

## UNIVERSITY-LEVEL WRITING: EXPECTATIONS

For most students, especially those just starting out at university, essay expectations are a mystery. What are professors looking for? What will I be graded on? While requirements will differ for every assignment, professor and course, all university-level papers are expected to show critical thought and analysis, proper referencing and formatting, and correct grammar and spelling.

### ORIGINAL THINKING

To many professors, your essay will be “your thoughts made visible.” It’s a collection of your thoughts on paper, and the contents of your paper will show what’s going on your head and how you’ve thought about the material. Overall, how sophisticated is your thinking? Professors want to see you using concepts and ideas, rather than just stating or summarizing them. What do you think about the ideas? How can you connect different ideas and concepts? How are you using the evidence?

### Using Evidence

You will use evidence to support your thesis. How you use your evidence, however, will determine the strength of your argument and the sophistication of your thinking. Evidence generally comes in four forms:

- Ideas and statements from authorities on the subject
- Examples, either your own or others’
- Statistics and data
- Reasons: your assessment of a case and of the materials you have read on the subject

You will need to use this evidence: it does not speak for itself. One of your jobs as the essay writer is to teach the reader about what you found and why you found it convincing.

First you need to state the evidence: you can do this by either paraphrasing or directly quoting the source. It’s generally best to avoid quotations, except in rare cases to define a word, or to quote some elegant phrases or terminology exactly. Paraphrasing, then, is preferred and involves putting essential information and ideas into your own words. Doing this helps you understand the full meaning of the original source while using it for your own purposes. Be careful, though, to not twist the original source out of context or misrepresent the original author’s ideas, as doing so would be a form of academic dishonesty.

When you do use a quotation, be sure to use it precisely (i.e., don’t leave out words, add words or change the order or words, unless you’ve made it clear that you’ve done so). Any language that is not your own must be cited—even if that means only one word. Use quotation marks around the phrase and include the proper referencing.

After you’ve introduced the evidence you need to go a step further and explain what it means. Why is it important? How does it contribute to your thesis? Why have you used it? So what? Providing additional information about the source will help you to connect it to your ideas, other evidence and your argument, showing the critical thought, analysis and sophistication your professor is looking for.

## When to Cite

If the reader would ask, “How do you know this?”, you need to include a citation. Even when you borrow *ideas*, you must cite them, just as you would cite facts, statistics, direct quotations, etc. Don’t worry that there are too many references to sources, as long as you use them to make your point. Remember, you will be explaining each source and why it’s important, so the focus will be on your words and interpretation, rather than the source itself.

## ESSAY ORGANIZATION & STYLE

After you choose your topic, develop your thesis and complete your research, you need to properly structure your essay for maximum impact. Proper flow, transitions and idea development are all very important and affect the strength of your communication. All good essays will have a strong introduction, well-developed body and interesting and reflective conclusion, all tied together in a logical way.

### Introduction

All strong essays begin with an excellent introduction. As the start to your argument, it provides the reader with their first impression of the essay. After all, if you put a lot of care into your introduction, chances are the following pages will be just as thoughtful.

Introductions provide a road map to the essay, engaging the reader and showing the path the essay will follow. The introduction will clarify the topic, state the thesis and tell the reader exactly what the essay will be arguing. Without a strong introduction the reader will not understand the significance of the argument or the structure.

A good introduction will:

- Clearly state the research question and/or thesis
- Show that you understand the question or assignment
- Show how you are going to answer the question
- Show why the topic is relevant or interesting
- Catch the reader’s interest

When you write the introduction will be determined by your writing style: while some students prefer to start the writing process with a rough introduction, others save it for the end. Regardless of your style, you should have some sort of outline or structure planned for your paper, keeping in mind the need for review and revision.

### Body

The body of your paper will be determined by your actual assignment and the type of essay you are required to write. Generally speaking, the body will make up 80% of your essay, so you want to make sure that 80% is strong and clear.

There are many possible structures for essays; for example, you might choose a compare-contrast structure, chronological or another format. Whichever format you choose, however, all content of your body should come back to your thesis. Remember, your thesis is the answer to the question you have

posed, and the body of the essay will prove why your thesis is valid.

Each idea will need to flow logically into the next; this is frequently done through the use of transition words. For example, you might use phrases like “in addition”, “similarly”, “furthermore” or “on the other hand” to show how a new idea is connected to the previous. Using effective transitions will allow the reader to progress from one significant idea to the next, making your essay more clear, interesting and easy to understand.

### Conclusion

The conclusion is the final part of your paper. It’s restating the thesis in fresh language, summarizing the argument and wrapping up the essay in clear and thoughtful way. Ideally, though, the conclusion is much more than that. You’re not off the hook yet: the conclusion is your last chance to show critical thinking and analysis, and a good conclusion can be the difference between a good grade and a great one.

A strong conclusion should move beyond a summary by broadening the paper’s focus and leaving the reader something to think about. How does this essay relate to the big picture? Depending on your topic and assignment, there are different ways to broaden the focus:

- Warn about consequences (e.g., if your essay is about the relationship between video games and childhood obesity, what would be the consequences of not paying attention to that relationship?)
- Make recommendations or a plan of action (e.g., what could schools do about childhood obesity?)
- Use a quotation or expert opinion
- Give a startling statistic, fact or visual image to drive home the ultimate point
- Refer to a story or example you used in your introduction, adding further insight or recommendations

### REFERENCING & FORMAT

Every assignment will include instructions regarding the style guide you are to follow. The most common styles are APA, MLA and Chicago Style, and each discipline has its own preferences. If you’re unsure of which style to follow, consult with your professor or TA.

Formatting may seem unimportant, but doing it properly (or improperly) can have a big effect on your grade. Most students are aware of different formats for referencing pages and citations, but there are also requirements for everything from page margins and numbering to headings and spacing. Believe it or not, even spelling can be affected by style guides!

To avoid losing marks for formatting errors, consult the appropriate style guide, ask your professor or visit an online resource like the Purdue Online Writing Lab (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>).

### REFERENCES

OWL Purdue (1995-2016). Academic writing. Retrieved from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/2/>