

# Writing Tips for Class Papers

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## General Tips

1. Think of your paper as an opportunity to explain a subject or develop a line of argument for your reader. Make sure that you express clearly at the start what you intend to do in your paper (a research question or theme), and that you actually answer your question or address your theme at the end of the paper (a conclusion). The beginning and end of the paper should explicitly relate to one another, and the body of the paper should draw on evidence that specifically supports your paper's principal line of reasoning.

2. In your writing style, try and strike a balance between academic formality and readability. You should not use conversational or colloquial language (keep it relatively formal in a scholarly sense), but you should also try and avoid specialized jargon or consciously-convoluted forms of expression which make the paper less accessible to the reader. As a general rule, remember to write your paper *for the reader*; this is easiest to gauge by reading your own paper completely once it is finished, making sure it makes sense and flows well from a reader's perspective.

3. *Get started early* on your research and writing so that you can identify problems before they become impossible to solve (particularly if you must find sources or gather data before you even begin to write). If possible, finish a first draft of your paper with enough time before the due date for you to review and proof your work, or to request outside review and assistance from the Writing Lab, or even from your professor (make arrangements beforehand, however, and provide plenty of time for feedback).

## Grammar and Spelling

1. Remember to write in complete sentences, and separate distinct clauses by appropriate punctuation. Be very careful of the different uses of commas, semicolons, and colons, particularly as regards separating dependent and independent clauses. This is easily the most common type of error I see in student papers.

2. Pay attention to capitalization of proper names and placenames, but do not over-use capitalization for general terms that do not require it (for example, "historical archaeology" and "anthropology" generally do not need to be capitalized).

3. Avoid split infinitives (for example, "to boldly go" should be "boldly to go").

4. Be careful to avoid using correctly-spelled words in incorrect locations (for example, "there village" should be "their village"). This is *not* going to be picked up by automatic spell-checkers, which are very unreliable for the final proofing of a paper.

5. Pay attention to verb tense, and try to avoid switching tenses abruptly or randomly (particularly with regard to using the present tense for past events, which is a temptation when using primary sources).

6. Avoid personifying abstractions such as "This paper will demonstrate;" do not be afraid to use first-person forms of expression when appropriate, such as "In this paper, I will demonstrate."

7. Emphasize the active voice over the passive voice (for example, "It is believed by archaeologists" should be "Archaeologists believe").

8. Take care to avoid commonplace but incorrect usages; some of my personal "pet peeves" include using "based off of" instead of the proper "based on;" failing to add an "-s" to "archaeologist" for the plural form (it should be "archaeologists"); and using "being that" or "seeing as" instead of "since."

## Formatting

1. Make sure to follow all class guidelines in formatting your paper, including font, type size, and margins (including whether or not it should be submitted electronically or in hard copy).

2. Use headers in word-processing programs to insert page numbers *and* your surname and course number on *all* pages of your paper (except a cover page, if used). This will greatly assist your professor when reading large stacks of student papers.

3. Leave a line between the end of one text section and a new section heading below.

4. Make sure any electronic file submissions you make are fully compatible with your professor's preferred word processing software. If in doubt, submit in an appropriate cross-platform format such as .rtf or .pdf.

5. If figures or tables are included in a paper, they should not be included within the paper text, but appended to the end after the main text and bibliography, and referenced appropriately within the text, if needed.

## References and Citations

1. All references listed in your bibliography should be *cited in your text*, generally using either the author-date system (anthropology) or the notes and bibliography system (history), in accordance with the style guide you are using. Make thorough use of these in-text citations, citing the appropriate source or sources for any fact or statement you make which is derived from the work of another scholar or scholars (including not just in-text quotations, but any other location where you paraphrase or summarize external facts). It is generally better to over-cite your sources than to under-cite them.

2. With occasional exceptions, *always use page numbers* in your in-text citations, including single-page and multi-page citations. The *only* time you should use a citation without specific page numbers is when you are referring very generally to the whole source, which is uncommon, particularly for books.

3. Be careful not to over-cite one general source, or a small number of general sources, throughout your paper. The best research papers draw upon a broader range of more specific sources, showing that the author has read and used a diverse range of sources. Multiple sources are commonly cited to substantiate even a single assertion or statement.

4. Don't waste writing space on the full titles and authors of books or articles you are making reference to (that's what in-text citations are for), or on lengthy quotations from those sources. Not only does this limit the space you have to express your own ideas in your own words (which is the whole point of class papers), but it can look like "padding" to mask limited effort.

5. When you *do* quote from a source, make sure you introduce or contextualize the quote (i.e. don't use a quotation as a complete "stand-alone" sentence in your paper), and never end a paragraph with a quotation (this is especially important when using block quotes, which should be nested *inside* a paragraph, and should never be followed by an indented new paragraph).

5. When citing a reference with more than two authors in the author-date system, use "et al." after the first author's name, and before the date and page number(s). Please note that there is *no* comma after the first author's name, and only *one* period, since it is an abbreviation for "et alii" ("and others") in Latin.

6. Pay careful attention to the particular style guide required for the class, and make sure to use the proper style for both in-text citations and bibliography. Above all, be consistent in your citation and reference format.

## Foreign Languages and Names

1. Pay attention to accents and other diacriticals in any personal names or placenames, and use the appropriate key codes (Alt+ for Windows, Opt+ for Mac) to insert them in your text.

2. Be careful to use proper format when using or citing Spanish names, remembering that surnames are generally double (and sometimes more in the colonial period). The first surname should be used for alphabetizing references in the bibliography, and for abbreviated references to individuals in the text. For example, Juan Ponce de León would be alphabetized under "P," and should be referred to as "Ponce" or "Ponce de León," not "León," in the text. In addition, the proper bibliographic entry for "Tristán de Luna y Arellano" would be "Luna y Arellano, Tristán de" (many scholarly style guides, including SHA, however, unfortunately still require that such names be alphabetized under "de"). Moreover, colonial surnames should never be abbreviated in the text with the "de" in front of the proper surname (for example, "de Luna" should be simply "Luna"), except in certain special cases where incorrect modern usage is widely embedded in popular consciousness, as is the case of "DeSoto" or "De Soto" instead of the correct "Soto" for "Hernando de Soto." Finally, late colonial and modern Spanish names commonly include double first names, which should not be confused with surnames in the bibliography (for example, "José María Caldez" would be cited as "Caldez, José María").