WRITING YOUR FIRST UNIVERSITY PAPERS

This publication was prepared by the staff and Peer Helpers of the Learning Commons
About our cover:

When the University of Guelph was incorporated in 1964, the institution adopted the name and some of the history of the City of Guelph. Guelph’s name comes from “Welfen,” the family name of the royal House of Hanover. That ancestry is recognized by the white Hanovarian stallion which appears on the University of Guelph’s official crest and in this 1981 painting by Heather Cooper. The original painting still hangs in the University Library, depicting the Hanovarian stallion with the winged horse, Pegasus, the symbol of poetic inspiration.
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Every writer I know has trouble writing.

Joseph Heller, author *Catch-22*

What you learned about writing in high school will no doubt be useful in university; however, as you will realize, the writing process you currently use may need a certain amount of adjustment and refinement. In fact, it is very likely that you will benefit to some degree by making even minor changes and modifications both to your writing process and perhaps the initial expectations you might have for your writing at university.

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**University Standards and Expectations**

Regardless of the academic discipline you work in, writing is an educational requirement that *will be evaluated and considered an important part of* your learning while at the University of Guelph. The University Senate, in fact, has stated that instructors must evaluate and assess not only the content of courses but also the students’ “ability to use correctly and effectively the language appropriate to the assignment” ([http://www.uoguelph.ca/diploma_calendar/dip08-grds.shtml](http://www.uoguelph.ca/diploma_calendar/dip08-grds.shtml)).

Students must therefore work at familiarising themselves with using “correctly and effectively the language appropriate to
the assignment” and the language and conventions of the various disciplines. With the range of expectations, characteristics, and “qualities” of university essays found in the various disciplines, there is no one-size-fits-all template. Learning the specific qualities and characteristics and meeting the range of expectations is not an easy — nor an immediately achievable — task. You need to be patient in order to build this knowledge and ability.

**Sophistication**

Often first-year students are worried that their essays will not be “sophisticated” enough, and spend much time finding and using the biggest words and most complex sentence structures they can. They often don’t realize that different disciplines use certain terms in very specific ways, and that a synonym that sounded perfect in the thesaurus takes on a different meaning in the context of a sociology paper. They also often don’t realize that their “sophisticated” vocabulary and sentence structure have wandered so far out of control that the sentence no longer conveys anything meaningful. Both of these problems, though, have the same undesirable effect: to make the instructor (or marker) suspect that the student has no real command of the subject and is trying to hide that lack by “sounding sophisticated.”

“Sophistication,” as it refers to university writing, has more to do with the logical and elegant development of an argument than with the length of words or sentences. A sophisticated argument demonstrates that you have understood your topic well enough to express an opinion on it, and have likewise understood any readings on that topic well enough to be able to show how others might support (or disagree) with the position you’ve taken.
A short sentence that makes an important point clearly and forcefully is considered much more sophisticated than a long one that contains so much jargon and wanders in so many directions that it loses its focus, its meaning, … and its audience.

From High School to University Writing

You will find that there are still some similarities between your university writing assignments and those you did in high school, for example:

- All papers need introductions, theses or hypotheses, proofs, conclusions.
- Paragraph structure is important.
- You need to write clearly and well.

However, you will also note that there are several important differences:

- Writing always happens within an academic context. The academic context influences the kind of language and style you use in your paper, but it should also influence the way you approach your writing tasks. In university, you are joining in a type of academic conversation that has already been going on before you arrived. Your papers are not just presenting your reader with a synopsis of what other people have already said on a particular topic; you are helping the reader understand the significance of what has come before and how your ideas fit into the conversation.
Terminology and concepts become more precisely defined and used.
Each discipline has its own particular “discourse” — the language, ideas, and critical paradigms commonly used by authorities working in that field. It is crucial that you understand how these terms are defined. Careless use of language and ideas undermines your contribution to the conversation, and it will be noticed: remember that your instructors are very fluent in their disciplinary discourse.

Your instructors want more than a paraphrase of what they said in class. You have to explain or argue something.
Most papers at university explain (the expository paper) or argue (the persuasive paper), or do a combination of both. But no matter which kind of paper you are writing, expect to have to take a stand with respect to your material. Your paper has to be based on an “original idea” — at its most basic, the aspect of the material that you find most significant.

Grammar and spelling always count!
The strength of your argument depends to a great extent on the strength of your ability to communicate it; the most brilliant idea can get lost or buried under punctuation problems, incomprehensible sentence structures, and careless spellings. Even if your assignment sheet doesn’t specify a value for grammar and spelling, you should realize that these components of your writing will always have an impact on the overall impression your paper conveys, and probably, therefore, on your mark as well.
Thinking on Paper

Writing, especially in an academic context, has often been referred to as “thinking on paper.” This description is particularly apt in two ways. First, it is often through writing about a topic that you actually sort out and solidify what you think about that topic. Second, when you hand in a course paper, you are offering your professor an example of not just what you think about a topic, but also how you think it. The following sections outline the types of thinking that university papers might require and how your writing can help you make a good intellectual impression.

Levels of Thinking

Writing papers is one of the ways instructors encourage active thinking and learning, where you are required to engage with ideas and develop a personal understanding or opinion about them. In fact, when students think back to what they learned in university, they almost invariably remember best the knowledge they acquired or issues they thought through in the process of writing papers about them.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, to realize that instructors actually design their writing assignments with the intention of helping you to think about a topic in a particular way, and to develop your capacity for more sophisticated thought. Any discussion of university-level writing, then, needs to start with some consideration of university-level thinking.

Benjamin Bloom and his associates, in Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956), created a hierarchy for listing educational goals and objectives and for characterizing the complex range of human thought. Bloom’s levels — knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation — describe different levels of cognitive development (the ability to
know things). The following is a description of these levels, including examples of how and where you might encounter them at university. Each description also includes a list of keywords to help you gauge what type of thinking your instructor might be expecting from a writing assignment.

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**Level 1: Knowledge**

- observation and recall of major ideas and information
- awareness of dates, events, places
- basic mastery of subject matter

Knowledge represents the most fundamental level of cognition that requires you to recall learned material in a basic manner. You will most often encounter questions requiring knowledge-based writing on essay or short-answer exams. However, you may also encounter these types of writing assignments in a first-year science course, where you might be asked to summarize a research article or describe a procedure.

**Keywords:** Outline, Summarize, Describe, State, Define

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**Level 2: Comprehension**

- understand information, recognize what it “means”
- interpret facts, compare, contrast
- order, group, infer causes and understand potential consequences

The next level, comprehension, also assumes an ability to recall learned material, but also requires that you grasp the meaning of that material. A paper for a first-year course in philosophy, for example, might ask you to compare the theories of Plato and Aristotle on the origins of
knowledge. A paper in a bio-medical science course might ask you to categorize the risk factors for heart attack according to criteria you determine.

**Keywords:** Explain, Comment on, Compare/Contrast, Discuss, Account for

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**Level 3: Application**

- use information
- use methods, concepts, theories in new situations
- solve problems using required skills or knowledge

In an application paper, you must build on your knowledge and understanding of facts or theories to apply them in a new situation. In a botany class, for example, you might learn about the habits of invasive species, then have to write a paper explaining what effect introducing one might have in a specific location.

**Keywords:** Apply, Demonstrate, Illustrate, Show, Calculate, Predict, Prove

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**Level 4: Analysis**

- awareness, identification of patterns
- organization/structure of parts
- identification of components

The fourth of Bloom’s levels, analysis, represents the level of thinking you will most likely be asked for in your first-year literature course papers. At this level, you are usually presented with a text or outcome and are asked to break it down into its component parts, explaining how each part contributes to a specific interpretation of the whole. A common English literature assignment, for example, will
ask you to apply what you have learned about various types of discourse (language patterns) to create a “discourse analysis” of a work: a paper that explains how a writer uses various language patterns to create a particular meaning, mood, or character.

Keywords: Analyse, Argue, Support, Explain, Interpret

Level 5: Synthesis

- apply previous knowledge (“old” ideas) to create new ideas
- generalize from given facts and draw conclusions
- relate and connect knowledge from several areas

Synthesizing requires the ability to produce unique and creative patterns or structures from the material with which you are working, whether in putting together a research proposal, reviewing the focus of recent sociological research, or writing a literature paper in which you read a short story from a feminist or Marxist perspective.

Keywords: Relate, Argue, Synthesize, Support

Level 6: Evaluation

- compare and discriminate between ideas and select one based on reasoned argument
- assess value of theories, presentations
- verify value of evidence and/or identify its biases

In evaluating material you are judging it critically according to criteria that are given to you or which you set. A book review or literature review requires this very sophisticated type of thinking. These assignments often
cause problems for first-year students (and upper-year students too), who feel intimidated by the requirement to “judge” texts or ideas crafted by acknowledged experts in a field. However, these assignments are intended to move you beyond passively accepting something as true just because it’s written in a textbook or journal article towards an active questioning and testing of the theories, methodologies, and arguments of the discipline. This is a crucial step in helping you understand that academic writing is an ongoing conversation, where no text or authority can claim to give you “the last word” on a subject.

**Keywords:** Evaluate, Assess, Critique/Criticize, Review

*Bloom material adapted from University of Victoria, “Learning Skills Program,” Counselling Services www.coun.uvic.ca/learn/program/hndouts/bloom.html*

**Making a Good Intellectual Impression**

From your instructor’s point of view, your completed paper represents both *what* you think about a topic as well as *how* you think it. Particularly in a large lecture course, a written assignment might be the instructor’s best opportunity to become acquainted with your thoughts and ideas. Taking care with your writing, then, is the best way to ensure you make a good intellectual impression.

For example, if the information or analysis in your paper is skimpy or superficial, your instructor will likely conclude that you don’t have any significant understanding about the topic or problem you are addressing, possibly because you have not spent much time thinking about it in any depth. Similarly, if your paper is full of interesting ideas but is poorly structured, your instructor
might have the impression that you have some basic knowledge of the subject, but no understanding about how it fits together. Worse, if your paper is convoluted, confusing, and doesn’t make any discernable point, you will create the impression that you are hopelessly confused about the issues at hand. Even spelling and grammar play an important part in making an impression on your instructor, since a methodical thinker is unlikely to be a careless proofreader.

There are several strategies you can use to make sure you are putting your best paper forward.

- **Read the assignment carefully.**
  Make sure that your paper actually does what the assignment asks for. See the section on “Reading the Assignment” for more detailed information on using the assignment cues. Also, make sure you follow any formatting specifications included with the assignment. If your environmental biology assignment specifies not to include a title page, *don’t use a title page*. Many instructors will also specify a preferred citation and referencing style. If they do, use it — and make sure you use it properly. The Learning Commons has a series of “Fastfacts” on the most common standard referencing styles, available on paper from the Learning Commons (1st Floor of the Library) or through our Website at
  
  www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/

- **Stress-test your thesis.**
  It should be relevant, significant, and arguable rather than a statement of fact. Use the section on “The Thesis” to help you evaluate whether your thesis is strong enough.
▪ Make sure your essay structure is logical, appropriate, and easy to follow.
See the sections on “Argumentative Structure” or “Science Structure” for an explanation of structural expectations in academic papers.

▪ Strike an appropriate academic or disciplinary tone in your writing.
Many of the words or sentence structures you might use in everyday conversation are not appropriate for formal writing assignments at university. See the chapter on “Academic Writing and Audience” for more information on how to find the right tone for your papers.

▪ Polish your spelling, grammar, and style until they shine.
You wouldn’t go into a job interview without tying your shoes; don’t let your instructor see you looking sloppy and tripping over your own words. See the section on “Revision Strategies” for tips on how to polish your paper, and the appendix for examples of the most common types of grammar and punctuation errors, and how to correct them.

