

## Suggestions for Writing Short Papers

The short essay presents a particular challenge: how to construct a coherent, compelling argument in a small space. In a short paper, it is especially critical that you be organized, concise, and clear. The following points are guidelines for writing a strong argument in about 3-10 pages.

- 1. Start early.** Papers written the night before they are due almost always lack clarity and are weakly argued. Write down some preliminary notes and come back to them later. Starting early will also give you time to talk to the professor to clarify any questions you might have.
- 2. Develop a plan.** Read the question carefully and think about all the elements of the question that you will need to answer in your paper. Make sure you understand what is being asked of you. Ask yourself: Is there an obvious sequence in which I should answer the parts of the question? What terms will I need to define in the paper? From which of the readings should I draw?
- 3. Take a position.** You may be thinking: "Both sides of the argument seem reasonable. The facts are insufficient for sweeping generalizations. The question is too complex." Nevertheless, if the assignment calls for it, you must take a position. If you cannot decide, list the pros and cons for each side of the argument. List examples and/or facts from your readings that you can use to support each of the positions. Think about rebuttals to each point. Reviewing all this, make a decision as to which side of the argument you want to defend.
- 4. Construct an argument.** Decide the order in which you want to make your points. State the most convincing points first. Think about the logic of the argument. Make sure the conclusion follows from the premises. Decide how you will incorporate examples and facts from the readings. Make sure you demonstrate your knowledge of the course material.
- 5. Be organized.** A paper should have a logical structure. It should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The first paragraph should contain your thesis statement and a summary of your supporting arguments. Do not make the reader guess about your position. Use techniques that will make it easy for the reader to follow your argument. For example, in the opening paragraph, state that there are 3 reasons why you are taking this position, then list them: (1) X, (2) Y, and (3) Z. In the body of the paper, discuss your arguments in the same order. In the concluding section, summarize your argument.
- 6. Be judicious with direct quotations.** While it might seem that published authors can state something better than you can, direct quotations rarely fit precisely into your argument. You can usually state the information more concisely for the purposes of *your* paper. This is especially true in very short papers. If you are going to quote, you must give credit. Changing a word or two does not make the passage your own. *Remember: Plagiarism is a crime.*
- 7. Revise.** Write a first draft, take a break (an hour, a day, a week), and then read it over. Have you said what you intended to say? Is the argument still in the correct, logical order? Do your points make sense? Have you demonstrated that you understand the course material? Are you persuasive?

**8. Proofread.** Misspelled words and incorrect grammar distract from the substance of your paper. Run a spell checking program. Consult a dictionary. Check for common errors (their vs. there vs. they're, its vs. it's, etc.). Learn where you usually make mistakes and watch for these. For example, do you tend to use the passive voice? Avoid casual language in academic papers. Avoid "I believe," "I think," and "I feel." These phrases weaken your argument. Avoid using "clearly" or "obviously." It may not be so clear or obvious to your reader. For definitions of political science terms, use your textbooks, not the dictionary. Terms often have technical meanings which may not be captured in the dictionary.

**9. Consider getting assistance.** If you have difficulty writing papers, ask your professor for suggestions on how you can improve. Also, seek help from the CSM Writing Program, located in 309 Stratton Hall: <http://writing.mines.edu/hourslocation.htm>. Our writing specialists can help you improve your writing over the long term.

*Writing is an important skill that you will use repeatedly  
... in school, in a job, and in your personal life.*

*The sooner you excel at it, the better!*