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 From: Stephen Van Evera, Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. Press, 1997): 123:128.

HOW TO WRITE A PAPER

I often offer the following suggestions to undergraduates writing class papers.

I. GENERAL FORMAT

The following general format is often appropriate: "tell them what you're going to tell them; then tell them; then tell them what you told them."

II. INTRODUCTION FORMAT

Begin your paper with a short summary introduction. This summary introduction should answer up to five (5) questions:

1. What question or questions do you address?
2. Why do these questions arise? From what literature or real-world events? Offer background that clarifies your questions and puts them in context.
3. What answer or answers do you offer? Summarize your bottom line in a few sentences.
4. How will you reach your answers? Say a few words about your sources and methods.
5. What comes next? Provide a roadmap to the rest of the paper: "Section I explains how I began my life of crime; Section II details my early arrests; Section III describes my trip to death row; Section IV offers general theoretical conclusions and policy implications." Something of that sort.

#1 ("What is your question?"), #2 ("Why does this question arise?"), and #3 ("What is your answer?") are essential: make sure you cover them. #4-#5 are optional.

Summary introductions of this sort help readers grasp your argument. They also help you diagnose problems with your paper. A summary introduction can be hard to write. A possible reason: gaps or contradictions in your arguments or evidence, which summary exposes. Solution: rethink and reorganize your paper.

III. CONCLUSION FORMAT

Authors often recapitulate their argument in their conclusion. However, a good summary

introduction often makes a full summary conclusion redundant. If so, recapitulate quickly and then use your conclusion to explore the implications of your argument. What policy prescriptions follow from your analysis? What general arguments does it call into question, and which does it reinforce? What further research projects does it suggest?

IV. ARGUMENTATION

Four injunctions on argumentation should be kept in mind.

1. Use empirical evidence--facts, numbers, history--to support your argument. Purely deductive argument is sometimes appropriate, but argument backed by evidence is always more persuasive.

2. Clearly frame the general point(s) that your evidence supports. Don't ask facts to speak for themselves.

To sum points #1 and #2: offer evidence to support your arguments and state the arguments your evidence supports.

3. "Argue against yourself." After laying out your argument, acknowledge questions or objections that a skeptical reader might raise, and briefly address them. This shows readers that you were thoughtful, thorough, and paid due regard to possible objections or alternate interpretations.

Often, of course, the skeptic would have a good point, and you should grant it. Don't claim too much for your theories or evidence!

4. Use footnotes to document all sources and statements of fact. On footnote and citation format, consult and obey Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th ed., rev. by John Grossman and Alice Bennett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), in paperback. You should own a copy.

V. WRITING

Good writing is essential to clear thinking and effective communication. So bear the following points in mind:

1. Your paper should make a single point or a handful of related points, and should follow a simple organization. Avoid cluttering it with extra points. If you developed an argument that later became ancillary as you rethought your paper, drop the argument from the paper. This is painful ("I sweated hours on that idea!") but extraneous arguments drain power from your main argument.

2. Break your paper into numbered sections and subsections. More sections is better than fewer. Sections help readers see the structure of your argument.

Label sections with vivid section headings that convey the main message of the section.

3. I recommend the following structure for sections/subsections:
 - a. Your argument;
 - b. Your supporting evidence;
 - c. Counter-arguments, qualifications, and limiting conditions of your argument.
4. Start each section with several sentences summarizing the argument presented in the section. You may cut these summaries from your final draft if they seem redundant with your summary introduction, but you should include them in your first drafts to see how they look. Writing such summaries is also a good way to force yourself to decide what you are and are not doing in each section, and to force yourself to confront contradictions or shortcomings in your argument.

Often these section summaries are best written after you write the section, but don't forget to add them at some point.

5. Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that distills the point of the paragraph.¹ Later sentences should offer supporting material that explains or elaborates the point of the topic sentence. Qualifications or refutation to counter-arguments should then follow. In short, paragraphs should have the same structure as whole sections.

A reader should be able to grasp the thrust of your argument by reading only the first couple of sentences of every paragraph.

6. Write short, declarative sentences. Avoid the passive voice. (Passive voice: "the kulaks were murdered"--but who did it? Active voice: "Stalin murdered the kulaks.")

7. Write from an outline. Outlines are major aids to coherence and readability.

8. Write at a level appropriate for college undergraduate readers--i.e., smart readers without much background knowledge on your topic. In fact your class papers will be read by teachers who probably know something about your topic, but they want to see how you would lay out your argument for folks who don't.

For more advice on writing see William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, The Elements of Style, 3rd ed. (NY: Macmillan, 1979); and Teresa Pelton Johnson, "Writing for International Security: A Contributor's Guide," International Security, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Fall 1991), pp. 171-180.²

If you are doing a research paper you might also consult Kate L. Turabian, A Student's Guide to Writing College Papers, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) for advice.³

¹ The topic sentence can appear as the second sentence in a paragraph, but should not appear later than that.

² Other useful guides to writing include Claire Kehrwald Cook, Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985); Frederick Crews, The Random House Handbook, 4th ed. (New York: Random House, 1984); Thomas S. Kane, The New Oxford Guide to Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³ Other primers include Roberta H. Markman, Peter T. Markman, Marie L. Waddell, 10 Steps in Writing the Research Paper, 5th ed. (New York: Barron's, 1989); Michael Meyer, The Little, Brown Guide

VI. VETTING

Ask a friend or two to give your paper a look before you turn it in; and return the favor for them when they have a paper underway. Two heads are better than one, and giving and receiving comments are important skills.

VII. GENERAL BEAUTY TIPS

Take care to turn in a neat, clean paper. Run your spellchecker. A messy-looking paper suggests a messy mind.

VIII. HOW TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TO WRITE PAPERS

Re-read articles you or others admire and imitate their better aspects.

to Writing Research Papers (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982); Audrey Roth, The Research Paper: Process, Form, and Content, 7th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1995); Ellen Strenski and Madge Manfred, The Research Paper Workbook, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1992); Harry Teitelbaum, How to Write a Thesis: A Guide to the Research Paper, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1994); Stephen Weidenborner and Domenick Caruso, Writing Research Papers: A Guide to the Process, 5th ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

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