



Basic Tips for Writing an Academic Paper

Before Writing

Although receiving an essay assignment can be daunting, there are certain processes that can help. Before getting started, make sure to read through the instructions carefully and ask questions about anything you are unsure about. Make sure to be clear on what the essay is asking you to do. The instructions might use words such as:

Analyze: examine the structure of something, especially information, typically for purposes of explanation and interpretation.

Synthesize: explore a single concept by exploring and integrating several ideas related to that topic

Expose: make something clear by explaining it further, providing evidence, reasons etc.

Interpret: explain something by making its meaning more explicit, including your own judgment

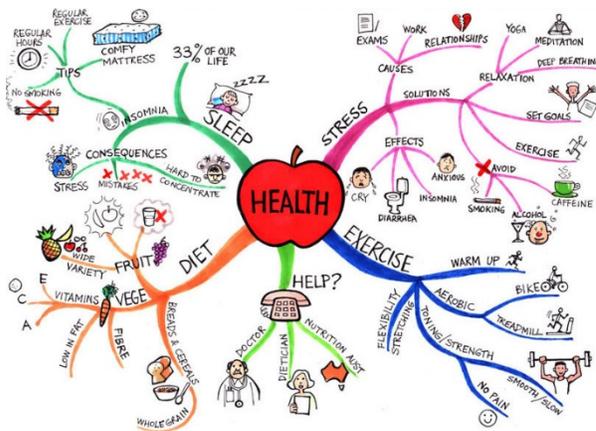
Present: outline main features and characteristics of a topic in an orderly way

Argue: make a case for accepting or rejecting a position by systematically giving reasons and evidence for or against it

Compare: identify relevant characteristics that are similar or different between two or more concepts

Persuade: show that one idea is more legitimate than another idea by giving sound reasons and evidence that leads the reader to adopt a similar position

As you go through the instructions, highlight or jot down important points to remember. Go through the rubric carefully if there is one.



Brainstorm

Whether or not you have developed the main idea you will be discussing in your paper, start getting some ideas down. A good way to do this is through mind mapping. Get out a blank sheet of paper, write some words down, and the patterns and themes between may begin to jump out at you.

Outline

Once themes start forming out of your brainstorm, try putting them into a plan. Throw out the idea of writing a “hamburger” or “5-paragraph essay” and remember that there is no one structure for an essay. It is important to have an introduction and conclusion, but it is your choice how to form the middle. The middle should consist of your main arguments or themes, but it is up to you how to write these. Pre-planning can help keep you on track and know where you’re going. Write down your main arguments, their sub-points, proofs, and examples. Think of the outline and thesis as changeable. You may change your mind and add or take away ideas and that is okay. In fact, it is the right way to do it.

Research

Now that you have your main ideas, it will become easier to focus your research and pick out what you need from your findings. The RULA website has many sources to use; make sure you are following guidelines in terms of how many journal, peer-review, and other sources you need. Remember to add to your plan/outline/rough notes and change your arguments as you learn more about your topic. Pulling out **quotes** that you plan integrate in your paper is helpful when you get down to writing. Writing them carefully in your notes, or highlighting in a certain colour will save some time later.

Writing and Integrating Sources

Begin your first draft: don’t worry if it’s not perfect, just get it down. There are many ways you can write your first draft, believe it or not, you don’t have to write from the beginning to the end. Each person has their own way of writing, and you will find yours. Remember, once again, that everything you write is a “working”

draft, and can always be revised. You may even change your mind as you write. Sometimes it may work for you to write your body paragraphs first, and then get the introduction and conclusion done. As well, you can write a rough introduction and then go back to clean it up later. If your thesis doesn't seem as clear as it could be, for example, get it on paper, and then once you have written the rest of the paper, it may become much clearer and you will be able to take the time to refine it. Writing is not a straight path. It's messy. For everyone. Make sure to **integrate sources** as you go. Even if you aren't writing your citations perfectly as you go, use some sort of system to make sure that you keep of track of what information is coming from where. For example, you can write a number for each source and put this in brackets until you are done. Once you are done, make sure that all citations are correct and you complete your **Works Cited** or **Bibliography** section depending on what type of referencing system you are using.

Editing for Correctness

Please see our separate handouts on Editing and Revision for more detailed information about these distinct parts of the process.

Editing is very important to a paper. As everything in your paper is “working” until it is handed in, it is during the editing process, that your paper will become the polished piece you want to hand in. Going through this process multiple times will make all the difference. Be sure to **take breaks** between edits. If you read the same piece over and over again, you may read over an error multiple times and not even notice it. Go have a snack, watch an episode of a TV show you like, or read a chapter of a book, and then come back to it. New ways of changing your words around will begin to jump out at you. If you have the time to leave it to the next day, this would be even better. This editing process can take time – more time than people usually devote to this. Make sure to start assignments early so you can have this time for editing.

How We Can Help

Folks at Writing Support are here to help you, to guide you, provide advice and strategies, and thoughtful response all along the way. We will do this at any stage of your writing, though it is best if you visit early in the process so you can get momentum. Be sure to check us out online and book an appointment. We fill up fast.