

Professor Campbell's Tips for Writing Effectively

Generalizations: Avoid broad proclamations about humanity. Writing sentences like “slavery was bad,” “women were oppressed,” or “history was changed forever,” is ineffective.

Past Tense: All history papers should use past tense.

Should I write my paper chronologically or thematically? This depends on your preference. Either approach can work well. It might be easiest to write your paper in chronological order, but this does not need to be a hard-and-fast rule. In terms of organization, the most important feature is that your paragraphs have a logical flow with smooth transitions.

Paragraph Organization: Make sure that each paragraph contains an overarching point. Page-long paragraphs will not only disorient a grader, but they will most likely contain structural flaws as well. Generally, though not in all circumstances, paragraphs should be anywhere from 4-8 sentences long.

Personal Pronouns: Don't say, “I think” this, or “I think” that. Instead of saying, “I think the American Revolution in the South was really a revolution over slavery,” say something like, “Scholars have argued that the American Revolution in the South was really a fight over slavery.” Typically, in formal academic papers, we avoid the use of personal pronouns such as “I,” “we,” and “you.”

Avoid Slang, Contractions, Informal Expressions and Colloquialisms: Do not use slang, informal expressions, or colloquialisms such “the straw that broke the camel's back” or “searching for a needle in a haystack.” These statements are vague and unscholarly. Contractions are not advisable in a formal academic paper.

Use Short Quotations: When you use quotes, let your own analysis stand out. In a short paper (i.e. five to ten pages), do not use display or block quotes. You want to integrate quotes into your own sentences. Often, students have trouble with this skill because they stick quotes into sentences in an awkward fashion.

Suggestion on which quotes to use: When you first come across a new source in the PSR, you will see an introduction (in italics) before reading the actual historical text. You want to quote from the actual source, not the italicized introduction. The point is to draw meaning from the original author's voice, not how historians have conceptualized the material many years later.

Interpreting Evidence: When you present evidence, you must *analyze* and *interpret* it to give meaning. It is not enough to simply list facts.

Sentence Structure and Writing Style: Simplicity is often better than complication. Why use three or four words when one will do? In addition, avoid run-on sentences that might distract the reader. Using simple, honest, clear, and direct language is one of the most effective ways of writing.

Use Standard Fonts and Margins: This means *Times* or *Times New Roman* style, 12 point font, double-spaced paragraph alignment, and ‘1’ inch margins all around.

Avoid Passive Voice: The passive voice in writing indicates that someone or something has been acted upon. Although passive voice is common in journalism, in history it often comes across as weak and unclear. An example of passive voice would be “Jack had his lights punched out.” This begs the reader to ask, “who punched Jack”? Instead, you should rearrange this sentence to say, “The unruly student punched Jack in the nose.”

Use Words Correctly and Appropriately: Make sure that you know the meaning of every word in your paper. Students, in an effort to sound sophisticated, often use complicated words when a simpler one may work better. For example, why use the word “propitiously” when “well” might be better? For example, instead of saying, “Johnson’s presidency did not end propitiously,” you might just say, “Johnson’s presidency did not end well.”

Strategies for Constructing an Argument: First, take rigorous notes on your documents, lectures, and readings. What can you prove? Figure out all of the main points of your paper first. There are different strategies to writing a paper effectively and there is not any single strategy that necessarily works better than others. However, if you are struggling, it might be wisest to write all of your body paragraphs first. Then write your introduction last. The advantage of this strategy is that it allows you to think about the paper’s main argument before you write the introduction. This will prevent you from having to write the introduction over and over. After all, the introduction should clearly state the main argument of the paper and act as a blueprint or roadmap for the rest of the paper.

PROOFREAD your papers: If a paper is full of grammatical errors and awkward sentences, it gives the impression to the grader that the student wrote the paper hastily and at the last minute. Grammar does, indeed, count. So, too, does presentation. As an analogy, consider if you were submitting a report to your boss at work. Would you want the paper to look sloppy or professional? To avoid these mistakes, print your paper out in hard copy and read it aloud. Have a friend or classmate read it. Does it make sense? If you implement these techniques, you are much more likely to catch mistakes.

Writing is a process: Even the best writers get discouraged. But the revision process usually can turn ineffective writing into something more worthwhile. Writing a little bit over several sessions, including revisions, is much more likely to produce a better product than writing a full paper in one marathon session.