

A.1 Guidelines on writing, and rewriting a paper

Most common problems :

Argument Structure –

Introduction – In your introduction, all you need to do is to state your thesis and summarize your argument.

- No need for introductory statement explaining how the topic has been the most important one since the beginning of humanity. You know very well, and as well as I do, that it is not true. No need to justify why you are writing on this topic: the truth is, you do it because I asked you to do so.
- It is ESSENTIAL that you give a clear outline of the paper in your introduction

Body :

- One idea per paragraph, and one paragraph per idea
- All paragraphs together form an overall argument
- Make the *structure* of your reasoning explicit: use link words as “because”, ”Hence”, “Therefore”, “Given that” etc. Be explicit in any step you take in your argumentation: you are not writing a mystery novel, no suspense needed!
- Any information you give should be explicitly related to the question at hand. A good rule of thumb: *You should not have more than 3 sentences with no mention of the topic.*
→ *When you read your first draft, ask yourself for every sentence: how is this relevant to the topic? Do I explicitly explain how it is relevant to the topic?*

Conclusion – all you need to do is to restate your thesis and summarize your argument. No need to say anything else. Don’t open new questions, like which one is right? That was not the question of the topic, so don’t speak about it.

→ *You should always have a clear outline of your paper before you start writing the first draft.*

Analysis –

- Address the question directly and fully. Struggle with it. *Always be careful not to answer another question.* Answer the question asked in the topic and ONLY the question asked in the topic.
- Special note on a typical mistake: If you are asked to compare two things, it is not sufficient to put the description of both these things side by side. YOU NEED TO COMPARE THEM.

Example: Nature and Culture

A *very bad* outline would be :

I. What is it that we call Nature

II. What is it that we call Culture

Instead, what you are asked to do is *to study the relationships between the two*.

- PUSH YOURSELF: Always consider the possible objections to your claims
- IF YOU ENCOUNTER A DIFFICULTY, DON'T ESCAPE: FACE IT. A difficulty is most often an opportunity to think, and hence to make your paper better.

1. State the problem

2. Propose solutions

3. If you don't have any satisfactory solution, SAY IT: explain what solutions could be considered and why you find them unsatisfactory. This is great intellectual progress already!

Support – It is essential that you support your claims:

- with relevant material (quoting appropriately) – do not make up stuff about authors. Most often, you won't get it right if you don't get yourself properly informed
- with examples – GOOD EXAMPLES ARE ALWAYS VERY EFFICIENT
- Feelings or authority do not constitute an acceptable basis for your claims
- Avoid Value statements

Writing Style – Keep it clear and simple

- Don't write any sentence that you do not fully understand.
- Don't use any word that you don't fully understand. Chances are, you'll make a mistake in using it.
- Plain English is great. Technical words are most often not necessary.
- Strictly avoid any decoration in style: clear, concise and precise should be your only aim
- Systematically discard all terms like "evident", "obvious" and the like: either it will speak for itself, or it is merely a way to hide a lack of argument
- NO SENTENCE IS LONGER THAN TWO LINES: if you find one, break it up.

Most Common Comments :

"Category mistake" : the subject and the predicate do not belong to the same category (kind of stuff).

- a law is an observation
- blue is a cat

"So what?": relevance of information for the issue under study?

It is never sufficient to give me some information. You have to show how it is relevant to the issue at hand.

“Not clear” : either the sentence itself, or the way in which it relates with the sentences around, is not clear.

“Mere assertion” : you make a claim without supporting it. That is to say, you did not tell how you know this claim is true. You have to demonstrate the claims you make, either by documenting, or by illustrating them.