

A guide to writing an academic paper

By [Valerie Strauss](#)

*I keep hearing from college professors that too many of their students don't write well. So here's a primer written for college students on how to write an academic paper, though some of the advice would be useful for anybody writing anything. The author is Steven Horwitz, a professor of economics at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY. He is the author of two books, *Microfoundations* and *Macroeconomics: An Austrian Perspective and Monetary Evolution, Free Banking, and Economic Order*.*

By Steven Horwitz

Though it may seem excessive to write almost 4,000 words on how to write better papers, the reality is that writing papers in college (and the sort of writing you will do for the rest of your life) is not the same as you were asked to do in high school. My purpose in writing this guide is to help make you into better writers and to help you become better able to articulate your perspective.... The point is not to give you pages of rules and regulations, but to give you the things you need to know to create and present your ideas in a legitimate and persuasive way.

RESEARCH PAPERS AND TOPIC PAPERS

Most non-fiction class papers fall into one of two categories: research papers or topic papers. For research papers, you are expected to pick a topic and engage in independent research (usually in the library or online) to find information and sources. For topic papers, you are usually given a topic, or several to choose from, based on the course readings and discussion and are expected to make use of those resources (rather than outside ones) to write your paper. Almost everything in this guide applies equally to both kinds of papers.

No matter which kind of paper you are writing *you must make use of the course readings*. Those readings are there to help you understand material both in and out of the course. Why would we assign them if we didn't expect you to make use of them? The whole point of either type of paper is to see how well you can apply what you have learned in the course. Doing so requires that you make use of the ideas and readings from it. When you finish your paper, check to see if you have course readings cited and in your bibliography. If not, chances are good that what you have done is probably not too relevant to the course. And don't forget: course readings must be cited properly like everything else.

THESIS STATEMENTS

Whether your paper involves outside research or not, you need to have a thesis statement. Once you have an idea of what you want to say, and have some grasp of what others have said, you need to make your ideas more concrete by coming up with a thesis sentence(s). *A thesis indicates the main argument of your paper*. The point of any class paper is to persuade your reader that you have something to say that he or she should care about. *A good thesis should be debatable, specific, and concise*. The following is not a good thesis:

* The history of the Soviet Union is very interesting and complex.

Lots of things are interesting and complex and I challenge you to find a country whose history isn't. While it is concise and somewhat specific, this thesis is not really debatable.

A good thesis might be:

* The history of the Soviet Union indicates many of the problems involved with centralized economic planning and the bureaucratized society that will inevitably develop.

This thesis is debatable, it is specific, and it is reasonably concise. It takes one side of a possibly refutable argument. One can imagine someone arguing that the history of the USSR indicates the problems of political totalitarianism and says nothing about economic planning. The basis for your supporting arguments should be the material that has been covered in class and in the readings, and, if required, from outside sources. The whole reason to take a course is to discover a framework for analyzing new phenomena (whether natural, social, literary, or artistic), and formal papers are an opportunity to demonstrate that you have learned enough to do such an analysis. Notice that your goal

is to convince your “reader” not the professor. When I read a paper, I am not the audience, rather I’m the judge, determining how well I think your work would convince *someone else*. Don’t worry about convincing me; worry about “someone else.”

It is also crucial to remember to put your thesis *up front*. Don’t wait until the last paragraph to tell your reader what you think. This is what you should be doing *during the entire paper*. The purpose of course papers is to give the instructor *your* informed opinion on your topic. Your thesis is a guide to the view you will present in the rest of the paper. Put it up front and stick to it.

Think of yourself as a lawyer and think of defending a thesis as being like trying to convict a defendant, and think of the professor as the judge, not the jury. This means thinking of your sources as evidence. This works in both directions. Sources that back up your argument are great because you can quote or cite them to build up your evidence, like eyewitnesses to a crime. Sources that contradict what you have to say are important as well because *you must present arguments for why you believe that contradictory arguments are incorrect or incomplete*. If you found a source that argued that the history of the USSR teaches us nothing about the feasibility of economic planning, then you would have to try to refute it or explain its incompleteness. If the defendant has an alibi, you have to show that he is lying or that even the alibi cannot get him off the hook. If other writers have said something different, you must deal with what they say and at least try to show how what they say doesn’t defeat your argument.

INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introductions are just that. They allow you to introduce your argument to your reader and vice versa. They also try to convince the reader why he should care about what you have to say. Part of writing a good thesis is building up to it with an introduction that whets the reader’s appetite. Don’t just drop your reader in the middle of an argument. Start with something interesting and sufficiently general, and then draw your reader in by applying that general idea to the topic at hand. Introductions should be general but not too general. A bad introductory sentence is:

* Karl Marx was a very important thinker.

This is bad because you can substitute hundreds of names for “Karl Marx” and it would still make sense. You want your intro to say something reasonably specific about your subject, like:

* Karl Marx was the first important thinker to argue that capitalism causes exploitation.

See how that really addresses something of substance? You could go on from there to talk about the nature of exploitation, how he defines capitalism and then conclude it with a thesis that explains *why* he thought capitalism causes exploitation.

Conclusions are also just that: a chance for you to conclude something. Don’t end by saying something like:

* Karl Marx was an interesting and important thinker who said some controversial things about capitalism.

Like the bad intro, it doesn’t say anything. A better concluding paragraph could start with:

* Karl Marx’s argument about exploitation under capitalism is ultimately flawed because...

and then broadly summarize your argument. Would a prosecuting attorney end a closing statement this way: “In conclusion, the defendant did some good things and some bad things and I really can’t say much about her otherwise?” Of course not. Conclude by telling your reader what conclusions one could draw from your paper. Tell her why she should *care* about what you’ve just said. Provide her with a moral of the story.

CITATION AND ACADEMIC HONESTY

Everyone’s favorite subject. The idea behind citation is simple: *when you make use of other people’s specific ideas, you must give them credit for those ideas*. As a writer, you have the right to articulate your own ideas and opinions, as well as the right to draw upon the work of those who have come before you. With those *rights* comes the *responsibility* to both inform your reader of which ideas are yours and which are not and to give credit to others when you

make use of their work. This is your way of showing others that you have both done your research and understand the importance of your sources in developing your own arguments.

My preference on style is that you use in-text citations with a bibliography at the end, i.e. some version of APA style. For example:

* Some people have argued that Marx's concept of alienation relates to the notion of commodity production (Roberts and Stephenson 1973, p. 35).

NOTE: *space between end of words and open parenthesis, no space between open parenthesis and authors' names, close parenthesis then period.*

To give a citation, use the name(s) of the author(s), the date of the specific text *and page number(s)*. Unless you are citing the argument of a whole book or article, you *must* indicate the pages where the specific thing you mention is discussed. It also shows your reader (and me) that you actually read the text in question. If you are using an idea that pervades the whole source, then you can leave it without a page number. Just make sure there are no exact quotes or close paraphrases of specific pages.

You must provide an in-text (not just a listing in the bibliography) citation, including a page number, when you paraphrase or quote an author word for word. You must provide an in-text citation when you use statistics that you obtained from a source. These are the unbreakable rules. If you break them you are guilty of plagiarism. You are assumed to be familiar with the student handbook's discussion of academic honesty. I take academic dishonesty very seriously. My ability to detect and then find things you have cut-and-pasted from the Web exceeds your ability to fool me with such cut-and-paste jobs, so don't even try it because I *will* find the source material and I *will* initiate the academic dishonesty process.

This sentence uses a quote and must include an in-text citation:

As Lavoie (1985, p. 6) argues, "Such knowledge is dispersed among market participants."

NOTE: *You should always introduce a quote, rather than just sticking it in the middle of a paragraph identified only by the citation. Also, quotes should never be placed back-to-back without any text in between.*

If you had decided to paraphrase this quote, you would also have to cite:

* Lavoie (1985, p. 6) argues that human knowledge is dispersed among traders in the marketplace.