Grade Expectations

While you might encounter writing assignments in first year that aim towards any of Bloom’s levels, one of the goals of having you write university papers is to move you towards the upper levels of the hierarchy. The more you can put yourself in an analysis, synthesis, or evaluation frame of mind, the more successful your university papers will likely be.
This means that your instructors will not just be looking for how well you know the facts or critical paradigms of your discipline; they want to know where you stand with respect to the (sometimes contradictory) ideas and theories in the field, and how well you can create or evaluate arguments based on these theories.

When they evaluate papers, most instructors use some kind of guideline or rubric to help them assess the level of a student’s thinking and writing. Just as there is no “one-size-fits-all” template for writing papers, there is no universal standard for evaluation rubrics. However, the following chart provides one example of how levels of thinking might be evaluated in a response to the assignment: “Compare and contrast the effects of blindness and deafness on language development.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of thinking</th>
<th>Characteristics/Contents of response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prestructural</td>
<td>Use of irrelevant information or no meaningful response&lt;br&gt;Anything student can think of about blindness, deafness, child development, and language development in no logical order. Draws no conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probable grade: F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unistructural</td>
<td>Focuses on one relevant aspect only&lt;br&gt;Lists some of the features of blindness and deafness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probable grade: D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multistructural</td>
<td>Focuses on several relevant features without co-ordinating them&lt;br&gt;Lists some of the features of blindness/deafness and some of the consequences for language development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probable grade: C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Relational | Several parts integrated into coherent whole; evidence linked to conclusions; easy to read/understand
| Probable grade: B | Identifies and compares/contrasts the consequences of blindness and deafness for language development. |
| Extended abstract | Well-developed argument clearly articulated; implication of issues and conclusions integrated into broader framework |
| Probable grade: A | Identifies and compares/contrasts the consequences of blindness and deafness for language development. Draws conclusions about the nature of language development. Comments on the adequacy of theories of language development. |

(SOLO Taxonomy for evaluation from Ramsden [55]; assignment responses adapted from Gibbs and Habeshaw [110])

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**What Won’t Work Anymore**

Students who don’t really understand the increasing complexity or sophistication of thinking required at university often just assume that the writing strategies that worked for them in high school should produce the same results in university. Or, when confronted with a whole new set of expectations about what constitutes a good paper, some students panic and fall back on structures they are familiar with from their high school papers. Either way, the result is almost certainly going to be a paper that falls short of university expectations. This section describes some of these common paper mishaps.
**Chronologies**

While a science lab report might require you to report methodology chronologically, chronological order is rarely a useful structural strategy for your other university writing assignments. This structure essentially becomes a recounting of “first this happened, next this happened, and then this…”

Students who write in chronological order substitute plot summary for a reasoned, analytical argument. Their papers focus on what happened and when it happened instead of analysing why it happened or is significant. Unless your instructor specifies otherwise, you can assume that your audience has read the work(s) under consideration, so plot summary is unnecessary.

If your paper devotes more space to recalling details of plots or events than it does to explaining their significance, you are not aiming high enough in the thinking hierarchy.

**Encyclopedia entries**

Encyclopedia essays are tricky because they are often well-researched, informative, and well-organized. Like an entry in an encyclopedia, they provide a great deal of information about a given topic, usually grouped in appropriate categories.

However, even the best-written encyclopedia essay still represents only level one or knowledge-based writing. While this type of writing was likely acceptable in many of your high school papers, remember that university assignments aim to get you thinking and writing in a more critical or analytical fashion. It’s no longer enough to write what you know about a topic; your goal is to help your reader understand why it’s important.

Make sure your paper isn’t an encyclopedia entry masquerading as a university essay by checking that your thesis is argumentative rather than a statement of fact and that each of
your paragraphs is developing an aspect of an argument rather than simply providing information about your topic.

**Data dumps**

The data dump paper is extremely common among first-year students, particularly those encountering their first major research paper. Faced with an overwhelming amount of researched information and unsure of what to do with it, these students sometimes just dump the sum of their collected knowledge down on paper without any discernable organizational structure. Data dumps sometimes also result from students’ desires to impress upon their instructors the vast amount of information they have collected about the topic.

Like chronologies and encyclopedia essays, data dumps substitute an array of information for a reasoned analysis or argument. However, since they usually lack even the basic organizational structures offered by the other two types, they advertise their logical deficiencies most loudly.

To avoid ending up as a data dumper, make sure you have a working thesis to guide your research before you even begin. You should also keep in mind that not everything you learn about your topic necessarily belongs in your essay: a well-reasoned argument will imply that you have a good knowledge base.

(Adapted from Bean [20-24])

**Where to Turn for Help**

This publication is designed to be a general introduction to writing at the University of Guelph: always discuss questions you have about your writing with the instructor who assigned that particular writing assignment.
Once you’ve done that, you might also want to check out some of the other writing resources available from the Learning Commons:

- Book an appointment with one of our Writing Peers or staff writing consultants. They are trained to work with you at any stage of the writing process — whether you’re still trying to get started or wanting someone to look over a draft of your paper. All writing consultations are free and confidential.

- Come to one of the Drop-in Writing Help Sessions staffed by our writing consultants or peers. It’s best to come with one or two specific questions about your paper, since the amount of time we can spend with you at a drop-in varies according to the number of students waiting. Check our Website or the posters around the Learning Commons for the times and locations of Drop-in Writing Help Sessions each semester.

- Our publications on *Writing in the Arts and Social Sciences*, *Writing in the Sciences*, and *Referencing in the Sciences* are available for purchase from the Learning Commons desk.

- Our free Fastfacts handouts are available in hardcopy at the Learning Commons resource area or online through our Website:

  http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/
  WritingServices/WritingHandoutsLinks.html
Part of knowing how to write a paper involves understanding who will read it. In fact, it can be said that there is no such thing as writing that is “right” or “wrong,” but, rather, that there is only writing that is appropriate or inappropriate to a specific situation and for a specific audience at a specific time. Writing can take many forms and do many “jobs” even in one isolated setting, but its success might depend on how well it is suited to the context or situation for which it is written.

For example, each time you enter into an everyday conversation, you encounter and adjust to different circumstances and different audience expectations. Success or failure in the following hypothetical “real life” circumstances will be greatly determined by how well you can adjust your language and argument structure to the conversation:

- In an interview for a research internship, how would you convince the project manager to hire you? Would you use the same argument, language and demeanour to convince someone to go out with you?

- After a busy semester of socializing, extracurricular involvement, a heavy course load and poor time management, your average comes in at 66%. How would you describe the semester and its outcome to your roommate? How would you discuss it with your parents,
who agreed to help out with your university expenses as long as your average stayed above 70%?

If you are aware that you would change your argument in these different scenarios, what factors have you identified that make the difference? Part of your job as an academic writer is to assess what types of language and argument are appropriate in particular writing contexts — the discourse and structure your audience will expect — and use them effectively.

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**Academic Audiences**

The audience for your papers, of course, is most often your instructor, whose career probably includes the requirement to read and write academic texts, and who is, therefore, immersed in the conventions and expectations of academic writing. You can take certain steps to ensure that you are writing to your audience in a convincing and conventional manner, a quality both important for writing first university papers and for developing these skills as you continue your education in subsequent years and eventually move into your career.

One way you can begin to understand the nature of your audience is by asking questions about it:

- What are the audience’s biases?
- What values does the audience hold?
- What knowledge base does the audience have?
- What are the audience’s expectations?

You might be able to answer some of these questions by listening carefully and critically to the material your instructor presents in class, or from looking over your course outlines and
recommended texts. However, some of the answers — especially about your audience’s knowledge base — may only become clear after a certain amount of research and additional reading. And it is crucial, in any academic writing, to make sure you base your arguments on known facts rather than personal assumption or conjecture.

In other words, you need to distinguish between what you know about a subject and what you think about a subject. You might, for instance, think and write that it was “horrible” and “wrong” that many women were burned at the stake in 17th century colonial New England. No one would argue with those sentiments; however, it is merely an opinion, a perception of reality and not reality itself. It is not an informed academic argument. In order to develop an informed argument, you need to determine what is really known about the subject — for instance, the fact that 19 people and not dozens are recorded as suffering from this persecution, and that according to records of the Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692, most of the accused were hanged (none was burned and six of the victims were men).

Your paper, then, will address or argue your position on a particular topic in the context of what others know and have already written about the topic. In this respect, your writing joins a larger “conversation” of scholars and academic voices. How well you can “converse” (that is, express your thoughts in writing) in the specific course will partly determine your success at university writing.
Disciplinary Audiences

Each academic department (English Literature, Sociology, Political Science, Biology, Psychology, to name a few) is often fairly rigid in its requirements and follows thinking and writing patterns that are established and monitored by the discipline in which you are working. Ultimately, it is your instructor who decides how successfully you understand and can write using the conventions of that discipline.

The Vocabulary of the Disciplines

Make sure you understand and can use specialized words and phrases that may be unique to the particular discipline. While there may be seemingly insignificant differences in the way words are used by different academic disciplines, it is important that you can use those words in precisely the way that your instructor is expecting. For example, if you are doing a close reading in English literature, you will likely have to understand what a trope is; in psychology you may need to understand what cognitive awareness and situated cognition is; in sociology you might need to be familiar with the terms ethnocentric and enculturation; in the life sciences, you may have to develop and communicate an ethical position on issues such as stem cell research, so you must be familiar with terms such as ethics.

Style

Examine the sentence and paragraph length in the writing in your particular discipline. Are the sentences relatively long or short? Are they fairly straightforward, or are they complex and heavily subordinated? Are the verbs passive or active, or is there a blend? Recognise the level of formality and be aware of the tone that is expected of you. The use of the first person “I” is often not acceptable; however, there are times and places where it is
acceptable and is the best way to express a certain point clearly and precisely. Follow the example of the materials you read in your class and check with your instructor.

**Evidence**

What is acceptable as evidence in one discipline may not be acceptable as evidence in another. For example, the observable, quantifiable data and reproducible experimentation that are essential to chemistry or biology are quite different from the oral records that might be used in history; the paraphrases of research findings that are preferred in sociology will not do in a literature paper, where a direct quotation (evidence from the text) is often necessary. Usually the types of evidence a discipline deems acceptable speak to the values of the discipline: so, for example, in the literary world of words, it is important to quote words precisely, while in the sciences it is more important to present measurements clearly while accurately summarizing or paraphrasing what others have written.

**“Rules” and Methods of Organization**

Evidence alone — no matter how strong it is — is not sufficient in a specific discipline unless it follows that discipline’s accepted formats, conventions, and “rules” for organisation. Case studies, book reviews, progress reports, literary analyses all have accepted structures into which the content of your research is “placed.” While you should **always follow your instructors’ guidelines for the specific format of any assignment**, you can also familiarize yourself with the typical organizational structures of papers in your discipline. The chapter on “Types of University ‘Papers’” offers a brief summary of typical organizational structures for various types of papers. The other writing books in this series, *Writing in the Arts and Social Sciences* and *Writing in the*
Sciences contain more detailed information on organizational structures in the disciplines. Or, you can check out the resources available through our Learning Commons Website at:

http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/
WritingServices/index.html

Bibliographical Requirements (Citation and Reference Style)

Finally, learn the conventions of the discipline’s citation and formatting system. There are subtle but important differences between American Psychological Association (APA), Modern Language Association (MLA), Council of Biology Editors (CBE), and Chicago Manual of Style (Chicago) that reflect differences in the types of information and authority that are valued in various disciplines. There are also variations of these styles that have different names such as Turabian, Vancouver, and Harvard. Your course instructor might follow one of these, or any one of the many styles developed by field-specific journals, so look closely at your course outline for instructions and follow those instructions rigorously. Many instructors insist on strict adherence to the accepted style of the specific discipline.
Learning and Writing With Integrity

A Student Perspective

This section was written by Ashlee Cunsolo, Susan Robertson, and Jamie Schumann when they were 4th year students at the University of Guelph

As a new student, you’re now a member of the university community. This is an important relationship, which can be very fulfilling personally and academically, provided a balance exists between student rights and student responsibilities. It’s important to understand that while the university has an obligation to you, you also have an obligation to the institution.

