press Inc.