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GUIDE TO WRITING AN “A” PAPER, OR . . . OVERCOMING THE “BLANK-SCREEN SYNDROME”

The dread of the blank screen has the effect of inducing instant panic, what I call “blank-screen syndrome.” This fear leads to a downward spiral. Not being able to stand the sight of the empty page, you end up typing fast and furiously with no direction. You tell yourself that you’ll go back and polish up the paper. But, then, you are so happy to have filled up the necessary space, this editing doesn’t happen. Trust me. (There is also a correlation between this syndrome and last-minuteitis, so usually you won’t have enough time to go back anyway.)

The bottom line: You need to know where you are going before you type in the first word. This guide helps to break the writing down into discernible steps, a number of which you do before you even sit down at the computer. If you know that you have to complete several steps before you sit down to start writing, then you approach the screen with a sense of what you are doing. In other words, you come armed and ready to face down your own reflection as you stare at the blank screen. I have listed some of the important practices to master and pitfalls to avoid, in other words, the top ten dos and don’ts. If followed, you will have less anxiety and produce better papers. Trust me.

TOP TEN DOS:

1) Be sure to do all the reading, including materials for the day the paper is due. Mark the readings with your own system--i.e.: underline for important info, add a bracket for main points, add a star for the main argument. This makes it easier when you come back to books you’ve read weeks ago.

2) Take two pages of notes on the reading: first, create a general history of the period that the readings cover-- the major events, turning points, phenomena, as well as key actors and institutions. Use your class notes for this, too. This doesn’t mean writing down everything, but just those facts that relate to the assignment. Typically, a single page of notes covers the main points.

3) Next take another page of notes on the major themes of each work (either primary documents or secondary sources). These don’t have to be extensive. In fact, they serve your purpose better if you stick to major arguments of each text. Usually, a few sentences on the main idea and broad narrative for each author suffice.

4) Then figure out where you stand. Your papers should avoid simple synthesis of other works, but rather should reflect your own argument. You should build upon the

scholarship and borrow examples in order to come up with your own strong, well-articulated thesis. At this stage, jotting some ideas down on a pad helps to crystallize your argument (and also serves as a useful check to prove to yourself that you really know what you are talking about).

5) Mine the readings to select examples that support your argument. At times, you may find a particular point an author makes useful. At other times, you may want to use the evidence an author provides to come to different conclusions. I find it valuable at the outset to pick more examples rather than fewer. Typically, I mark these by just sticking a post-it on the page. Sometimes, I also code these post-its with letters, numbers, symbols, whatever, so all the examples on the same point are marked "1" or "A."

6) Now you are ready to write. Begin with the introduction. This first paragraph should clearly state the overall argument and give the reader some sense of the structure of the paper. The use of "first. . .second . . .finally" runs the risk of not really making an argument in which one point actually leads to the next. Instead, state your overall thesis and then the rough outlines of the argument. What is an argument? An argument reflects your particular take on a period of historical change. It explains why and how things happened the way they did, what factors influenced this change or development, and, often, who or what played significant roles. In general, an argument characterizes a particular moment in history and explains the contingent forces at work.

7) Outline the remaining argument of the paper. You don't need a tidy outline with Roman numerals and lower-case letters. Instead, you need the topic sentences or ideas of each paragraph. Once you do this you begin to see how much (or how little) space you have to make your case. Often you have less than you thought. If the rule of thumb is roughly two paragraphs per page (or page and a half), and you need an introduction and conclusion, then you can work backwards and figure out how many points you have room to make. Assume one major point per paragraph. These points should build on each other and thus the reader should be able to read the intro and the first sentence of each paragraph and understand the whole argument.

8) Select the quotes you want to use. Typically, you want to use a quote only when an author or historical actor said something in specific words that actually matter. Use your judgment as to whether something is particularly juicy and powerful, and you need to have the exact quote, or whether you can just paraphrase. When you quote a scholar, then you should use a lead-in like, As historian Alan Brinkley points out, ". . ." If you are quoting from a quote in a book, identify the historical actor, As Huey Long argued, ". . ." and then in the footnotes, put where Long wrote it and also "as quoted in" and the citation where you got the quote from. (By the way, get a good handbook on the proper way to do notes.) In general, use quotes as evidence and examples that support your

argument rather than as the argument itself. In other words, make sure your quotes reinforce a point you have stated in your own words.