The university will provide you with a variety of educational and social resources such as libraries, professors, teaching assistants, computer labs, food venues, and administrative and social support. The university supplies the actual infrastructure that makes your university education possible. Most importantly, the university provides you with the space and the opportunity to learn.

As a member of the university community, it is important to respect the role that this institution plays within society: the university exists not only for the benefit of students, but also for the benefit of the community at large. As a participant in the institution, it is both your personal and your academic
responsibility to maintain the integrity of the institution. Good inputs lead to good outputs, and a good reputation for the university leads to a good reputation for your degree.

Since you have the responsibility to maintain the integrity of the university, you are also obligated to ensure that you do not participate in, or encourage cheating, plagiarizing, or other forms of academic misconduct. Academic misconduct harms everyone. You have the ability, as well as the responsibility, to create a community of fairness and integrity.

Not only do you have an obligation to your institution and to your peers, you also have an obligation to yourself as a learner and as a person. Give yourself permission to try new things and allow yourself room for mixed success. University is a time where you can develop intellectually, morally, spiritually, and practically. Take advantage of this. Begin to foster a sense of personal growth, and cultivate a love of learning. Most importantly, rejoice in the process!

If you accept your responsibility to the university community, rejoice in the educational process, and learn to love learning, you can begin to view your education and your degree as a complete unit, where the final worth is greater than the sum of its parts. This holistic notion of schooling can provide the framework for your educational experience as a learner in the years to come. Be active in your education. Learn to be a learner. Enjoy the process. You are being presented with the exciting opportunity not only to receive a degree, but also to seek out an education.

In the end, it comes down to you. If you find yourself wondering if what you’re doing might be cheating, plagiarism, unfair collaboration, or the misrepresentation of the work of others as your own, we recommend that you examine your own
conscience and sense of integrity, and then check with someone (your professor or TA, staff in the Learning Commons) who understands the rules.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is the central principle on which the academic community depends. If a researcher falsifies data in order to support an hypothesis, or if a scholar steals the clever ideas of another and claims them as her or his own, the climate of trust that fosters the growth of knowledge and the creation of new ideas is destroyed. For students, copying others’ work damages the intellectual integrity of their academic experience; it prevents intellectual engagement with a discipline and inhibits learning. It’s unfair because it gives cheaters an advantage over other, more honest students. Moreover, since the value of a university degree is based on the public’s trust that graduates of that institution have gained a certain level of knowledge and ability, fraudulent shortcuts devalue the degree. In an attempt to prevent academic fraud, the university punishes those caught, and, depending on the crime, may even expel them from the university.

Plagiarism is perhaps the most common academic fraud and it can range from an extremely serious to a minor offence. Sometimes students knowingly attempt to deceive their instructors; sometimes they commit plagiarism because they are unclear about what it is.

What Exactly Is Plagiarism?

Plagiarism is a combination of stealing and lying about it afterwards. It means using others’ work and misrepresenting that
work as your own without giving the author credit: this includes ideas, words, data, computer programming, or any other creative endeavor. An extreme example would be copying or purchasing an entire paper and submitting it as your own. Less extreme would be submitting a paper you have written for credit in another course without prior permission from your instructor. Another, more common example, would be copying another author’s phrases, sentences, ideas, or arguments without citing the source.

**Penalties for Plagiarism**

The University of Guelph takes plagiarism seriously, and will assess one or more of the following penalties for those found guilty of it:

- Requirement to submit a new piece of work or partial or total loss of marks for an assignment or course
- An official warning that the next offence will be punished by suspension or expulsion from the university
- Rescinding of university-funded scholarships or bursaries
- Suspension from the university for one or two years
- A recommendation for expulsion from the university
- A recommendation to revoke or rescind a degree

**The Good News about Citing Sources**

Although we have been speaking about the negative reasons for avoiding plagiarism, the positive reasons to do so are even more important to students who want to achieve good grades. Referencing actually makes your work appear to be more academic and positions it within the on-going scholarly
conversation or debate in your discipline; it provides an authority to back up your arguments. Citations create the impression that your own argument is founded logically and systematically on previous work (and hence, credible). As a result, in many subjects, the more you reference the more scholarly your paper will be. And, more generally, referencing also benefits others who are interested in pursuing the subject beyond your paper.

**Plagiarism and the Internet**

In the last few years, attention has focussed on Internet plagiarism. Some people call it “the new plagiarism,” because the advent of the World Wide Web has made information retrieval so simple that student plagiarism appears to have increased: just press a button, and information can be added to your own paper. Also, there is a kind of anarchy and a blurring of the boundaries on the Web which makes it easy for students to assume that all of the “free” material available there is not governed by the same rules as for printed material. But it is. In addition, although it is now easier for a student to purchase an entire paper over the Web, to copy an entire article from an on-line journal, or to block and paste entire sentences or paragraphs from an electronic text directly into their papers, it is also much easier for those marking the papers to find out the source of the information. Instructors can use easy search methods to find electronic articles which use particular words or phrases, and many universities purchase proprietary software or hire Internet businesses which use algorithms to find any instance of plagiarism.

The antidote to unknowingly plagiarizing Web material is to follow our Golden Rules #4, #5, and #6. Downloading the material (make sure you have an up-to-date virus-checker running on your computer) will ensure that you have the URL. Better still, printing the text will make it easy to copy all of the required
bibliographical material (author, dates of publication, of access, publisher, etc.) for your reference list, should you later choose to incorporate some of the information into your paper. Ultimately, if you treat all of the words and information you receive from the Internet exactly the same way you would with material from a print-based article or book, you will be safe. For help in citing and referencing from Internet sites, follow the rules in our referencing Fastfacts for APA, CBE, Chicago and MLA styles.

![Ten Golden Rules to Avoid Plagiarism](image)

1. If you didn’t write the paper yourself, **don’t** hand it in. (Don’t buy, commission, download, borrow papers from other sources, or write a paper with a friend and each submit it as your own work.)

2. Get written permission from your instructor before turning in a paper you have used for another course. (For example, if you have written a paper in a Russian history course dealing with some aspect of the Soviet Union and then the next year take a Political Science course covering the same country and period, you should not submit that paper again to your Political Science professor.)

3. You **must** give credit in a citation, footnote, or endnote, whenever you use **over three words** from another source (this will appear in your text within quotation marks) or **whenever you use someone else’s idea, even when phrased in your own words.**

4. When taking notes or downloading from another source, copy all of the bibliographic information right beside the information.
5. When taking notes or downloading make sure you immediately put quotation marks around any words or phrases copied directly from the source.

6. When taking notes and paraphrasing an idea, look away from the source, write your paraphrase, check back to ensure that you have not used the original words, then circle your paraphrase to indicate that it is in your own words. You will still need to provide the accurate reference citation for the idea, so write down all of the bibliographical material right then and there.

7. Never cut and paste text to create a paper from several quoted sources, supplying only your own introduction and conclusion. This is a patchwork quilt, not an essay.

8. Quote all the words that you have copied. A common type of plagiarism occurs when students quote a sentence or two, include a citation, then continue on copying the words from the source without quotation marks, implying that these were the students’ own summarizing words. (This is wrong even with a concluding citation).

9. Never fake a citation or reference in your reference list in order to pad your research list.

10. When engaged in a group project, always get detailed instructions from your professor about ownership of work. When writing individual papers resulting from collaborative group work, give credit in citations for ideas generated by other members of the group.
How Not to Plagiarize

Paraphrasing involves more than substituting a few words of your own to slightly change the original text. Compare the following versions of this original text:

**Original:** From Bliss, Michael. 1982. *The Discovery of Insulin.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, p. 190. (Chapter 8, Section I, Paragraph 1)

Most medical people despised the press, holding attitudes not totally unfamiliar today. Reporters tended to be suckers for every quack, half-quack, over-eager scientist, or naive country doctor who thought he had a serum to cure tuberculosis, a herbal remedy for cancer, or a new surgical procedure to rejuvenate the aged. When the newspapers were not wasting space on undeserving medical stories, they were over-playing legitimate news, getting their facts wrong, and generally making a nuisance of themselves interfering in the lives and practices of busy professionals. Doctors’ deep suspicion of what they read in the newspapers and even in the less-carefully edited of the medical journals, helps to explain some of the early skepticism about insulin in countries like Britain: “Oh, the Americans are always curing everything; this week it’s diabetes.” Even in Canada and the United States it was some months before there was enough confirmation of the unlikely news from Toronto to convince wire services and the more sceptical doctors and editors that insulin was, indeed, the real thing.

**Version 1:**

Most medical people hated the press, because reporters tended to believe every over-eager scientist or naive country doctor who thought he had a cure for
something. Newspapers often over-played legitimate news, got their facts wrong, and interfered in the lives and practices of busy professionals. Doctors became deeply suspicious of what they read in the newspapers and less-carefully edited medical journals, therefore were sceptical about insulin in countries like Britain because it seemed the Americans were always curing everything.

- Version 1 represents **outright plagiarism**. The author has merely shortened the original version, copying most of the words and phrasing of the original without giving credit to the original author.

**Version 2:**

Most medical people hated the press, because reporters tended to believe every “over-eager scientist or naive country doctor” (p. 190) who thought he had a cure for something. Newspapers often over-played legitimate news, got their facts wrong, and interfered “in the lives and practices of busy professionals” (p. 190). Doctors became deeply suspicious of what they read in the newspapers and less-carefully edited medical journals, therefore were skeptical about insulin in countries like Britain because it seemed the Americans were “always curing everything” (p. 190).

- Version 2 is **slightly more sophisticated**, but still constitutes **plagiarism**. While some phrases have been appropriately enclosed in quotation marks and cited, the entire passage is built on someone else’s idea, and most of the words that aren’t in quotation marks still come directly out of the original.
Version 3:
Insulin as a treatment for diabetes was not widely accepted as “the real thing” (p. 190) by the medical profession for many months after “the unlikely news from Toronto” (p. 190). Doctors had become skeptical about the legitimacy of medical discoveries as reported both by newspapers, which tended to waste space on “undeserving medical stories” (p. 190), and by some less professional medical journals.

- Version 3 is not strictly plagiarised, but it is a poorly-written paraphrase. The words in quotations are poorly chosen: quotes should be reserved for specific or particularly effective phrasing. While the student has appropriately cited each quote, using these quotations necessitates three separate citations to the same source page within a two-sentence paraphrase.

Version 4:
Insulin as a treatment for diabetes was not widely accepted for many months because doctors had become skeptical about the legitimacy of medical discoveries as reported both by newspapers and by some less professional medical journals (p. 190).

- Version 4 is a sample of appropriate paraphrasing. It effectively summarizes the key ideas in the passage in the student’s own words and provides the citation at the end to indicate the source of the ideas.

To learn more about avoiding plagiarism and the larger issue of academic integrity, visit the Academic Integrity Website, available through the Learning Commons home page at www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/
So what exactly is a university “paper”? Perhaps it might help to first consider what it is not. A paper is not just a formal combination of various stage-managed parts, that once combined with, say 3,000 odd words on a chosen topic will produce an “paper.” So often when we do research on a subject, we find out many interesting and intellectually impressive ideas and we want to include them, no matter what. The result is akin to a drive through that particular countryside (the topic), noticing at random any interesting features of the terrain as we pass by. At the end, we know we’ve been on a trip, noticed some things, but don’t really know why we took the trip, or what the destination was. This is usually the kind of creation produced by the student who looks on his/her project as an attempt “to fill” ten pages, a task which always seems to be a daunting one.

