

Seven Tips for Writing a Good Paper

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Good writing benefits both students and teachers

I have been grading student essays for many years. Reading good essays is what every teacher wishes for yet rarely gets -- a revitalizing and uplifting experience. More commonly I read bad essays. Reading bad essays is like living on a diet of junk food. Before long you will be feeling sick, guilty and angry by turns, and ready to die. Students, too, suffer when they write badly because they get bad grades, which they usually don't enjoy. The writing principles outlined here could help both groups feel better.

Do the Work.

As a student you are stressed and often quite busy with schoolwork. You have a perfect right to feel self-pity and to rage at the fact that life isn't easy. In fact, it's quite the American thing to do. Nevertheless, you still have to perform. To get an 'A,' you need to do 'A' level work. It's not enough to want an 'A.' It's not enough to need an 'A.' It's not even enough to have gotten A's on all your previous papers throughout high school. Past glory may help you bypass long restaurant lines, avoid criminal convictions, or star in horrid late night infomercials, but to get a good grade on your paper, you have to do good work now.

Simplify.

Einstein said, "Make everything as simple as possible, but not more so." Are we prepared to argue with Einstein? Right. So think twice before you use 'existence' to mean 'life,' 'conceptualization' to mean 'idea,' or 'human beings' to mean 'people.' And never, ever, use the word 'paradigm,' even if you know what it means. Like large bills, big words are better to have than to use. Adding them will make your bad essay longer, not better.

Don't: "I, myself, for me, personally, as I see it, in my opinion, if you ask me, would venture to intimate that verbal articulation is meaningfully significant."

Do: "Language is important."

Avoid Small, Annoying Errors.

1. First, say "First," not "Firstly," "First of all," or "First off."
2. "They're" means they are. "There" is where they are. "Their" is something that belongs to them. For example: "Their stuff is there. There is where they keep their stuff." Or try: "The truth is out there. They're searching for it with their silly flashlights."
3. "Must have" is correct while "must of" is incorrect. The fact that two words sound alike does not mean they can be used interchangeably. To wit: "I must have confused the sound of the word with its spelling. I wrote, 'must of' when I should have written, 'must have.'"
4. It's = It is. Its = Belonging to it. To help internalize this distinction, you may memorize the following poem:

It's not a friendly bear
Look at its glaring stare
If we don't scoot, it's rather certain
Its jaws will be our final curtain!

5. The spell checker checks for spelling. It doesn't check for meaning in context. That task, I'm afraid, is still yours to complete. You need to tend to it. For example, the word 'definitely' definitely does not mean the same thing as the word 'defiantly,' even if your spell checker sees no distinction at all. If you decide to defiantly ignore this distinction, then you will definitely get a lower grade.
6. Resist the temptation to use "very" more than once or twice in a decade. Whenever you feel the urge to write "very," you should write, "freakin'" instead. For example, the sentence, "Psychological assessment is very crucial to the very essence of the very fragile psyche of your very child" may look passionate and powerful to you. However, if you re-write it: "psychological assessment is freakin' important to the freakin' essence of the freakin' fragile psyche of your freakin' child," the problem will, one hopes, become freakin' clear. (This 'very' rule also applies to 'really' and 'pretty'.)

Which brings us to the next rule: Don't Use Slang

unless slang is the topic of your paper. Not to diss the faculty, but it is (it's) quite likely that your professor is not freakin' familiar with the latest slang. Your professor is a middle-aged egghead who still remembers the first gulf war, has actually watched black and white TV, thinks ecstasy is what you experience when your paper gets accepted for publication in The Journal of Perpetual Obscurity, and doesn't know a mosh pit from Brad Pitt. Your professor thinks the def

can't hear, the phat are overweight, and the 'ho's' are what Santa does on Christmas (and I mean that in the most vanilla sense). In other words, bro, your professor is not down with that. Feeling me? So resist the temptation to write, "Freud's the bomb! That idea of the anal stage is the shit!" Your professor may agree with you, but for all the wrong reasons.

Revise.

Not all revised papers are good, but non-revised papers are always bad. As they say in politics, "Trust, but verify." Even if you're certain that your paper is a brilliant gem, give it the once over before turning it in. In writing as in love, a second glance is usually warranted. Don't marry after the first date, and don't turn in a first draft, at least if you expect anyone to take your marriage or your paper seriously. Revising is like using a condom -- not your first priority, but your first obligation nonetheless. It's not the most elegant process, but it is still a rather simple way to avoid freakin' big problems; it isn't spontaneous and it feels somewhat awkward, but everyone is eventually the better for it.

A Paper Assignment is an Opportunity, Not a Crisis.

Many students consider the task of writing a paper to be a form of cruel punishment, inflicted upon them by the heartless professor. Thus, they approach it with dread and resentment. This is not the right attitude. The writer Henry James once noted that good stories happen to those who know how to tell them. Every paper assignment is a great opportunity to learn how to tell your stories. Moreover, writing clearly necessitates thinking clearly, so the process of writing (and revising) helps you to sort things out with, and for, yourself. Finally, writing papers gives you a chance to speak up, and a stage from which you can sound off on various topics knowing that someone on the other end (your professor) will consider your ideas seriously and

benevolently. Having experienced Twitter, you must realize what a rare opportunity this is. Take advantage of it.

Have Fun.

Karl Kraus once said, "You don't even live once." So don't waste time. Go ahead and put it in writing.

"Everything that can be said can be said clearly"

(Ludwig Wittgenstein)