To write either of the previous sentences and not give a citation is not acceptable. Again you have the right to use whatever sources you see fit, but with that right comes the responsibility to inform your reader where and how you obtained your information. That is the purpose of a citation. Think about a lawyer who said "Some people saw the accused commit the crime." Wouldn't you want to know *who* those people were and *exactly what* they saw? When you use ideas or information or statistics, giving an *in-text* citation is just like calling specific witnesses. You need to do this to make your case. This is equally true if you try to use the ideas more generally:

* One perspective on capitalism is to recognize that it helps overcome the fact that human knowledge is dispersed throughout the marketplace (Lavoie 1985, p. 6).

To leave that sentence without citation is also not acceptable. The reason is that it identifies a specific "perspective" and implies that it is not your original idea. Therefore you must indicate where it came from. You don't have to cite your sources every single time you come back to that main idea; however, you must cite them the *first* time.

In reality, knowing when to cite is as much an acquired skill as anything else. There are a few unbreakable rules, such as citing a direct quote or a paraphrase or statistics. Beyond that, use your judgment. It is always better to cite too much than too little. To continue the metaphor: you want to cite whenever you are relying on evidence gathered or argued by someone else. Your sources are like witnesses and a good prosecutor would tell the jury "witness so-and-so saw the defendant do it," in constructing her argument. And witnesses for the other side must be cross-examined!

BIBLIOGRAPHY (LIST OF WORKS CITED)

In choosing to use this citation style, you are required to create a bibliography at the end of the paper which includes all of the material you have cited within the text. *Do not include items in your bibliography that you have not cited in the text of your paper and don't cite things that aren't in your bibliography.* Some people say that sometimes they get ideas from a book but don't directly use it. That's crap. If you got ideas from it then you better cite it. If you didn't get ideas or information from it, then it doesn't belong in the bibliography. If you are familiar with official APA citation style, please use it. If you have any reference books that you got in FYP or FYS, make use of them. At the very least, bibliographic style should look like the following examples:

Book:

Lavoie, Don. 1985. *National Economic Planning: What is Left?*, Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Publishing.

Article:

Murrell, Peter. 1983. "Did the Theory of Market Socialism Answer the Challenge of Ludwig von Mises?," *History of Political Economy* 15, Spring, pp. 120-135.

Article in an Edited Volume:

Ricoeur, Paul. 1971. "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," in *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, Fred Dallmyr and Thomas McCarthy, eds., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977.

I'm not too fussy about the details here, as long as you get all of the relevant information in your entry. However, do be careful how you cite articles in edited volumes. The editor(s) of the book (i.e., the name(s) on the cover) is usually not the author(s) of all the articles in the book. Usually the editor(s) have only one or two of them at most. *You must cite each article separately by the name of the author(s) of each article.* Check to make sure you are clear on whose article or chapter is whose. Also make sure you underline or italicize (pick one and stick with it) the *book title* and put the article or chapter title in quotes. For more examples of bibliography formatting, and the relevant information on the course readings, consult the syllabus. All of that information is there for you.

A word of advice about Internet sources: before using Google, do your homework. Be familiar with the journal literature and the popular sources that are also available on paper. Learn how to use EconLit and other scholarly and popular indexes. Then, and only then, should you Google. Why? The beauty of the Internet is that it is pretty much unregulated; that is also its greatest weakness. Net sources are on average *much less reliable than printed ones* because even though scholarly material is available via Google, a much larger percentage of what you find is, in one way or another, self-published and therefore less reliable. The best way to determine whether a Net source is a legitimate one is having read lots of printed material and having a sense for what kinds of arguments are considered reasonable. If you go to the Net first, I guarantee you'll get tons of sources, most of which will be worthless. However, if you do find a usable Net source, you should cite it like any other work. Note that there must be an *author* and a *title* of the page or paper in question. Then you can provide the complete URL and either a date listed on the page, or the date that you accessed the information.

Internet sources:

Horwitz, Steven. 2008 "An Open Letter to my Friends on the Left," found at http://myslu.stlawu.edu/~shorwitz/open_letter.htm, accessed on October 8, 2008.

The hardest part about making use of sources is not finding them or learning how to manipulate the mechanics of citation. The hard part is evaluating whether a source is reliable or not. This is especially true on the Net, but is also true for printed material. The best way to become a good judge of sources is to read them. For example, papers that keep being cited by other authors are probably important. But the only way to know that is to have done a fair amount of reading and research (including the reference lists of the sources you find) and entering the ongoing conversation. And that requires making the time and doing the work.