Probably the most common type of paper is the essay, and this is perhaps a good place to begin to understand what a paper is. The French verb *essayer* means “to try” or “to attempt,” and in writing an essay and other papers you are *attempting* to present your position on a specific issue or “case” and to convince your audience to see your view of, or your position on, that issue or case. In a way, you are presenting, in graphic terms, your intellectual ability. The process of writing — creative and potentially infinite in its possibilities (that is, you could revise and re-write endlessly!) — is at odds with what you are trying to end up with: a finished, “finite” writing product that is polished and
ready to submit to your instructor by a specific deadline (missing which might cost you marks!).

Even though essays might be the most common form of “paper,” they are by no means the only kind; in fact, not only are there many types of papers, there are even many types of essays. The types of writing assignments you have will be strongly influenced by the discipline you are in. Following is a brief synopsis of some of the types of “papers” you might be asked to write. For examples and more detailed information on writing these types of papers, check out the Writing in the Arts and Social Sciences and Writing in the Sciences volumes in this series, available for purchase at the Learning Commons reception desk.

**Research Essay or Term Paper**

Essay, paper, research essay or research paper, term paper or term assignment. You might be confused by the number of different names for this assignment, but they all refer to the same basic kind of work: a paper that asks you to find information on a specific topic — in books, journal articles, lectures, electronic resources, and/or your own research — and to integrate those sources into a coherent structure that will inform or persuade a reader. The aspect of integration is crucial: a good research paper doesn’t just present an assortment of interesting facts or even interpretations on a topic, it shapes them together into one “big picture”

A crucial requirement for a good research paper is a strong thesis: the explicit, arguable opinion you have about the significance of the research material. All the analysis, interpretation, and examples you use should work together to persuade your reader that your opinion is a valid interpretation of
the significance of these sources. (For more information on developing a thesis, see “The Thesis” on page 66.)

**Literary Essay, Literary Analysis**

In an introductory English literature course, you may be asked to write a *literary essay* or *literary analysis* which “interprets the meaning” of a poem, short story or novel and uses only that piece of work and your own ideas as your sources. In order to make such an interpretation, you may need to enhance the literary reading skills you used in high school. A common procedure of reading and analysing a literary text on its own is called *explication* or *close reading*. A close reading, as the name implies, entails reading a passage with attention to details — image patterns, word choices, themes, structures, or stylistic choices — and analyzing how they work together, or function within the longer work, to convey a particular meaning. Your thesis in such a paper would communicate exactly what elements of the work you are examining and how they contribute to the meaning of the work as a whole.

In more advanced English courses you may also be using the published opinions of other critics to support and expand your interpretation: you may find critics who agree with your general interpretation and use them to offer authoritative proof for the validity of your argument; or you may find critics who disagree with your interpretation, and be able to strengthen your position by pointing out the flaws in the critic’s argument.

The crucial requirement for any literary paper, whether it is based exclusively in your own reading or uses other research sources, is a strong *thesis*: the explicit, arguable opinion you have about the significance of the work. All the analysis, interpretation, and examples you use should work together to persuade your
reader that your opinion is a valid interpretation for the literary work. For more information on developing a thesis, see “The Thesis” on page 66.

**Literature Review, Research Review**

“Literature” in this case does not refer to novels, plays, poems, fiction or other “works of literature.” It refers to studies, research, and scientific findings that are published in academic journals and books on a specific topic, often in the social and natural sciences (as in, “The recent literature shows that the dangers of smoking to the unborn child have been underestimated”).

An assignment requiring a literature review or research review may be asking you to choose a specific topic and then to read journal articles written by experts on that topic. Your paper will compare and contrast research results and findings published in the articles. A portion of this review will generally have a “critical” evaluation — you will indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the source and to assess its validity or usefulness.

Often students treat literature reviews simply as a synopsis of individual journal articles: they devote one paragraph (or one section of the paper) to a description of one article, then move on to the next. To them, this seems to be an easy and logical way to structure the paper.

However, a good literature review goes beyond merely summarizing individual articles or experiments; it offers a structure that shows how this body of literature fits together. Central to this structure is a thesis or an argument, even if it is only your finding that “most recent researchers in this field agree on/are interested in XYZ.”
In order to shape this argument, try to find the common themes, ideas or methodologies among your materials, and use those to structure your paper rather than simply organizing the literature review by article. Looking for these commonalities means that you should be very selective about the articles you choose: don’t just use the first few you find; select ones that have some points of contact built in.

Grouping your articles around those common points lets you compare and contrast what previous researchers have written about them. You may have to discuss some articles in more than one paragraph if they touch on more than one of your categories, but it will give your reader a clearer picture of how the previous research fits together. Once you’ve shown what topics previous research has covered, it’s often easy to identify areas where there are gaps that require further research, which is often the purpose of a literature review.

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**Book Review, Book Report**

A book review or book report focuses on a single work. More than just a summary or paraphrase of the key points of the book, a good book review, like a good literature review, offers your critical opinion about the strengths and weaknesses of an article or book. To accomplish this, you will have to read and understand the book in its entirety, to get a perspective on what the author sets out to do and how well she accomplishes that goal. It will be necessary to identify the book’s thesis and evaluate how well the structure of the book supports that thesis. You might also need to identify any biases, methodological or theoretical stances, or even evaluate how sound the book’s thesis is; in more senior courses, you might need to consider how that
thesis fits into its discipline or field. The paper you write will convey the results of that evaluation.

**Lab Reports, Research Reports**

The purpose of a scientific lab or research report is to reveal to others some specific data you have collected and what you think they mean. A report must be written as concisely and clearly as possible so that the reader can grasp the material quickly and could accurately repeat or expand on your research. While the specifics of formatting a lab report might vary from course to course, most scientific lab or research reports follow a fairly standard template: Introduction, Materials and Methods, Results, Discussion. Most of the lab reports you will write in first year will follow this format. Another book in this series, *Writing in the Sciences*, discusses writing lab reports in detail, as does our Fastfacts “Writing Lab Reports or Research Reports.”

**Science Summaries**

A common type of term paper in the first-year biology program requires you to read and understand one recent, primary journal article and summarize its content concisely. The purpose of this assignment is not to get caught up in minute details of the article; rather, it is to introduce you to the scientific process of reading, understanding, and critiquing scientific literature.

This assignment may represent the first time that you are asked to read primary scientific literature — the kind of articles that describe the original research of the authors, and describe the experiments they carried out, their observations or results, and the authors’ interpretation of their results.
It is VERY important that you find a primary journal article that you can understand. Often students choose an article that uses complicated language or advanced methodology, and find themselves unable to understand the article, much less summarize it.

Before you make the final decision that a primary article is appropriate for your paper, you should read it several times in order to ensure that you clearly understand the purpose of the paper and how the authors carried out their research. You should be able to describe the types of questions that the authors are asking, and, in a general way, describe how the authors set out to answer their questions (Methods), and what they conclude (Results and Discussion).
First Things First: What to Do Before You Write

A Brief Moment for Time Management

If there is one overarching difference between the high school and university learning environments, it is time. Although it might appear on the surface that you are spending much less time on schoolwork than you did in high school, look again. Your course load and the amount of reading required at university will almost certainly increase significantly over that of your last year of high school… and you will get very little — if any — “direction” in making the best use of that time. As an example of this ratio of class time to out-of-class study time, if you have 15 hours of direct contact time per week at university (time spent in the classroom), instructors may recommend 2 additional study hours outside of class per hour in class. That’s 45 hours of work, each and every of the semester’s 12 weeks — and that may not include extra time spent studying for exams or writing papers! On top of this, you will possibly be juggling social activities, employment, sporting activities, and university clubs. Time management, therefore, will be a key to success.

For example, in choosing an essay topic, performing library research, reading research materials both quickly and in-depth, writing rough copies, getting feedback, revising, editing, and polishing, checking reference style and accuracy, and final
printing, you may need to dedicate at least 3 hours a week for a
period of 5 weeks to one course alone! And, not surprisingly, that
is exactly what most successful students tell us they do — begin
early and set aside regular time to work on assignments.
Assuming you can research and write a paper in the evening or
two before it’s due is always a mistake. For more information on
time management strategies for university, see the *Time
Management for University Students* publication in this series, drop by
the Learning Commons reference desk, or check out our
resources at:

http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/ByTopic/
Learning/TimeManagement/index.html

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**Choosing the Assignment**

Most professors teaching first-year courses will give
students a selection of essay topics from which to choose.
Sometimes they will allow students who have a particular interest
to choose their own topics. But if you are given a list of essay
topics, there are certain things that you should think about and do
in the course of making your choice.

- **Always choose the topic you find most interesting** or
  intriguing. You will work harder and retain your interest
  longer, and most students say that interest in the topic is
  the single most important factor in writing a successful
  essay.

- **Accurately read** the questions or statements you have
  been given. This is also most important. Many an essay
  has travelled down the wrong path because the writer
misunderstood the emphasis of the essay question. (See “Reading the Assignment” below.)

- If the essay topics appear as statements, **turn them into questions** to find out what you really should be writing about. If the topic statement is, for instance, a very general one such as: “Water pollution in the Great Lakes,” you might restate it as a question that expresses the relationships implied in that phrase. So you might ask “What are the major causes of pollution in the Great Lakes?” or “How polluted are the Great Lakes today?” or “What can we do to keep the Great Lakes clean?” This will help you to choose the focus of your essay. And the answer to your question, of course, will be your thesis argument. Of course, it is always a good idea to quickly check with your TA or professor to see if you are on the right track.

There will be times when you will be asked to choose your own essay topic. Although you will have the freedom to choose a subject that really interests you, you also may find it difficult to decide what to do. Here are some suggestions:

- **Reread your lecture notes.** Your professor may have indicated topics that are controversial, that need further investigation, or that are central to the interests of the course.

- **Go back to your text.** Glance over the table of contents, the index, and the highlighted areas (sometimes appearing as boxes, or other graphic devices). Or go to the library and look through other survey texts in the same field.

- **Make a list** of the things that interest you about your course and of the course-related issues. Choose the most
suitable of these, restate it as a question, and for five minutes write whatever comes into your head about it. Reread your writing and see if you have found a topic that is viable (i.e. you can find research material here in Guelph), reasonable (one that is important in the field), properly focussed (for the length of the essay, course level), and arguable (that is, where you can take a position that is defendable).

- **Don’t dismiss the power of collaborative thinking.** Get together with a few friends (preferably in your course, or who have taken the course before), and brainstorm together to find good topics. You can further this exercise by asking each other “what would you want to know about my topic if you were reading a paper?” or “what do you know about my topic that I might use in my essay?” Or just asking each other questions can help you to realize in what direction your research might develop.

- Last but not least, if nothing else helps you to find a topic, **go to your TA or professor** for help. They will probably be full of potential ideas. One thing to watch, though, is that you don’t leave this until the last moment. Nothing serves to lower your public image with a teacher like turning up on the doorstep looking for an essay topic only days before the essay is due.

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**Reading the Assignment**

As obvious as this sounds, reading the assignment strategically and analytically is the first step to producing a paper that is focused and on-topic. Most assignments have some sort of “structure” or “format.” Do not simply read the question over
quickly and begin writing: understand its structure. Read through the assignment carefully and methodically, asking yourself questions and making notes. Talk to your instructor immediately about anything you do not understand. Before you begin any writing or researching, make sure you are clear about what is being asked of you: this could save an immense amount of time later in the writing process.

What does the assignment “say about” the instructor? What does the instructor want you to be able to demonstrate? How does the question fit in with the other material you’ve encountered in the course? If, after you have put a lot of thought into the issue, you still are unsure of what is expected of you, ask your instructor or teaching assistant. Generally, they will be pleased to assist a diligent, hard-working student by clarifying or elaborating on an assignment.

