

Tips for Writing Quality Academic Papers

Yolanda Palmer-Clarke, PhD.

Writing scholarly and academic papers is a major part of any graduate program. As a graduate student, there will be a greater demand on your time and often you will be required to write from broader and multiple perspectives while integrating diverse ideas and higher order thinking skills. Furthermore, as a graduate student you are expected to know and develop expertise in a range of writing styles and repertoire. These extend from writing abstracts, critiques, opinion pieces, reviews, grant applications, journal articles and conference presentations. Mastering these skills can be a major hurdle for graduate students in post-secondary institutions, including international graduate students. This challenge is further extended to faculty and faculty assistants who are tasked to read, make sense of and decide on the value and power of these written pieces. The perceived challenges come in light of the disparity between “normal” everyday language and the language spoken and used in academia. Additionally, the language and discourse employed throughout universities tend to be rhetorical and deeply embedded in jargon specificities across disciplines. Notably, when a student enters graduate studies in ignorance of the rhetoric and intended language structures their adjustment and performance may become stagnated and in some cases troublesome for professors and teaching assistants.

In light of the possible challenges that graduate students face in their writing, I offer the following tips for consideration when writing an academic piece.

1. **Choose a Topic.** Have a topic idea clearly defined in your mind before you begin to write.

The following questions will help you to figure things out.

- a. What do I want to write about?
- b. What do I know about the topic?
- c. Where can I find additional information about this topic?
- d. Who is your audience? Who will take the time to read your paper?
- e. What is the relevance of the paper?
- f. What will be the structure of the paper? How will it be organized? What will I look like when I am done?
- g. What contribution will my paper make to field or discipline?

If you are working on an assigned paper, you first need to fully understand what you will be writing about. Writing about what you know and think can help to alleviate some of the issues and concerns associated with the process of writing at the graduate level. When writing an article for a specific journal, ascertain the requirements and write to suit those purposes. One way of doing this is reading articles previously published in said journal. This will give you an idea of the requirements for structure and format of your own paper.

You may want to invest in an idea book or journal. These are useful tools when writing at any stage. Through a journal, you, as the author, are able to record your ideas, thoughts and changing impressions of your writing. An idea book will help you to keep track of your ideas and the progress of your paper.

2. **Read Widely.** It is critical that you read about your topic area and what others say about it.

You will want to know what others have said about it so you can identify the gaps and where your paper will fall within the area. To write a solid paper you should also read outside your area of interest and focus.

3. **Brainstorm.** Begin to work through your ideas and what you want to write. Brainstorming can take many different forms. What is important is that this is the first step to writing the first draft of the paper. At this stage, you may want to make jottings, concept maps, mind maps etc. as you work through the content you have researched.
4. **Sketch.** Make a sketch of the paper. It gives you an opportunity to think about the what it will look like, the pieces you will use and where they will fall in the paper. This is a plan or outline of the paper; its organization, structure and content.
5. **Write.** Writing is a recursive process and is never complete. Years from now you will look at your best work and see errors that you never saw. Therefore, be prepared to do multiple drafts. Write every day. Practice: write, edit, rewrite then write again.

Some key points to remember when writing are:

- Have a strong thesis statement and supporting arguments.
- Know your referencing style and use it well. If you do not, ask for help.
- Use appropriate vocabulary.
- Avoid colloquial expressions and harsh words.
- Do NOT use contractions.
- Be concise. Your ideas are important but you cannot write all you know in one paper. Save some for the next and next...
- Avoid repetitious words, phrasing and content. Use a thesaurus!
- Write to inform NOT to impress. Do not oversimplify nor overstate. Use vocabulary you know but also give yourself the ability to expand your vocabulary through use of synonyms.

6. **Share.** Do not be afraid to share your work with others. Ask a few friends to read, edit, and critique your work. This is a refining process. Do not be afraid of criticism.
7. **Sleep on it!** Let your work breathe. Take a break.
8. **Reread your paper.** You cannot have enough of your own work, great!
9. **Proof read** and read again. Know when to stop writing there is such a thing as overwriting...
10. Believe it! Know it! Own it! Submit!

Useful Readings

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