PRESENTATION AND FORMAT

Nothing is more disappointing and annoying than a sloppy looking paper. If you think it doesn't matter, you're wrong. What it tells your reader (and *me*) is that you don't give a damn about what you've said. *Show some pride in what you do and take the time to make it at least look like you care.* You should feel flattered that someone has asked you to tell them what you have to say about a subject. When you turn in wrinkled pages with no page numbers or title, it says that that you don't take yourself or your ideas seriously. And this holds whether you're turning the paper in electronically or hard copy.

The following is a list of things that your papers, *first drafts included*, must contain. This includes any drafts you send as a file attached to an email or place in a drop box on Angel. If I print that file, it should look just like a paper you would hand in as hard copy. That means:

1. A separate title page that includes your name, the date, the class, and a real title.
2. Double spaced (not 2.5).
3. Margins of 1 to 1.25" (no more).
4. *Quotes over three lines long should be single-spaced and indented 1/2" on the left margin.*
5. Automatically numbered pages. Figure out how to do it in Word.
6. A bibliography starting on a new page.
7. Use Times New Roman 12 point font or something else easily readable like Garamond and *do not use the templates in Word 2007 or 2010 for writing papers.* Just plain black text on a white page please.
8. If a hard copy, your entire paper must be stapled or paper clipped – *Do not* use geeky plastic binders.
9. No more than a very small number of handwritten changes; preferably zero.
10. The pages should be clean, dry and wrinkle-free.

A few comments on this list. First, pick a title that says something about your paper. A paper on Albania should not be titled "Albania" or "The Economic History of Albania." Instead, try "Albania: An Example of the Failures of Stalinism." The last one says something, the first two don't. Try not to make your title a question; make it a statement that summarizes the main argument in the paper. Your title should also not be a complete sentence. It should be a short, declarative summary of the paper.

Second, if you have a long paper that seems to divide up into distinct sections, break it up by using section headings. For example, if the first half of your paper on Albania was about socialist theory, you could use a section heading to indicate it. Before you start the next section, say on the history of Albania, you could use another section heading, and then use one to indicate your conclusion. This will help keep your organization straight and make it clearer for your reader.

Third, *number your pages.* This enables me to give you help or criticism on specific pages. No little thing annoys me more than a lack of page numbers. Ask my wife.

Fourth, *give yourself enough time to do the assignment well.* If you start two days before it's due, I guarantee you the paper will not be as good as it could be. The biggest cause of sloppy work and bad analysis is not taking your time. If you start enough in advance, you can run a draft or two and take the time to read them for analytical and grammatical errors. *You* should be the most merciless critic of your own work. Write a draft and go over and over it; that's what I do with my work. However, doing so requires time, *so make the time to do the job right.* If I have the time, and I usually do, I will be glad to read early drafts and outlines, just ask me ahead of time.

Remember that grammar, spelling, and correct use of the language all matter. I know that you all know how to do all of this correctly. You make mistakes because you are rushing to finish and/or you just don't care very much. Making simple mistakes makes you look uneducated and sends the message that you don't care about your ideas. And if you don't care, why should I?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The point of this guide is not scare the hell out of you, it is to help you. Really it all boils down to this issue of pride. Have some pride in what you do, have some pride when people ask you for your thoughts, and have some pride when you present those thoughts to others. If you have some pride and care, you'll take the time to construct good arguments and use (and cite) your sources properly, and the way you present your papers will reflect that pride.

There's nothing mysterious about writing good papers. It is a skill that anyone can learn and master. Yes, it takes work but what doesn't? You'll find that if you start caring about what you're doing that the work will seem less of a struggle, the concentration will come easier and the rules will no longer be constraints, but rather the means through which you can communicate what you have to say. Remember the feeling when you were a little kid and you brought home your first finger painting and you were so proud of it that you insisted that it get hung on the fridge? It's that pride in your work (and the feeling it generates) that ought to motivate everything you do, not just in college but in your whole life. If you *care* about what you do, the rest will take care of itself.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/a-guide-to-writing-an-academic-paper/2012/01/18/gIAjGCTCQ_blog.html