*Look for the basic structural elements of the question*

Often, the way the assignment or question is worded contains several specific “clues” that help you decode what kind of paper your instructor is looking for, or what kind of paper you should be writing.

- Examine any **background** or “preface” material; there may be some sort of introduction or general discussion. These may hold clues for you to follow.

- **Note the “tone”** of the assignment: is the instructor asking you to “write a polished critique” on the subject? Is s/he asking for you to “be concise”? “Discuss exhaustively”? Although your instructor may burst into your class in his/her Birkenstocks and ponytail eating a slice of pizza and roaming around the class gesticulating wildly, do not “read into” this persona an opportunity to
write informally and casually. Instructors, for all their casual theatrics and laid-back attitudes, still may want to see an “academic” approach and style and may be very tough and rigorous in demanding it.

- What supplementary information is provided? While some instructors at university may leave you completely to your own devices, others will offer “signposts” and hints for ways to approach the assignment — use these hints. Some may even reveal a “process” for you to follow in the very order in which they make suggestions or ask questions. Be aware of these cues.

- Don’t ignore the “details.” If the instructor wants a 12-point, sans-serif font with 1.75 inch margins on 50-bond paper, give it to him/her. Pay attention to due dates and page lengths: a paper between 3-5 pages probably focuses on one major idea only, and briefly at that. A paper between 7-10 pages (roughly 2500 words) could more fully present and support a more complex thesis statement. This is probably the basic length for most traditional comparison/contrast essays. Papers approaching 20 pages in length allow significantly more complexity and focus. Instructors expect a lot of course material and concepts to be drawn into the paper, theories explained and applied, as well as secondary resources used. In your first couple of years at university, a paper this length is unusual. If it is assigned, it would be considered a major paper submitted at the end of the course. Finally, a paper of over 30 pages is usually reserved for senior year courses and is often the basis for a significant percentage of the student’s grade. Increasingly more complex, this paper makes more intensive use of theory, secondary resources, shows
elements of original research, and approaches graduate-level work.

- **Highlight important verbs** in the assignment. Do the “W5” questions (who, what, where, when, why) come into play? Are you being asked to “compare,” “discuss,” “analyse”? If so, your instructor might be looking for the following kinds of content:

  **Compare:** This familiar term means exactly what you expect it to: you will look at two (or more) issues, works, or theories, and determine areas of similarity and difference. You may have done this many times in your high school papers. However, in university, you will need to go beyond merely presenting your points to a structured argument about the implications or significance of the similarities and differences. Usually the instructor will identify the materials for comparison; if not, remember to choose wisely: make sure your selections aren’t so similar or dissimilar that there isn’t anything useful to say about them.

  For example, a first-year English paper might ask you to “Compare the influences of the female characters in *Jane Eyre* on Jane’s development.” You might start out by noting that the hateful Mrs. Reed actively oppresses Jane, the beautiful Miss Temple offers Jane encouragement and respect, Helen Burns teaches her tolerance and forbearance, and Miss Ingram makes her see that beauty should not be defined by outward attractiveness and social class. These are all good observations, but still beg the question, “so what?” To develop an argument from these points, you need to formulate a thesis that ties them all together, perhaps something like: “The role models offered by Miss
Temple, Helen Burns and Miss Ingram help Jane to understand what kind of woman she wants to become and give her the mature confidence to forgive Mrs. Reed.” Formulating the thesis allows you to move beyond simple comparison to arguing the structural significance of your observations.

**Discuss:** This term can cause a lot of misunderstanding because it suggests talk or “chat.” However, an academic paper ought not be casual, undirected, or chatty. Your work should not use the tone of the spoken language you use with friends or peers. Even though we use the metaphor of an academic “conversation” throughout this book, that doesn’t mean that you can “discuss” your ideas in a paper using the same language that you might use to talk them out with a classmate over coffee. Instead, an assignment asking you to “discuss” an issue is directing you to establish an argument in an organized and non-conversational way that emphasizes a clear thesis.

So, the assignment that asks you to “discuss the significance of apple production in the Canadian agrifood system” isn’t just asking for a random collection of data or observations on where and how many apples are grown, or even how much revenue apple sales generated, as impressive as those statistics might be. Instead, your “discussion” needs to take the form of some kind of an argument, so that at the very least, your reader knows that “apple production is/is not important to Canada because….”

For example, if you structure your discussion around the idea that “Apples are an important commodity in the Canadian agrifood system because meeting the high market demand for apples, both domestically and
Internationally, helps the Canadian economy to grow,” you might use your data to show how apple production has positive economic effects on local economies as well as Canada’s trade balance.

**Analyse:** Perhaps a difficult sounding term, but it isn’t really: an analysis breaks something down into its parts and examines those parts as they constitute the whole. It is a process that we actually do a lot of in our day-to-day lives: reading and interpreting a restaurant menu; selecting a particular book, CD, or piece of music; reading a map or bus schedule in an unfamiliar city; listening to a speaker and deciding if you “agree” or “disagree” with him/her; critiquing a movie’s acting, script, special effects, and camera angle; or evaluating the effectiveness of the tactical strategies used in sporting events.

A question that asks you to “analyze the risk factors associated with heart disease,” then, is asking for more than a list of eight or so items you can identify. You might start out with the list — cigarette smoking, hypertension, obesity, diabetes, genetic/hereditary factors, cholesterol, sedentary lifestyle, stress levels — but an analysis requires that you move beyond the list to create some kind of grouping or categories that show **how** these individual items fit under the umbrella of “risk factors.” There might be several ways to envision the groupings: by severity, by preventability, by whether they are physical or behavioural, etc. Your job is to find a grouping that makes sense to you and that helps you demonstrate how the component parts relate to each other and how they fit together under the assigned topic.
Often the particular structure you create for your analysis serves as the “original” idea or argument that your paper should be based on.

**Using the Assignment**

Since understanding the question is such an integral part of writing the paper, you should always keep the assignment in front of you while you’re working on the paper. As you read, think, and write, refer to the assignment frequently: use it as an “anchor” to help you stay on topic.

**Reading it Right: A Checklist**

- **“Read” the class and recognize contexts**
  “Read” the class as you read the assignment. Reflect on what has been going on in lectures and discussions and look for possible clues. Consider the assignment in the light of what you’ve been discussing in lectures. Obviously, the assignment is designed to test specific course material covered. Or, just as valuable for directing your research, does the assignment seem to point to things not discussed? How does this assignment compare to/ differ from an earlier one?

- **“Read” the instructor**
  What is the instructor’s style? — “front-of-the-class-lecture”; discussions; suggestions; repeated themes, theories, studies; question and answer? What materials does s/he seem to refer to frequently? What background does s/he seem to draw on regularly?
Isolate Key Terms and Break the Assignment into Parts — “Divide and Conquer”

- Address and define terms you find difficult, have multiple meanings, or that are abstract, vague, general
- Locate key verbs: is the assignment asking you to discuss, compare/contrast, summarize, analyze?
- What do any other words seem to indicate?
- Consider “How + W5” (who, what, where, when, why)
- Decide whether you are being asked for information: “define,” “illustrate,” “explain;” for a relationship: “compare,” “contrast;” or for an interpretation: “assess,” “justify,” “prove,” “evaluate,” “analyze,” “support”; or, a combination of these verbs in a multi-part question
- Consider other detail in the assignment: “You may want to consider...”; “It may be useful to read ...”  
  These comments may reveal your instructor’s thought processes on a subject or be “clues” to what specifically your instructor is looking for.

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Researching the Assignment

Sometimes, students faced with a looming deadline and no sense of what they should say are tempted to head straight to the library or the internet and start “researching,” hoping that a thesis will present itself. As efficient as this might sound, it will always be a waste of time. There are literally limitless possibilities
for research, and it is usually impossible to find something if you
don’t know what you’re looking for. Before you begin
researching, always take the time to narrow your focus to a
specific aspect of the topic you have been assigned — and frame
a working thesis. You can then target your research more
efficiently instead of wasting time reading irrelevant material.

If your paper requires the use of secondary research
sources, you will no doubt find yourself heading for the campus
library. It might be overwhelming enough to realize that the
library gives you immediate access to literally thousands and
thousands of general reference books, journal and periodical
publications, newspapers and magazines (both popular and
academic), databases, an audio-visual materials, maps, rare books,
and many other specialised archival collections. However, as a
University of Guelph student, you also have easy access to
virtually the entire holdings of the University of Waterloo and
Wilfrid Laurier libraries as well, through the Tri-Universities
Group agreement. This doesn’t even begin to take into account
Ontario’s system of inter-library loans. With so much material
available, the research possibilities are endless, but you have a
deadline looming, so you have to rein them in. Use the following
guidelines when approaching library research.

*Always have a working thesis before you begin researching*

It is usually impossible to find something if you don’t
know what you’re looking for, especially when there are so many
places to look. Consider your assignment carefully before you
come to the library. Narrow your focus to a specific aspect of the
topic and develop a working thesis. Your working thesis might
not end up being your final thesis: you might even find enough
compelling evidence to contradict it that you end up changing
your mind entirely. But it has given you a place to start, and allowed you to target your research more efficiently instead of wasting time reading reams of material that turned out to be irrelevant to the idea you decided to develop. (See “The Thesis” on page 66 for more information on formulating a working thesis.)

Ask a librarian

At the start of the semester, there are always tours and user information sessions that are offered by the library. Take advantage of them: they are the best way to get a sense of what sorts of useful reference information the library holds, as well as how to access it, materials like historical abstracts, government publications, biographical encyclopaedia, and other specialised indexes such as Index Medicus, PubMed, Index to Canadian Legal Periodical Literature, MLA International Bibliography, Book Review Digest, Communications Abstracts, and Social Sciences Index. If you can’t get to the library in person for one of their sessions, work through some of their online tutorials at:

http://www2.lib.uoguelph.ca/help/research/tutorials/

Whether you take advantage of the library sessions or not, you should know that probably the most valuable resource the library offers you is the librarians themselves. They have made a career of understanding the scope of the library’s research holdings, and can usually make informed suggestions on where to look for the types of research materials you need. You don’t even have to be in the library building to get help from a librarian. To learn about all the ways you can tap into a librarian’s expertise check their Website at

http://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/help/
Choose materials wisely

Begin by working up a bibliography, using the library’s various search functions, of all of the recent books and articles that would discuss your topic. After you have made up a list of books and articles (as up-to-date and as focussed as your essay demands), arrange them in order of most-to-least useful. This is the order in which you should read. If you run out of time, you will have spent the time you had in the most appropriate and efficient manner.

Many of the books and articles you will read will summarize some of the same material. Learn to skim over these portions, as well as to search through material for key words which are important to your paper.

Always write down the full title and call number of each book, article, etc. At peak paper-researching times, you’ll be glad you don’t have to look up the call number again when you are creating your bibliography or works cited.

References

Regardless of the resource you are using, always make sure to take careful note of bibliographic information — author, title, publisher, page numbers. Record this data carefully at the time you are reading it. If you end up using the material in your paper, you will have to provide the reference information to avoid plagiarizing, and it is much easier to take the information from your notes than have to go back to the library to look it up again — and run the risk that someone else has the material out.

You can also take advantage of the good referencing habits of published scholars. Scrutinize your source’s footnotes, endnotes, and bibliographies for other relevant materials. Don’t be afraid to “footnote hop;” it is a valuable academic research
strategy! By skimming through the footnotes of other scholars’ articles or books, you may locate other sources that are important for your subject, and that you will want to read. But never, under any circumstances, use those references to “pad” your bibliography and make it look like you researched more material than you actually did. Such misrepresentation is a form of academic misconduct.

