

Guidelines for Writing Papers

1. Have a clear and strong thesis. In the beginning of the paper, i.e. the first paragraph, offer a clear statement that presents the argument that you will be developing throughout the paper. You can think of your thesis as the answer to a specific question. Answering a specific question, and backing up your answer (thesis) with specific evidence, is quite different from providing “book reports” on the materials you have read.

2. By beginning with a clearly articulated thesis, you impose a certain structure on your paper that will help both the flow of the narrative and the overall coherence of the paper. Clearly stating the goal of the paper and then referring back to it will keep you from going along unproductive digressions. It also gives the reader a clearer sense of where your paper is going and how your arguments fit together. And it will help you when you come to the conclusion of your paper, which should contain a restatement of your argument and central thesis.

3. Depth over breadth. It is better to develop two ideas thoroughly than it is to mention five and leave them relatively unexplained. Part of your goal in writing papers for this class is to show that you are capable of articulating a position and then developing the argument. In such a brief paper there is no expectation that you will be able to deal with every aspect of the question at hand. As a result little is to be gained from listing a number of considerations without exploring them in any detail.

4. History is necessarily an interpretive enterprise. There are rarely clean, clear-cut beginnings and ends to eras. Nuance is an important key for characterizing contributions, events, and shifts.

5. Short paragraphs should not be the norm for your paper. They may work to punctuate a certain point in rare instances, but generally, paragraphs should have a beginning, middle, and end – so, at least, three sentences. They should fully develop a point that fits in the trajectory of your overall argument.

6. At first reference to an author or physicist, use their full names (i.e. first and last). The last name can be used thereafter.