

Beth's Paper Writing Tips

Compiled by Beth Elness-Hanson, rev. 4/8/2013

1. **Syllabus Expectations:** Read the syllabus expectations carefully. Recognize there are different kinds of papers. Here are common types of papers used in my classes.
 - a. **Summary:** The main expectation of this paper is to summarize a position or issue. For example:
 - i. Philip Melanchthon's view of the nature of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist changed from a physical presence to a spiritual presence, as evidenced quintessentially in the Augsburg Confession of 1530 and the Variatia of 1540.
 - ii. This paper would summarize the change in Melanchthon's view; WHAT was the early view, and WHAT was the later view.
 - b. **Argumentative:** An argumentative paper requires a *thesis* that you will support through a logical argumentation. For example:
 - i. Philip Melanchthon's humanist views were influential in his change from holding a physical nature to a spiritual nature of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, as evidenced in his interactions with Johannes Oeclampadius.
 - ii. This paper would argue the WHY behind Melanchthon's shift in position; WHY did Melanchthon change from being in concert with Luther to being similar to Calvin?
 - c. **Exegetical:** An exegetical paper is a critical interpretation of a biblical text and follows an established format. For one example, look at Duvall and Hayes, *Grasping God's Word*, 2nd ed. (2005) 397, which is on reserve in the library under Beth's name.
 - d. **Reflection:** Reflection papers are your personal reflections. Until recently, this is the only paper (of these four types) which would allow first person singular statements, i.e. "I believe..." However, note that many instructors want reflection papers that integrate course content and textbook reading with proper citation.
2. **Sources:** Know how many different sources you are required to integrate into your paper (not just list in your bibliography) and if there are additional requirements, such as:
 - a. **Primary source** is a document or physical object which was written or created during the time under study. These sources were present during an experience or time period and offer an inside view of a particular event.¹
 - b. **Secondary source** interprets and analyzes primary sources. These sources are one or more steps removed from the event.
 - c. **Journal articles** are peer-reviewed, scholarly articles. These are excellent resources for upper division (300-400level courses) papers. Often, they are very narrow in topic and assume a well-education audience in discipline, so they may be less helpful for lower division papers.
3. **Paper planning:**
 - a. Start planning your topic *early* to allow for inter-library loans, which may take 2 weeks.
 - b. Ask for a sample paper from the instructor.
 - c. If you are adrift in an ocean of ideas or sources:

¹ <http://www.princeton.edu/~refdesk/primary2.html>, accessed 4.4.2013.

1. Narrow your topic/thesis; or delimit the number of sub-topics (“While this topic includes sub-topics A, B, C, D, and E, the scope of the paper will limit the discussion to B and E.”)
 2. Consider strategically limiting the sources; (This paper will not address all of Martin Luther King Jr’s writings, but will focus on his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”)
- b. If you are having difficulty finding sources, find a related journal article and view the articles’ bibliography.

Format

1. Use Time New Roman 12 point font with 1-inch borders.
2. One page is approximately 250 words (unless footnoted); number the pages;
3. Staple pages; no plastic sleeves.

Tips for Writing a Thesis Statement:

Note: Your thesis can (will probably) adapt as you read and discover more about your topic and find evidence to support your thesis.

The thesis is the controlling force behind your argument. After your introduction sets up why the discussion is interesting or necessary to consider, your thesis statement is one solid, complete sentence that promises to deliver your carefully reasoned response to the issue. Your thesis should therefore:

1. Be expressed in one complete sentence at the end of your introduction.
2. Indicate your position on the issue by stating what you will actually prove by the paper’s end.
3. Use clear and precise language that sets the tone for the entire essay.
4. Reference the sources you will use in your argument and how they contribute to the project.
5. Not be phrased as a question, but rather as a solid answer to a specific question raised—explicitly or implicitly—within the introduction.
6. Not claim something obvious.
7. Not make use of clichés or tentative language such as “I think.”²

Writing Tips

1. **Use an outline**
 - a. Using an outline is an excellent way to move beyond a collection of quotes or concepts from your reading notes.
 - b. You are writing on a collegiate level and are expected to craft a cohesive and clearly written paper.
2. **Sections:** Divide your paper into sections that *logically advance* the sub-points of your summary/argument of your thesis.
3. **Educated audience:** You are writing to an educated audience. Avoid general content and biographical information, unless it relates to your topic.
4. **Content**
 - a. Solid content/evidence that supports the summary/thesis belongs in the body of the paper.