See the section on “Plagiarism and Academic Integrity” for more information about how to make sure you are using your references in an appropriate manner.

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**Active Reading for University Writing**

One way you can help elevate your level of thinking is to engage in a more systematic, “active” form of reading. The method you use to read texts at university can have an impact on your success with university writing. Many instructors have noted that students often use a “passive” reading process that seeks only to understand basic content, rather than the more critical, questioning reading process that university demands. Recall the idea that academic writing process is a “conversation,” and that “active” reading is part of that conversation: rather than merely reading to absorb information, active readers challenge the texts they read — they question, criticize, problematise, test, and “argue” with these sources. Active readers continually examine what they are reading for how it supports (or fails to support) their research question or the issue they are exploring in their own writing. Active reading is closely related to Bloom’s “thinking” categories: at various times in the researching and writing process, you will read to simply collect information, then to comprehend it, to analyse it, to apply it, and to evaluate it.
One of the things that often discourages university students from reading actively is an assumption that any academic texts they encounter must be “right” or “true.” While they have almost certainly gone through a rigorous peer-editing process before they were published, remember that these texts are not the ultimate and only truth about a particular topic; they are one author’s particular contribution to an ongoing conversation. As you hone your critical thinking skills, you need to learn how to question and respond to these texts.

Active, critical reading, then, is a two-fold process: it entails questioning what you have read and writing brief notes (annotations) about that reading. It will take longer than skimming a text with a highlighter, but it is an investment that will pay off in a much more sophisticated engagement with what the author is trying to convey.

While reading your sources (and only if these sources are your own personal copies and not library property), record the issues that make you think: draw arrows, use brackets and underlining, highlight passages, jot notes, draft summaries, write marginalia, use sticky tabs to indicate that (and where) you have questions, agreements, and disagreements with the text. Number the paragraphs that seem to you to build layers of meaning. Circle words and phrases such as therefore, on the one hand... on the other hand, reason, effect, in contrast to. You may want to consider using freewriting to record your responses or formulate questions. Write quickly what you think about what you have just read, without worrying about grammar and punctuation. Pursue and develop your ideas and questions; for instance, you may want to examine your original annotations and make further notes or ask further questions.

Some writers use a double-entry notebook; one column notes passages of interest and the adjacent column records
reactions to or questions about that passage. The following example shows how a reader might use the double-entry format to record reactions to Neil Postman’s *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSTMAN SAYS...</th>
<th>MY NOTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>p.5 “Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that.”</td>
<td>He says it’s both a burden and a blessing…but his real focus here seems to be more on the burden part of things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p.117 “What is clear is that, to date, computer technology has served to strengthen technopoly’s hold, to make people believe that technological innovation is synonymous with human progress.”</td>
<td>Shows how the widespread acceptance of technology has been leading us down a dangerous path—not all innovations are improving humanity… I think I agree, but his phrasing is pretty disempowering—the idea that we have been “made” to believe something…hmm… seems like he has a fairly constructivist point of view.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These strategies — taking careful notes, free writing, using double-entry notebooks, summarizing — prepare you for the next stage: analysing what you have read.

*Observe, Connect, Interpret, Evaluate*

While the specifics of what you observe during your reading will depend on the discipline you are working in (history, psychology, sociology, biology, geography, English literature), you will need to observe the argument, the supporting evidence, the kind of research undertaken, and even the use of language and
vocabulary. Having observed and noted all of these issues and details, you must connect them and locate a relationship (or lack thereof) between them. Ask these and other questions:

- Is much of the same research repeated while other sources are referred to less often?
- What types of evidence are offered to make the case? Are they dependable and appropriate?
- What kind of language is used to drive the writer’s point home?

Answering these questions and others will help you make certain connections between points in the text. At this juncture, it may be necessary to re-read the source with these potential points of connection at the forefront of your mind.

Connections now made, you can begin to think about a basic analysis. Interpreting what you have read is crucial to successful university writing and moves well beyond merely stating what happened in a text. In effect, you are “reading between the lines” of the document, determining what it “means.” Although another critical reader may read something different between the lines, you should nonetheless attempt to frame your own interpretations of what your source means with close, careful attention to the details of the text, valid connections between these details, and a reasonable conclusion as to what “message” the writer was intent on communicating.

The highest level of thinking in Bloom’s taxonomy — and the level to which you must eventually strive in your university writing — is evaluation. Similarly, it is important when reading to make some sort of reasoned judgement about what you have just read. While your interpretation might be (relatively)
neutral in value, your evaluation judges the merits of the article, chapter, or book you are reading:

- Does it make a fair argument about the issue?
- Does it take into account biases and prejudices?
- Does it present its evidence in an honest, ethical manner?
- Is its logic clear?
- Does it effectively communicate the writer’s intentions?

The evaluation you make is more than just saying, “After reading this article, I feel the writer is saying that the Salem witchcraft trials were a horrible persecution.” It evolves out of a systematic inquiry into the writer’s methods; it is reading grounded in a critical methodology which enables you to write that this historian fails to employ certain pieces of evidence in making his claim about the veracity of the trials.

**Critical Reading and the World Wide Web**

The Internet provides an immense amount of potentially useful information, but it is a double-edged sword. Caught between the entertainment value of “surfing” the Internet and the research value of exploring the World Wide Web, you must be aware that a lot of material you find may not have an academic quality and may not therefore be appropriate for use in your essay. Much of this information could be simply wrong because it has not gone through any kind of objective academic peer-review process. The material is usually uncorroborated, can be methodically unsound, and is often biased. It is your responsibility to determine the value and credibility of the material you find on the World Wide Web. The library’s online tutorial can help you polish your web evaluation skills:

http://www2.lib.uoguelph.ca/help/research/tutorials/
You can also use the following checklist:

- Does the site offer the name or organization of the person responsible? This simple accountability could be a basic requirement in helping you determine the value of the material. If it’s from a university Website, it’s probably reliable.

- How clearly are the site’s sources indicated, and how much context does the source provide? Without knowing where the material has been drawn from and how it has been used, you will likely not be able to trust it as a suitable academic resource.

- How much does the material present in the way of countering argument or opposing views? Academic papers, as has been pointed out in this booklet, are engaged in a kind of “conversation,” acknowledge alternative views, and refute them logically.

- What is the last revision date of the material? Websites can easily be posted and abandoned, leaving inaccurate or out-of-date information on them.

- What is the suffix of the site’s URL? .com indicates a commercial site .gov indicates a government site .net indicates a network site .org indicates a not-for-profit group .edu indicates educational sites (including U.S. colleges)
Getting started with the actual writing, after the hours of preliminary work, can be difficult for many students. Call it the “tyranny of the blank sheet,” the “snow-filled” page, the 8.5x11 archipelago, or writer’s block, it all means the same thing: as American author Joseph Heller has noted in the epigraph of this book, every writer has trouble writing. It doesn’t matter what stage of your “writing career” you are in (whether a rookie or a seasoned veteran), writing is hard work and there will likely be times when you have trouble getting started. Yes, working hard is a key (to paraphrase another writer, the late Canadian novelist and essayist Mordecai Richler, ‘writing is 5% inspiration and 95% sticking your ass in the chair’); however, a plan of attack, a strategy for getting started when you don’t know where to start will go a long way to breaking that tyranny of the blank sheet or the blinking cursor.

Having said that, it is important to recognise that everyone learns and thinks in different ways and at different rates: it is impossible to prescribe one method or approach that will suit every learning style. Not everyone likes to work from a formal outline, for example. Invest some time in developing a method or system that appeals to — and works for — you. What follows are some basic approaches that you might find helpful.

**Free Writing**

Some writers engage in writing “calisthenics”: they write with no target, no objective in mind, but with the goal only of getting their brain “warmed-up” for a ten- to twenty-minute period. These writers pay no attention to punctuation, sentence structure, spelling, or any sense of “correct” form — they write purely to release, explore, and record potential ideas. They turn off the “editor within” and grapple with the issues they want to
explore. A warning, however: while these writers scribble out whatever literally comes to mind about their topic, they do so from more than a superficial perspective. They are concerned with the issues at hand and use free writing as a way to generate ideas and formulate questions they want to answer. And of course, there comes a time when a more rigorous editing process is required to give acceptable form to these informal, free flowing writing warm-up exercises.

**Outlining**

Although awkward and unwieldy to some, outlines provide an “anchor” for writers who do not like the rambling, desultory method of free writing or idea webs. However, outlines should be approached as flexible writing tools that can be revised and re-arranged to reflect the revisions and re-arrangements of your thinking as your research progresses. The logic and structure that an outline imposes can help you to see what is missing, out of order, or simply irrelevant; the outline, formal or informal, is the skeletal structure of your topic.

**Mind maps, clustering, pyramids**

Writers who describe themselves as visual learners sketch and doodle in a pictorial, creative way in order to think about the issues of their topic — they prefer this to either point form notes or sentences as a way of generating ideas. “Top-down” thinkers will often use a “pyramid” or hierarchical diagram to map out how their idea breaks down into its component parts, whereas “bottom-up” thinkers might find a cluster map or web diagram more useful to help them see how all their ideas about a topic might fit together. The following illustration shows a type of cluster map that starts with a main idea in the middle and branches out to clusters that explore different aspects of that
idea. You can then use the map (as demonstrated below) to sort and organize the ideas that will make up the argument in your paper.

Elimination might make farmers be more efficient
OR lower their standard of living

The elimination of the chicken mktg bd under the NTO will be a disaster for chicken farmers

Why is turkey cheaper in the US?

The chicken mktg bd does/does not serve the interests of its clients

No one buys our chickens because they are too $$ (US wants to sell us their low-priced, free-economy chickens

If other countries liberalize trade would we be net gainers if we eliminate mktg boards?

Farm Marketing Boards

What do they do?

Farmers are price-takers & mktg bds ensure a stable price

Do they retard efficiency?

Effect on commodity prices?

But: problems with following the market (if wheat high this year -> everyone plants it next yr -> so much wheat prices plummet)

Who wants them gone?

Western farmers want to be able to negotiate on their own (when prices are higher for some goods)

Fair distribution of quotas, etc?

Do they help/not help the family farm?

Good or bad?

One area:

= turkey
= chicken
= milk

farmers can do long-term planning

& can't control their economic destiny

Net gainers if we eliminate mktg boards?
Regardless of the pre-writing method they have selected, eventually all writers must pull together their rough notes into a coherent, unified, self-contained and polished document. How you get to this last stage most efficiently will be determined by the level of comfort you have in working with these pre-writing strategies. In fact, getting the first draft completed is perhaps the most difficult stage — many writers will tell you that they enjoy the editing stages of the essay writing process more. Here they get to craft and “wordsmith” the hard-won fruits of their research and thinking labour until the final shape of their work is at last visible.
**Things to Consider as You Write**

The exact structure of the paper you are writing depends on its purpose: whether it is intended to argue or persuade, or whether it is intended to convey results or inform. Usually papers in the arts and social sciences are the first type, while the experimental or natural sciences most often use the second type. This chapter briefly discusses the thesis and structural requirements of the argumentative paper, the standard IMRAD structure for a scientific paper, and the necessity of using proper referencing format. For more detailed information on any of these topics, check out the other writing-related books in this series, *Writing in the Arts and Social Sciences*, *Writing in the Sciences*, and *Referencing in the Sciences*. Or, log on to the Learning Commons Website for writing help:

http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/WritingServices/index.html

**Argumentative Structure**

**Beginnings, Middles, Ends**

Just about everything can be reduced to a beginning, a middle, and an end. We live among many, many, patterns of “before, during, after”: morning, noon, night; yesterday, today, tomorrow; pre-season, season, playoffs; breakfast, lunch, dinner;
youth, middle age, maturity; grade school, secondary school, and university. Our daily lives and our very human condition seem to have organized themselves in this manner to no little degree. Similarly, virtually all formal written assignments, informal documents, impromptu communications, correspondences, oral presentations, and speeches are structured with a beginning, middle, and end — an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Speech writers will reveal that the basic communication pattern they follow is:

- tell the audience what you’re going to say;
- say it;
- then tell them what you just said.

