

Sample Handout: Writing Papers at the University

Academic writing is different from other forms of composition. It calls for formal diction, sustained argumentation, and citation. Formal diction can be understood in contrast to informal prose. In an academic paper, we use language that is elevated. We do not use contractions. We place quotation marks around slang, and we always write in complete, grammatically parallel sentences. Academic papers are edited for spelling mistakes, for clarity, and for continuity. Paragraphs are connected by transitions and our ideas are sign-posted so that our readers can easily understand where the argument is leading.

Academic arguments are fallible. In other words, they are not dependent upon arbitrary statements that cannot be either confirmed or refuted. Academic argumentation makes use of evidence, and a good argument employs this evidence in a way that is congruent to the claims it forwards. The evidence of literary or film analysis is textual citation. The writer uses data from the text or the film to forward his or her point. These portions of text or film are cited-this means that you indicate to your reader where the textual fragment comes from. Academic papers have a thesis and a conclusion. The body of your paper should support your thesis.

It follows that it is useful to ask yourself the following questions before you hand in your paper:

1. Do I have a clearly written **introduction** that alerts my reader to the direction my paper is taking? Have I communicated what is at issue? Have I defined my terms?
2. Does my **paper body** build an argument? Do I use appropriate examples-i.e., do my examples forward and illustrate what I am trying to prove? Do I analyze my examples or do I simply paraphrase the text? (In other words, do I do more than simply retell the "story"?) Do I employ transitional sentences or phrases to alert my reader to my argument's direction? Is my argument well organized or does it jump around from point to point without making the necessary connections?
3. Does my **conclusion** tie together the strands of my argument? Does it summarize the points that I have made in my paper body? Does it elaborate and expand upon my findings in a conclusive manner?
4. Do I have a **thesis**? Is my thesis a clearly defined expansion of the points that I have proven in my paper body? In other words, can my thesis be defended solely by using the content of my paper? Have I avoided logical fallacies?
5. Finally, ask yourself: Is my paper clear and concise? Is my rhetoric convincing without being arrogant? Have I proven my point? Have I considered counter-arguments to my claim? Did I document my sources? Did I analyze rather than summarize?

Citations and Source Documentation

Citations are excerpts from other texts that you embed in your paper. They are used to furnish proof, to provide theoretical support, or to clarify your argument. When you cite a text, you need to provide information about the source of the citation. This information is important: the reader of an academic paper must be given the opportunity to examine your argument (which is, by definition, fallible).

Examples:

a) You are writing about Johannes' self-construction in *The Seducer's Diary* and you want to cite Kierkegaard's text to furnish proof for a statement you have made. You can use a short citation (less than 4 lines) from the text and embed it in your writing:

The seducer produces a running commentary, which he reflects upon and expresses in a metonymic chain that degenerates into self-reflexive fiction. The self is effaced and "[e]verything is metaphor, I am myself a myth about myself."

This citation must be *attributed*. There are three basic methods.

1. If you are citing only one text in your paper, and it is abundantly clear to the reader that this is the case, simply enclose the page number in parentheses after the citation: ".about myself" (287).
2. If you have not introduced the text or you are using several sources, do not confuse your reader. Indicate which author or which text you are citing in each particular citation: ".myth about myself" (Kierkegaard 287) or (*The Seducer's Diary* 287).
3. You can always use a footnote. ".about myself."¹

The footnote can read:

1. Søren Kierkegaard. *The Seducer's Diary*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. Pg. 287.

b) If you use a quotation that takes up more than 4 lines of your text or if you want to isolate your quotation (for emphasis), offset the entire quotation as follows:

.This is his method of seduction.

The image I have of her hovers indefinitely somewhere between her actual and Ideal form. I now have this image before me, but precisely because either it is actuality or actuality is indeed the occasion, it has a singular magic.

(Kierkegaard 334) or (*The Seducer's Diary* 334)

This type of reflection governs the aestheticized linguistic economy..

(Notice that the cited text - Kierkegaard's text - is embedded between essay paragraphs [the writer's own words]. It is formatted in 10 pt. font, and indented two tab spaces.)

In any case, it is best to make judicious use of citations. Use them if they help you forward your argument. If you use a quotation, you need to analyze it and integrate it into the flow of your writing. You do not always need to furnish textual evidence for every claim that you make. It is also possible to make a point and support it with a summation or a paraphrase of a portion of the text. Remember, even if you summarize or paraphrase, you need to acknowledge your source. This can be done with a simple phrase: 'According to Plato,' 'Freud argues,' 'Kierkegaard implies,' and the like.