

## Tips for Academic Writing

### CONTENT AND STRUCTURE:

1. Have a clearly stated thesis at the beginning of your paper.
2. Be sure your introduction provides a roadmap of your paper. The introduction describes the overall argument, logic, and layout of the paper.
3. Your paper should incorporate material from class and your research in a logical way.
4. Be sure each paragraph has a topic sentence. Ensure that the paragraphs fall in a logical progression and that each paragraph is about one (no more) topic. Your paragraphs should build a cohesive argument that leads to a deductively logical conclusion.
5. It is okay to use the first person when stating your argument.
6. It is *not* okay to use the first person to state your personal opinion. Avoid statements like “I think,” or “I believe.”
7. Your paper should form a logically deductive argument where the conclusion of your argument is presented in the thesis and the premises are presented in topic sentences.
8. Have a conclusion that summarizes your paper and argument.

### MOST COMMON WRITING MISTAKES (AVOID THESE):

1. *Do not use your opinion.* Personal opinion is not appropriate in professional or academic writing, except in very specific circumstances (such as editorials). Be sure every claim you make is supported by logic and evidence.
2. Form possessive singular nouns by adding ‘s:  
*Charles’s friend.*
3. The word “its” is a pronoun, and the word “it’s” is a conjunction for “it is.”
4. When listing three or more terms, use a comma after term:  
*Red, white, and blue.*
5. Use a semi-colon only to join to grammatically complete clauses:  
*It is nearly half past five; we cannot reach town before dark.*
6. Be sure the subject and verb of your sentence are in agreement:  
*INCORRECT: One of those people who is never ready on time.*  
*CORRECT: One of those people who are never ready on time.*
7. Be sure to use a consistent verb tense.  
*INCORRECT: The President agreed to the accord and presents it to Congress.*  
*CORRECT: The President agreed to the accord and presented it to Congress.*
8. Use the active voice.  
*INCORRECT: My first visit to Boston will always be remembered.*

*CORRECT: I will always remember my first visit to Boston.*

9. Omit needless words:

*INCORRECT: The reason why is that...*

*CORRECT because...*

10. Do not use exclamations to show emphasis:

*INCORRECT: The law was important!*

*CORRECT: The law was important because...*

11. Do not use colloquialisms, slang, idioms, clichés or figures of speech:

*INCORRECT: The policy costs an arm and a leg.*

*CORRECT: The policy is expensive.*

12. Do not overwrite. Be clear, and keep it simple. Wordy, ornate, flowery writing is more difficult to understand than direct, pithy writing.

13. Do not use qualifiers. Avoid the following words: *rather, very, little, pretty, really, like.*

14. Do not use contractions.

*INCORRECT: don't, can't, aren't.*

*CORRECT: do not, cannot, are not.*

15. Revise your writing. Write more than one draft (first drafts are never “A” papers)

16. Read you paper. Re-read your paper.

#### **LOGISTICS:**

1. Create a clever title that includes a verb and alludes to, or states, the purpose or question addressed in the paper.
2. Number your pages.
3. Double space your text (except long quotes and bibliographic entries)
4. Use one-inch margins
5. Use proper bibliographic notation (see other handout).
6. Use an appropriate font, such as Times New Roman (not Courier).
7. Use organizational subheadings throughout your paper. This helps to keep your argument organized and keeps the reader focused on the steps of your argument as you develop them.

Resource: **George Mason University Writing Center** (<http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/>). Contact [wcenter@gmu.edu](mailto:wcenter@gmu.edu). There are locations in Robinson Hall (114A), Enterprise Hall (076), Fenwick (B-104) and Johnson Center (134H) Libraries. Do not hesitate to call and ask for an appointment for someone to read your paper with you.

I also strongly recommend a style guide for writing, such as *The Elements of Style*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White. Much of the advice referenced here come from this text.