You can use this same pattern to help structure your essays, right down to the paragraph level.

The introduction defines both the general issue that your essay deals with and the specific set of problems or ideas that you will be examining. Once again, different disciplines have different assumptions about how to frame an introduction. The “inverted triangle” form that you probably learned in high school — beginning with general issues and progressively narrowing your focus to the thesis statement at the end — will still apply in many disciplines. However, philosophy papers, for example, use an opposite approach, with the thesis statement coming close to the beginning of the introduction and the remainder of the paragraph mapping out the issues that need to be considered. Whatever the disciplinary conventions, though, all introductions delineate a basic “blueprint” for what argument you are going to make and how you are going to make it.

The main portion of your essay, the body, provides your reader with the detail, information, and arguments that support
the specific focus of your paper (the thesis). The paragraphs that make up the body are themselves “mini-essays,” each with its own beginning, middle, and end. A topic sentence introduces the main idea of a paragraph and indicates how the paragraph as a whole supports the main focus of the essay. It is also expected that these body paragraphs will be linked to either the previous paragraph or to the one that follows. This will help give your essay — and your central idea — unity, coherence, and development. At its simplest, the paragraph states, amplifies, gives examples, and concludes. This conclusion is often a broader statement that anticipates the next paragraph.

The conclusion generally reiterates the focus statement of the essay, summarizes the main points of the supporting body paragraphs, and attempts, in a broader statement, to put your specific focus into the context of the general and background issues that were presented in the introduction. The most serious flaw of a conclusion is the injection of new information at this late juncture. While what constitutes new information can be subjective, writers should strive to ensure that everything in the conclusion somehow relates logically to what has come before, that there is no loose end that cannot be tied up in the original blueprint. Again, this sense of unity, coherence, and development is vital to academic writing.

*The Thesis*

University writing guides often place much emphasis on this idea of the thesis, and with good reason: the thesis argument is probably the most important aspect of your essay. Without one, your essay has no point-of-view. Without one, your essay has no reason for existing.

Not surprisingly, therefore, there is likely no other writing term that causes as much concern, especially for new students, as
the thesis statement. Sometimes, fearing they don’t fully understand this vital and mysterious concept, students resort to treating it as a mechanical “three-part formula” that is plunked down at the end of the introductory paragraph in most essays without any real consideration of its value as a statement. However, successful student writers know that it is more than formulaic, and use it deliberately to frame a focussed argument for their instructors that defines and addresses an important issue raised by the general essay topic.

Such a statement should be a blending of fact and opinion that is simultaneously more general than the evidence presented in order to support it and yet specific enough that a convincing argument can be developed within the confines of the space allowed by the essay assignment. Like the essay’s introduction itself, this thesis will form an important part of a writing blueprint for the document, sketching out its direction and various sections.

~ The Working Thesis

How do you find one of these thesis arguments, especially at the beginning of the process, when you have not done any research yet?

When you were deciding on your topic you probably did some very preliminary and general research (like rereading your text or course notes), and may have taken an intuitive position already. Although in many ways the thesis argument is really the conclusion of your work, and you won’t arrive at it until after you have done your research, you need a working thesis argument written out before you begin to research. Choosing a position from the knowledge you already have helps you to focus, yet
leaves you open to the possibility of changing your thesis argument if your research suggests it.

To arrive at this working thesis argument, you can restate your essay topic as a question, and make a list of possible generalized answers to it, remembering that the best way to find an effective thesis statement is to ask yourself what the underlying issues at stake in the topic are — not just the “what,” but the “so what.” Try to include answers that do not agree with, or that even negate each other.

For instance, if you are assigned the topic “the economy in the Maritime provinces,” you might ask “what factors have contributed to the economy in the Maritimes?” or “how can the Maritime economy be improved?” or “what measures have been tried in the past to manage the economy in the Maritimes?” or “why have previous programs to address the economic hardships in the Maritimes been unsuccessful?” Formulate a working thesis based on one or more of the answers to these questions. Then, armed with a working thesis, you are ready to begin researching and refining your ideas.

The “Real” Thesis

Throughout the process of researching your topic, you have been narrowing in on an informed opinion about your topic, one that you could see yourself successfully arguing in your paper. Try to express this argument in one or two sentences, remembering that your thesis should reflect not just the topic of the essay, but your purpose or aim in writing the paper. Make sure that your thesis statement takes a stand or expresses your opinion; it shouldn’t merely restate the topic or the
question your professor asked. Admitting that there are arguments both for and against multiculturalism doesn’t indicate where you stand on the issue; writing “Multiculturalism as a political policy will ultimately fail Canada because…” does.

The following examples from a book report in a communications course show you how to develop a complete thesis statement.

- **Example 1: Not a thesis**
  Postman’s *Technopoly* is about modern culture’s fascination with technology.
  - What’s missing? This thesis does not present an arguable point — it is merely fact and only summarizes the content of the book.

- **Example 2: Not a thesis**
  I did not like the argument Postman used in *Technopoly* and his dislike of technology.
  - What’s missing? This thesis is basically an opinion, unsupported by reasoning and without context.

- **Example 3: Not a strong argument**
  Postman’s *Technopoly* challenges the pervasive assumption that technological advancements are synonymous with human progress.
  - What’s missing? This thesis does not present an argument (that is, two “sides;” something someone might disagree with). **To help correct this**, the writer could tell us *how* the book challenges this assumption, and evaluate *to what*
Example 4: Argumentative and Specific

Neil Postman’s *Technopoly* challenges the pervasive twenty-first century assumption that technological advancement is synonymous with human progress. Postman uses narrative, chronological order, and figurative language to provoke readers to reconsider their ideological assumptions; at the same time, his use of these strategies successfully demonstrates his sensitivity to his audience, as he attempts to avoid alienating readers altogether with his controversial argument.

This thesis is both more complex and arguable — the writer will have to prove this statement in order to convince the reader of his or her position. The argument is two-pronged: the writer of the paper is claiming that the author of the book uses key strategies and that these strategies walk a fine line between provoking readers and alienating them altogether. The writer will have to address both the strategies and their effect to prove this thesis in an effective manner.

**Checklist for Thesis Statements**

Use this checklist as a guide to framing your own thesis statements, both at the working thesis-argument stage, and later, when you are making a detailed outline of your whole paper.

- Does the thesis statement declare what you intend to do, perhaps even indicate the results of your study?
☐ Is it expressed so clearly that no one could mistake the precise nature of the central idea of your essay?

☐ Does it define the limits and restrictions of your discussion? For example, it might indicate the time frame or the limited area of your investigation.

☐ Is it brief — preferably no more than two sentences in an average-length research paper?

☐ Can it be argued convincingly? Is it narrow enough to prove in a single essay?

☐ Finally, if you can ask “so what?” and can’t answer the question, it suggests that your thesis statement may not be significant enough to be worthy of an essay, and that you are not writing about anything of relevance. If this happens, try to find a less superficial topic.

**Developing the Body of the Argument**

The form you choose for presenting your central argument depends on the purpose of the assignment, the kinds of evidence you are using, and how you can best present your case. Evidence on its own is relatively useless — until it is transformed into a structured argument, it is merely a collection of bits of information. Lawyers do not merely list the individual points of evidence during a trial; rather, they create or build a case. The descriptive “list” style of a lot of first university papers (“this happened, and then this happened, and then this happened”) usually results in a poor grade and comments from the instructor that the paper has no focus, is incoherent, weakly structured, poorly argued, and characterised by a simple string of
unconnected ideas and facts. Follow these steps to understand how to shape your material into an argument.

1. Evaluate your audience and decide what kind of evidence the reader expects to read. Remember, disciplinary audiences differ in the types of evidence they expect and value. The assignment details will most likely specify provide clues about the type of evidence required. The common types of academic evidence are:
   - **Facts**: statistics, numbers, objectifiable evidence from reliable sources. Unless these facts constitute “common knowledge,” you’ll need to document their source scrupulously. Note, also, that statistics are notoriously duplicitous, so you will need to explain them in context.
   - **Appeal to Authority or “Einstein proof”**: a well-known or credible authority in the field agrees with your point.
   - **Research findings or case proof**: you can point to some kind of research, experiment, or case study that supports your point.
   - **Example**: something in the text or material perfectly illustrates the point you’re making. Only use examples from personal experience if the assignment or instructor explicitly allows them.

2. Determine if you have *enough* material — granted, “enough” is a relative term, but consider whether a sceptical audience (they *want* to support you, but you have to convince them) has been given enough solid and coherent information to make a positive evaluation of your work. Does this material support your thesis and the claims you are making?
3. Does this bulk of information have a suitable shape? Does it have a clear structure, and is it built logically? Arrange your information into some sort of outline or cluster or tree of ideas, either hand-written or computer-generated. Note cards work well, because they can be shuffled, interchanged, and easily re-organized. What is the relationship between your own ideas and interpretations and those of your supporting or secondary sources? Establish balance: where are you placing the individual pieces of your evidence? Strongest first? Middle of the paragraph? Following are some of the more common rhetorical structures:

- **Nestorian Order:** You have probably already used this rhetorical pattern, which is named after the character Nestor in *The Iliad*. Here, you create a climax and leave your reader intellectually impressed after finishing your paper. You achieve this effect by organizing your argument so that you put your best and most convincing argument last, your second-best argument first, and burying your weakest argument in the middle of your paper.

- **The Straw Man:** This argumentative pattern is really effective for controversial position papers, and is quite common in philosophy papers. Here, you begin with your proposition or argument, then say that yours is not the only position that can be taken on this issue. You begin by listing your opponents’ argument(s), after which you proceed to refute them. You are then free to argue your “superior” position, which you support with proof.

- **The Concession:** Here you present a proposition, then begin to note the important opposing
argument(s) to it. You concede the validity of these opposing views, but then begin to argue in defence of your proposition, noting that your position is also valid, and is, for reasons which you give and support, the stronger position of the two.

The strength of the last two of these argumentative patterns is that they can serve to knock the wind out of any potential disagreement with your paper. In addition you have become a debater and are forced, by choosing these formats, to become more analytical, more precise, and more convincing.

Science Structure

In the sciences, the most common types of papers primarily convey information or the results of experimental procedures. There is a fairly standard structure for writing laboratory or research reports. Known by the acronym IMRAD (for Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion), you can usually order your material according to the following template. (For more detailed information on the types of writing required in the sciences, see the books in this series on Writing in the Sciences and Referencing in the Sciences. Or, check out our writing Fastfacts on specific types of assignments, available online at http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/WritingServices/WritingHandoutsLinks.html or from the Learning Commons resource area.)
Title

The Title is not a section but it is important as it is often the first thing read. It should indicate the topic of the research and provide key words for indexing.

Abstract

The Abstract is a clear, concise summary of the entire paper. It should include the question(s) investigated, the experimental design and methods used, the major findings, and most importantly, a statement of conclusions.

Introduction

The Introduction provides the rationale for the experiment. It describes the problem to be investigated, providing the context, key terms and concepts so that the experiment can be understood. It also reviews the relevant research to provide a rationale for the experiment — what findings of others are being challenged or extended. It then outlines the hypotheses and research questions.

Materials and Methods

The Methods section describes the steps followed in conducting the research and the materials used at each step. It is not only useful to readers who want to know what methods were used and how this may have influenced the results, but also to those who are interested in replicating and reproducing the study. Consequently, it should be sufficiently detailed to allow them to do so.
Results

The Results section should present only results which relate back to the question posed in the Introduction (the hypothesis). It functions as a stepping stone to the Discussion section by presenting the framework on which the Discussion can be built.

