

UNIVERSITY-LEVEL PAPERS

As much as your English teachers in high school tried to prepare you, writing a university-level paper is different from writing a secondary school essay. Listed below are tips for all the steps from choosing a topic through handing it in.

1. Choose your words.

You're writing a paper that judges your academic merits, not a letter to your friend. So avoid:

- contractions (“do not” instead of “don’t”; “I am” instead of “I’m”)
- slang (“hip” for “popular”; “kid” for “child”; “green” for “inexperienced”)
- colloquialisms (“a lot”, “anybody”, “how come”)
- clichés (“it was an open and shut case”; “a hands-on experience”; “give it a rest”)

Note: There has been a growing change with contractions; they are becoming more accepted for use in essays. However, many professors stand by the old rules, so it is best to be cautious and not contract.

2. Choose your word length.

Queen Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother, said, “More matter with less art.” Fill your paper with well thought-out ideas and theories, not filler and adjectives. An acceptable length for a university paper is in the area of 1000 words. Make them count.

3. Choose your thesis.

Generally, professors hand out topic ideas, not theses. A thesis is a short statement that summarizes the argument or analysis in your paper. It is basically your arguing point. Your professors are looking for original thinking on your part. Consider what they assign as a starting point for what you are going to research. In secondary school, you were most likely taught a thesis is one sentence only, with three clearly outlined main points, as follows:

There are three reasons how John A. Macdonald, the first prime minister of Canada, contributed to the homogeneity of Canada’s founding: he was a man, he was upper-class, and he was of British Isles descent.

A thesis for a university paper does not have to follow this hard-and-fast rule. Your thesis can be more than three points (although it is important to consider how much



depth you can analyze, given the larger scope of a many points thesis). It can also be more than one sentence. Finally, it can be more than one type of essay, as seen by this persuasive and contrasting essay thesis:

In this paper, I will argue that the political careers of John A. Macdonald and Pierre Trudeau contain numerous similarities. Despite his good intentions with founding a railroad that would connect all of Canada and thusly all Canadians, MacDonald serving as prime minister only further strained relations between French- and Anglo-Canadians, as did the FLQ crisis with Pierre Trudeau. Furthermore, the rebellions of 1837 were a period that served to “make or break” Macdonald, as did Trudeau’s repatriation of the Canadian Charter. Finally, I will argue the two prime ministers were also alike in personality, as both were known for their quick wit and their short temper.

4. Choose your style.

APA style was developed by the American Psychological Association for social studies (including anthropology, economics, education, geography, law, linguistics, political science, psychology and sociology) and scientific papers. MLA style was developed by the Modern Language Association for humanities (including languages, literature, media studies, cultural studies, philosophy, religion, and history) papers. If your professor hasn’t assigned a certain style, choose your style according to your topic.

Exercise

For a media studies class, you have been assigned a paper about disparities between two groups of North American citizens as portrayed by a television show. You decide to write about the different levels of health care received by upper-middle class women and lower-middle class women in clinics in the United States, based on prime-time medical dramas.

What style would you use for writing and citing your paper? What should be taken more into consideration, the subject of the paper or the subject of the class? Write your thoughts in the space below.

5. Give yourself plenty of time.

There’s a reason why professors assign papers weeks ahead of when they’re due. They want to see a little effort. And while you may have been able to write a multiple page essay the night before and get an A in high school, you’ll be lucky to get a C+ now. A professor once handed out a calendar for writing an essay: one week was devoted to research, while two were for writing drafts, revision, editing by peers, the TA, and the professor, and writing the final copy. (For a more detailed breakdown and explanation of each stage of the writing timeline, see the back of this handout.) That said . . .



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6. Don't procrastinate.

It's so easy to procrastinate. It's also easy to delude yourself into thinking you're being productive by doing extra research while the deadline is looming and nothing has been written. It's a vicious cycle: you can't write unless you're under pressure, but the pressure makes you hurriedly write, producing a lower quality paper. Try writing down ideas as they come to you, or forcing yourself to write when you just don't want to. You can always change what you wrote during a late-night cram session.

7. Know your sources.

There are many differences between primary and secondary sources.

Primary Sources	Secondary Sources
are created at the time of an event	are created after an event
include interviews, press releases, personal journals, photographs	analyze and interpret the event
are great for supplemental information	include textbooks, seminars and conferences, academic journals, artwork and music
can be produced by anyone	are usually written by experts on the subject, allowing for more insight




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Writing a University-Level Paper: A Timeline

Assignment is given	Your professor hands out a list of topics for a paper.	
20 days to deadline	You have chosen your topic. It should be one you think is interesting, or will be the easiest for you in terms of researching and writing.	
19 days to deadline	You have written a tentative thesis, and have emailed your professor and/or TA for their thoughts and insight on your thesis. Ask them to clarify what they are looking for in relation to information, content, format, and style.	
10 days to deadline	You have read, seen, and heard an assortment of both primary and secondary sources that relate to the assigned topic (and hopefully your thesis). Revise your thesis as necessary, based on the information found. If you revise the thesis, email your professor and/or TA for their thoughts and insight on your revised thesis.	
7 days to deadline	You have written the first draft of your paper. Ask trusted classmates to review it. You can also come to the Writing Centre and ask a tutor for their input on your writing and subject matter.	
3 days to deadline	You have written the second draft of your paper. Ask your professor and/or TA to review it. Pay attention to their comments. You can also come back to the Writing Centre for more feedback on your writing and subject matter.	
1 day to deadline	You have written the final draft of your paper. You have (to the best of your knowledge) properly used in-text citations and a bibliography of your primary and secondary sources.	
DEADLINE	Hand in your essay when your professor asks for it. Generally, this will be at the start of the Class. Do not skip class and hand in your paper at the end of class time.	



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