² http://www.biola.edu/academics/torrey/handbook/handbook.cfm?handbook_pageid=29

- b. Content peripheral to the summary/thesis belongs in the footnotes.
 - c. Information that does not strengthen, support, or have anything to do with the summary/thesis does not belong in the paper.
- 5. Critique**
- a. Remember that collegiate-writing incorporates critical thinking or critique. Remember to include your researched analysis of the strengths AND weaknesses of your authors/sources.
 - b. Use other scholars to support your critique.
 - c. Personal comments: In critique, you may express your personal views, e.g. “I agree with X because of Y.” or “I disagree with X because of Z.” However, this is not a personal reflection paper, where you express your feelings on the topic.
- 6. Internet Sources:**
- a. Credible Internet sources usually list an author (their reputation is at stake). Good scholarly writing lists the sources which the author used in footnotes and/or bibliography.
 - b. Do not use obscure Internet resources, e.g. Pastor X from ABC Church, godblog.com.
 - c. Internet version of public domain works (i.e. Calvin’s *Institutes* or Luther’s works) are often not the best translation. Usually improved translations can be found in print.
- 7. Plagiarism, Citation and Footnotes:**
- a. Lower-division (100 and 200-level courses) can use any standard style guide (APA, MLA, Chicago, Turabian). Just use one consistently.
 - If you use APA, I require that you include a page number for each citation, not just direct quotations.
 - b. Upper-division (300 and 400-level courses) Biblical Studies course papers should be written using the Society of Biblical Literature Style Guide (which is free and online; search for SBL style guide). It is very similar to the Chicago Style.
 - c. A great source for the Chicago Style is the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/12/>
 - d. Remember to avoid unintended plagiarism. If in doubt, footnote it! Every substantive sentence taken from a source—not just direct quotes—needs a footnote. Yes, 3 to 6 footnotes per page paper is common.
 - e. It is academic policy that use of work prepared for another course is NOT permitted without the permission of BOTH the professor for whom you wrote the paper and the current professor. Without permission, this is considered plagiarism.
 - f. Footnotes are preferred to endnotes.
 - g. Avoid parentheses. Use footnotes instead.
 - h. Try to avoid making footnotes from one source in chronological order, which may indicate that you have not digested the concepts well enough to engage your topic on a collegiate-level.
 - i. Internet attributions require listing the full URL and date accessed, according to the style guide.
- 8. Direct Quotes/Bible Quotes:**
- a. Use direct quotes sparingly. Instead of multiple direct quotes, explain the views in your words. A collection of direct quotes is not a research paper.
 - b. If you use a direct quote, use the key sentence or phrase in the body of your paper. If a larger portion or context is helpful, include it in a footnote. This is especially important for Bible passages. Do NOT include the entire Bible passage.
 - c. Bible quotes in the paper need to include the reference (in SBL style) and translation, i.e. (Exod 20:4-6 NRSV).
 - d. Capitalize Bible. Do not capitalize biblical.

9. Proof!

- a. Please! Have someone who is a good academic writer proof a *hardcopy* of your paper. Give them permission to make suggestions, not just find typos. You are expected to write on a collegiate-level.
- b. This is especially important if English is not your first language.

10. 1st Person Singular Pronouns:

- a. In most academic papers, if possible avoid first person singular pronouns, i.e. “I believe...”
- b. In reflection papers you are free to use “I” statements.

11. Nondiscriminatory Language Policy (from syllabus template)

- a. Please use non-discriminatory language when referring to humankind. For example, “man,” “men,” and “mankind” are no longer considered generic terms and should be replaced with “human,” “humans,” and “humankind.”
- b. Though once standard in English usage, it has been alienating to many. Thus, we want to be intentional in using inclusive language to not unintentionally marginalize any person.

Grading Rubric (see syllabus for full rubric)

- C** It is generally competent—it meets the assignment, has few mechanical errors, and is reasonably well organized and developed. The actual information it delivers, however, seems thin and commonplace. Stylistically, the C paper has other shortcomings as well. The opening paragraph does little to draw the reader in; the final paragraph offers only a perfunctory wrap-up; the transitions between paragraphs are often bumpy; and the sentences, besides being a bit choppy, tend to follow a predictable (hence monotonous) subject-verb-object order. The C paper, then, while it gets the job done, lacks both imagination and intellectual rigor, and hence does not invite a rereading.
- B** It is significantly more than competent. Besides being almost free of mechanical errors, the B paper delivers substantial information. Its specific points are logically ordered, well developed, and unified around a clear reorganizing principle that is apparent early in the paper. The opening paragraph draws the reader in; the concluding paragraph is both conclusive and thematically related to the opening. The transitions between paragraphs are for the most part smooth, the sentence structures pleasingly varied. Occasionally, the B paper even shows distinctiveness—finesse and memorability. On the whole, then, a B paper makes the reading experience a pleasurable one, for it offers substantial information with few distractions.
- A** Perhaps the principle characteristic of the A paper is its rich content. Some people describe that content as “meaty,” others as “dense,” still others as “packed.” Whatever, the information delivered is such that one feels significantly taught by the author, sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph. The A paper is also marked by stylistic finesse. The title and opening paragraph are engaging; the transitions are artful; the phrasing is tight, fresh, and highly specific; the sentence structure is varied; the tone enhances the purposes of the paper. Finally, the A paper, because of its careful organization and development, imparts a feeling of wholeness and usual clarity. Not surprisingly, then, it leaves the reader feeling bright, thoroughly satisfied, and eager to reread the piece.