The Results section will present the findings of the research in both figures and in written text. Figures (graphs, tables and diagrams) present the complete findings in visual and numerical terms, while the accompanying text helps the reader to focus on the most important aspects of the results and to interpret them.

Discussion

This section is generally considered to be the most difficult part to write and it calls on the skills of the researcher to interpret the results obtained.

It presents an argument, or set of arguments, about the significance of the results, about any limitations or problems with research design or implementation and consequent proposals for future work.

References

This section should include the references actually cited in the body of the paper.

Revision Strategies

Enjoy the relief you feel when you type that last sentence, but don’t hand in your paper right away. Your university
instructor expects to see a polished paper and typographical errors and simple misspellings can be costly, even when minor. Grammar errors are worse. An instructor may think that if you can’t control these relatively simple fundamentals of communication, how can you handle issues of the argument, complex theories, understanding of the content? To this end, teach yourself (and give yourself the time) to be an efficient proofreader and editor of your own writing. Try some of these revision strategies.

- **Put yourself in your reader’s shoes.**
  Because your reader’s perception of your essay is so crucial to its success, it is helpful to put yourself in the reader’s position when editing and revising. A little critical objectivity and distance should help you to analyse your essay for weak, problematic or confusing areas. And putting your essay aside for a few days or a week will help you to see mistakes and problems with fresh eyes.

- **Consider the argument and evidence.**
  Is your thesis statement understandable and discernable? Is your thesis statement an argument? Are you citing your sources properly (both within the body of the essay and in the works cited section)? Is your evidence really relevant? Does it enlighten the idea under development in that section or does it belong elsewhere — or not in your essay at all?

- **Make certain that you are not plagiarizing.**
  Every time you use someone else’s ideas or words you must give them credit, either in a parenthetical citation or a footnote or endnote. Penalties for plagiarism can be severe. For more information about the rules for citing
Check out the flow.
Are your paragraphs, or points of evidence, being presented in the most advantageous and logical fashion? Does one idea naturally develop into the next? If the top-level structure of the argument as expressed in your introduction is not clear, then it is probable that the links between ideas in the body of your paper are not clear. Getting your introduction clear and logical is one of the primary ways you can use revision to make a paper better. First perfect the introduction, then re-read the whole paper, making sure that you make the links between the ideas in the body just as clear.

Edit paragraph by paragraph.
Does each paragraph relate to the thesis and to the other paragraphs? Does each paragraph contain one idea only? Does the paragraph cover that idea in its entirety or is further development required? Are the sentences within the paragraph logically ordered, cohesive and related?

Scrutinize your sentences.
Are your sentences varied in structure and length? Is your tone constant and your style academic rather than colloquial? Beware, though; don’t go to the opposite extreme and commit the sin of using big words in an attempt to sound more intellectual. It is not uncommon for first-year students in particular to attempt to inflate their prose in order to seem more intelligent. Often they end up using their “impressive” words inaccurately and
their attempt backfires. Remember, the best writing is clear writing.

- Grammar, diction and spelling.  
  Check for pronoun/antecedent agreement, subject/verb agreement, tense agreement, tense shift, modification, punctuation, spelling errors, awkward phrasing, colloquialisms, and jargon.

- Pump up the volume.  
  Read your paper out loud at least once. This is often the best way to locate run-on sentences, awkward constructions, leaps in logic and poor transitions.

- Do consider aesthetics.  
  Your paper should be visually appealing. It should be neatly typed and in compliance with the recommendations and requirements of your course instructor. If your instructor has not given you any specific details, number your pages, and use a twelve-point font, double spaced. Make sure the instructor’s name, the course number, the date of submission, and your name and ID# are spelled correctly and are clearly visible.

- Turn to your friends.  
  Ask friends, classmates or family members to proofread your paper. Do the same for them to increase you own critical powers, so that next time you’ll see more of your own errors.

- Keep an error log.  
  Most students tend to make the same mistakes over and over again in their writing. Keep a record of the mistakes that teachers or peer editors have pointed out to you, and
learn how to fix them. At the revision stage, go through your paper looking specifically for those mistakes so you can catch and correct them before your instructor has to.
Looking Forward

As you get used to thinking and writing in a university frame of mind, you’ll likely find yourself modifying and refining the process we’ve outlined in this publication. This book was deliberately organized with a chronological distinction between researching and planning your paper and its actual writing and revising because that is most likely how you wrote your papers in high school, and you may likely approach your first university papers in a similar fashion. However, one of the best ways to make sure you continue to develop your skills as a critical thinker is to continually upgrade your process as a writer.

In the model presented in this book, the writing process begins with reading the assignment and progresses in a relatively straight line through the stages of researching the thesis, outlining the argument, writing the paper, and revising it. This process encourages you to commit to a thesis quite early on, potentially short-circuiting opportunities for you to critically engage with the topic. Factor in your likely situation at the University of Guelph — a 12-week semester with multiple papers due — and it can become very tempting to quickly pick a side, find evidence to support it, write it, and move on.

Successful critical writers rarely use this “straight forward” approach to writing. For them, writing is a curvy, loopy “dialogical” process — an ongoing dialogue between what they write and what they think. This version of the writing process is marked by freewriting, multiple drafts, and researching.
interspersed with bouts of writing (and vice versa). Typically, these writers don’t refine their theses until after they’ve written either several drafts or far more pages than they will have in their finished papers. Only after writing through their ideas, arguments and counter-arguments do they fully understand what they believe and can prove; understanding that, they can finally refine a thesis and build an argument.

The more you can take advantage of opportunities to “think on paper,” the more sophisticated your thinking — and your writing — can become.

A Comment on Comments

It happens regularly that students who were used to getting excellent marks on their high school papers don’t achieve those same grades in their first year. The good news is that students who use those early papers as a learning experience will usually find themselves making the grade by second or third year.

Most instructors or markers will include comments — sometimes lots of them — on the paper. Too often, students don’t bother to look at anything but the mark, and don’t take advantage of the feedback offered by the comments to determine how they could improve next time.

Often, for example, instructors’ comments indicate that many first-year writers have more in common with the dialogic version of the writing process described above than they realize: when the comments on your paper indicate that your argument is clearer in the conclusion than it was the introduction, recognize that what you handed in was a first draft rather than a polished paper. You might be the kind of writer who needs to write through the argument to be able to see what argument you are making. If that’s the case, plan to start working on your paper
earlier next time to make sure you leave yourself ample time for multiple drafts.

Since instructors could mark papers much more quickly if they didn’t write comments on them, you should recognize that the commentary on your paper is actually a teaching tool: the marker is offering you some insight into where your thinking and writing worked, where it didn’t, and what kinds of things you could have considered in the process of making your argument. Get yourself into the habit of reading all the comments, not just looking at the grade. Discuss the comments with the instructor if you’re not sure what they mean. If that’s not possible, consider bringing your marked paper in to the Learning Commons. We can help you diagnose what your instructor’s feedback says about your strengths and weaknesses as a writer, and help you make the most of your future university papers.

www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/
References


Appendix 1: Common Grammar and Punctuation Errors

The following list outlines some of the most common errors in grammar and punctuation we find in student papers and shows you how to avoid them.

Commas

Make sure you use a comma:

- **After introductory phrases:**
  Certainly, grammar can be a nuisance.
  If you are really interested, you can pick up several good grammar guides.

- **Around non-restrictive clauses:** a non-restrictive clause adds descriptive information that isn’t essential to defining who or what is being described. (Compare with restrictive clauses, described below.)
  The instructor, who wears black pants, is a real stickler for grammar and spelling.
  (There’s only one instructor, who, by the way, happens to wear black pants all the time.)
- **Before co-ordinating conjunctions in independent clauses:**
  
  I didn’t think grammar was easy, **yet** it truly is.

**Don’t use commas:**

- **Around restrictive clauses:** a restrictive clause adds descriptive information that is essential for defining specifically who or what is being described. (Compare with non-restrictive clauses, described above.)

  The instructor **who wears black pants** is a real stickler for grammar and spelling.

    (There are lots of instructors, but you specifically mean the one in the black pants.)

- **To create a comma splice:** Commas alone can’t join 2 independent clauses (complete sentences). Either break the clauses into individual sentences, use a semi-colon, or use a comma and a co-ordinating conjunction.

  ![x]( falta la imagen )  I didn’t think grammar was easy, it truly is.

  ![✓]( falta la imagen )  I didn’t think grammar was easy. It truly is.

  ![✓]( falta la imagen )  I didn’t think grammar was easy; it truly is.

  ![✓]( falta la imagen )  I didn’t think grammar was easy, **but** it truly is.

**Agreements**

- **Subject-verb agreement:**

  ![✗]( falta la imagen )  The **rules of grammar** **makes** writing easy.

  ![✓]( falta la imagen )  The **rules of grammar** **make** writing easy.
- **Noun-pronoun agreement:**
  - ✖ When a **student** hates grammar, **they** are more likely to make mistakes.
  - ✔ When a **student** hates grammar, **she** is more likely to make mistakes.
  - ✔ When **students** hate grammar, **they** are more likely to make mistakes.

- **Parallelism:** any elements that serve the same grammatical function in a sentence must take the same grammatical form.
  - ✖ I like **reading, writing**, and **to parse** sentences.
  - ✔ I like **reading, writing**, and **parsing** sentences.

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**Grammatical Sentencing**

- **Sentence fragments:** are missing a main subject, predicate, or main clause.
  - ✖ The **students** who were so tired of grammar review. (What about them?)
  - ✔ The **students** who were so tired of grammar review **vowed** never to misuse a semi-colon again.

- **Fused sentences:** contain two main clauses joined too weakly.
  - ✖ A comma splice is a type of fused **sentence**, **writing** one will lose you marks.
  - ✔ A comma splice is a type of fused **sentence; writing** one will lose you marks.
  - ✔ A comma splice is a type of fused **sentence. Writing** one will lose you marks.
A comma splice is a type of fused sentence, and writing one will lose you marks.

- **Run-on sentences:**
  - Run-on sentences just go on and on and contain far too many ideas that sometimes come into your head at the time that you are writing and you can’t bear not to write them down but you should always remember to organize and punctuate them correctly and if you don’t some instructor is going to take off marks for bad grammar.
  - Run-on sentences go on and on and contain far too many ideas. Sometimes, ideas come into your head at the time that you are writing and you can’t bear not to write them down, but you should always remember to organize and punctuate them correctly. If you don’t, some instructor is going to take off marks for bad grammar.

- **Vague pronoun references:**
  - The student and her instructor tried to improve her grammar.
    (Whose grammar needs improving?)
  - The student and her instructor tried to improve the instructor’s grammar.

- **Dangling modifiers:** have nothing in the sentence to modify.
  - **Walking** in the woods, my heart ached.
    (Something was walking in the woods, but what? The only eligible noun is “my heart,” but it couldn’t go walking in the woods by itself.)
While I was walking in the woods, my heart ached.

- **Misplaced modifiers**: cause confusion because they occur too far from what they’re modifying.
  - The professor wrote a paper on sexual harassment in his office.
    (The topic of his paper might be sexual harassment that occurred in his office?)
  - The professor wrote a paper in his office on sexual harassment.

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**Apostrophes**

**Possessives**

- **Singular**: The Writing Peer’s advice was helpful. (one peer giving advice)

- **Plural**: The Writing Peers’ advice was helpful. (many peers gave advice)

**It’s vs. Its**

- “It’s” is ONLY the contraction for “it is”:
  It’s important to use good grammar.

- “Its” is the possessive form — the exception to the apostrophe rules given above.
  Grammar reared its ugly head.
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