9) Now you have to fill in the blanks with the rest of the text. Once you have a strong intro, topic sentences that build on each other, and good examples, you are almost done. Now you just need to connect the dots. How you do this, though, matters a lot. A good idea is only as good as the writing. You need to express precisely what you mean. Again, think before you type. Make sure that each sentence relates to the topic sentence while also adds information. To improve your writing, consult with the list of “don’ts” below.

10) Proofread and correct your paper. This means more than spell checking. You should print out a hard copy and ask yourself the following questions: Does the paper tell a strong compelling story that explains how things moved from point A to point B? or else stayed the same? Can you read only the introduction and each topic sentence and get the argument? Would your classmates or roommates or other professors understand it?

TOP TEN DON'Ts:

1) Don’t leave all the reading to last minute. Also, taking notes as you do the reading will shorten the paper-writing process and will also enable you to contribute more to each class.

2) Don’t wait to the second or third or fourth (!) paragraph to introduce your argument. In other words, avoid the “set-the-stage” intro in which you go back to the American Revolution. Also, avoid sweeping statements like “the world was a different place in the twentieth-century than in the nineteenth.” Or broad generalizations like “many things happened in the 1930s.” Yes, we know and that is why you are writing the paper. Indeed, introductions present the most challenging part of writing a paper. You have to do a tricky balancing act between setting up the context and actually stating your thesis. Think of the introduction as posing a particular problem that you need to solve, rather than just asserting that “the world witnessed a lot of change.”

3) Avoid having too many points per paragraph. Each paragraph should have a single idea that you state clearly in the first sentence and then explain and illustrate.

4) Watch out for the “laundry list phenomenon.” That happens when you have one paragraph after the next without any real transitions. Transitions can often prove to be the biggest stumbling blocks. That’s why many authors do neat tricks like use text breaks or false connections like “meanwhile” or “at the same time.” Instead your points need to

cumulate and build off of each other. Smooth transitions usually make the difference between papers that simply summarize and papers that actually analyze and argue.

5) Don't introduce new ideas or information at the end. Usually I can spot a victim of b.s. (blank screen) syndrome if the conclusion makes more sense as an introduction. Because you have not prepared before sitting down to write, then only by the end of the paper do you figure out what you want to say. Your argument should not come as a surprise to the reader or to you.

6) Avoid long or vacuous quotes that you could easily summarize. Professors are clever (after all, we used to be students too) and realize that this space means fewer of your ideas and more of someone else's. Also, feel free to use just a few telling words out of a longer sentence.

7) No flabby fillers. Rather than a vague sentence like "industrialization led to a lot of changes," be more specific in your writing. What do you mean by "a lot of changes?" Do you mean unrest or instability or dislocation or increased living standards or what?

8) At all costs, don't use the passive voice. Teachers say this all the time, but what does it mean? It means that every sentence should say who did what. When you write sentences that use some form of the verb "to be," you are avoiding telling the reader what exactly happened. Instead of writing "laws were passed," you should explain that "a group of Progressive politicians from urban areas in the North and the Midwest worked for several years to gain support for their legislation in Congress."

9) Avoid sloppy slip-ups. Computer spell checking leaves us with little excuse for errors. But your computer is only so smart. It does not pick up on some of the most classic mistakes like "lead" for "led." (Bonus points if you can explain why that error occurs more frequently than any other does.)

10) Overall, don't waste space. Once you realize that you have many steps to do before you start writing, you'll realize that the goal is not filling up five pages or fiddling with the margins to make the blank screen go away. You'll come to appreciate that the real question concerns how you can best use your space, and you'll be wishing you had more. Think of it this way: you need to score a certain number of points. If an entire page passes with no check marks from the reader, then it will be hard to recover and you have cheated yourself out of valuable space.

The take-home message: start early, break the writing into its component parts, approach the blank screen with a solid game plan, and then reread to make sure you have avoided pitfalls. Once you get this system down, then writing all papers becomes much easier. Sure you need to be clever and creative (don't want to forget that), but as with other disciplines, writing papers is a skill you can practice--a formula to learn. Hope this helps cure the dreaded blank screen syndrome. Happy writing!