

Criteria for Well-Written Papers

(Or is that “good writing”?)

Following are important criteria for well-written papers. Though each instructor focuses on different elements of writing, and emphasizes different aspects depending on course and topic, these are typical of what readers are looking for:

- 1. Clear statement of purpose.** Tell us exactly what you are doing and why you are writing the paper (without writing, “because the teacher assigned it” or “I am writing this paper because...”).
- 2. Organization.** Is there a clear structure to the way you are writing your paper? Are you rambling just to fill space with no real idea of where you are going? Would a reader be able to outline your ideas without getting lost?
- 3. Adequate evidence to support the thesis.** Arguments need evidence. Are you supporting what you say with appropriate argumentation and evidence, or are you merely asserting something without proof? Even a stated opinion should have reasons to back it up.
- 4. Appropriate style.** What is the level of formality for this paper? What tone are you trying to set? Is the style appropriate to the topic? Different papers naturally carry different styles. A humorous fiction essay is going to be different from a paper focused on a biblical topic or passage.
- 5. Appropriate use of source materials.** Are the sources appropriate to the topic? Are they credible? Do you cite them properly when using their ideas and quotes? Special attention needs to be given to the problem of plagiarism. While we encourage and require source materials, the paper still needs to be your paper. Also, remember that any place from which you might plagiarize (websites, etc.) can also be accessed by your instructor.
- 6. Correctness.** When a reader cannot read a paper without constantly tripping over errors, you know there is a problem. Check your mechanics, grammar, punctuation, spelling, syntax, and citation form. Most word processors have checkers to help, but you still need to proofread your paper for mistakes (and perhaps have someone else do this for you). Last-minute papers are quite obvious.
- 7. Coherence of Ideas.** How well are your thoughts tied together? Are your transitions clear and smooth? Are your thoughts logically presented? Does the paper as a whole, and each individual sentence, make sense? Would a reader have to reread a sentence several times to understand what you are trying to say?

If you are carefully thinking about what you are doing as you write, you will enjoy the work more. This will also be obvious to the instructor. Suggestions: make a clearly organized bare-bones outline of the material you want to cover in your paper, then start to put flesh on it by working out the details. If you need help with this, let your instructor know. Do this well ahead of the paper’s due date and you won’t feel so pressured and tense when it becomes due.

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