

Guidelines and Advice for writing short papers

All papers must adhere to the limits established in the syllabus. Remember: one page only, double-spaced! All papers must be based on the assigned discussion reading for that week. All papers must address the topic that I have provided. The questions are broad but I want your papers to address a specific aspect of these broad topics. All papers must be in the form of an analytical argument. Your analysis should be explanatory and your arguments should convince the reader that you are right. Your paper should NOT simply summarize the text(s) under consideration. If you are unsure of whether your paper has progressed beyond summary to analysis, ask yourself if the reader could argue with your thesis. If so, then you have crafted an analytical argument and you now must seek to prove your thesis.

A good paper has three structural elements: Introduction, Body and Conclusion

1. Introduction: Your introduction should include your thesis statement and place it in an appropriate context. Your thesis should be a declarative sentence, or sentences, which introduces the governing idea of your paper. Your thesis should NOT just restate the topic.
2. Body: This is where you must marshal support for your thesis. Proof often involves reference to the text(s); however, do not rely exclusively on quotes from the text to make your points.
3. Conclusion: Here you should strive to make things easy for the reader by tying the previous two segments of the paper together. The conclusion is not merely a recapitulation of your thesis. At this point the reader should be convinced of your thesis!
4. Remember, paragraphs are your friends. They help to organize your work. Do not present me with a wall of text. Use paragraphs to arrange your paper in line with these structural elements: a paragraph for your intro, a paragraph (or a few short paragraphs) for the body of your paper, and a paragraph for your conclusion.

Some common stumbling blocks to effective analysis:

1. Lack of a thesis: If you cannot summarize your main point in one or two sentences then you will not be able to make a clear argument. Your paper must have a focus.
2. Failure to address the topic: Make sure that your thesis responds directly to the topic.
3. Loss of focus: Even if you have written an effective thesis statement you must be careful that the content of your paper supports that thesis. Examine your evidence and make sure that it is all relevant to your argument.
4. The 'phantom' thesis: The 'phantom' thesis appears to take a stand, but evades responsibility by using vague terms or simply stating the obvious.
 Example: 'Throughout human history, people have confronted issues raised by social inequality.'
 The reader's response: What issues? What people? Does the author really intend to discuss all of human history in a short paper?
5. Undefined terms: Nothing is self-evident. Many terms commonly used in analytical essays have no fixed meaning. Some examples: politics (do you mean government or power relations more generally), class (based on wealth, prestige, birth?), justice, human nature, etc. Do not assume that the reader will intuitively understand your use of such terms.
6. Arguing on the basis of shared assumptions: It is not effective to base your argument on an assumed agreement with the reader. What if he or she does not agree? This is frequently the problem with comparisons between ancient and modern society in which it is assumed that everyone agrees about the present situation.

All direct references to sources MUST be cited. All papers will be graded on presentation, organization and content. You must proofread and spellcheck all written assignments. Make sure that your paper is organized along the principles outlined above and be sure that the content of your paper supports your thesis. If you would like to write a first draft I will be happy to read and comment on it. If you want me to look at a draft of your paper, you must submit it to me well in advance of the due date (not the night before). If you have short and simple questions about the nature of the assignment or a specific aspect of your paper you can send them to me via e-mail at any time. You may also e-mail me your thesis for evaluation.