

**The
Academic
Resource
Center
at Wheeling Jesuit University**
Ignatius Hall – Ground Floor (304) 243-4473
<http://www.wju.edu/arc/>

How to Prepare a University-Level Essay

All paper assignments you prepare at Wheeling Jesuit University ought to meet certain minimum standards for layout and style. This worksheet will discuss these basic requirements to help you prepare assured, professional papers for your classes.

Presentation

Follow these directions *unless your professor or instructor specifically assigns something else*.

Type (or font) size should be 12-point on electronic word processing and 10 cpi on typewriters. Allow **one-inch margins** on all four sides of your paper. Do not justify your text along the right margin. **Double-space** everything. Double-spaced on separate lines at the top-left-corner of the first page, **identify** your paper by typing your name, the date, and the number of your course (for example: ENG 105). Double-space and center the **title** of your paper. Double-space, indent five for your opening paragraph, and begin. All **paragraphs** should begin on a new double-spaced line, indented five. After the first page, put your last name and the **page number** in the top-left-corner and double-space to continue your text.

Do not: use contractions, informal diction (slang, profanity, etc.), or direct references to yourself or the reader (the first and second persons of speech or, in other words, "I" and "you"). When **quoting** from an outside source, indicate who is speaking (or writing) and then enclose the quoted material completely within double quotation marks, like so: As Dr. Seuss has written, "I do not like green eggs and ham." Remember to leave the period *inside* the last quotation mark. Short story, journal article, and poem titles should also be in quotes. In **underlining**, avoid using the underline for emphasis; underline only when marking book, journal, or show titles, as you would in indicating that the above quote came from Green Eggs and Ham. For citing your sources, please see the **ARC Style Sheets for MLA, APA, or CMS**.

Paragraphs and Organization

As mentioned above, there's a proper way to *present* a paragraph (double-spacing and indenting five spaces before beginning). Beyond its visual presentation, however, paragraphs have a specific purpose. Each successful paragraph ought to contain no more or less than one controlling idea, communicated in a **topic sentence**. The topic sentence ought to come at the beginning of the paragraph, so that your reader understands the direction of the information that follows. You must then provide **support**: details, facts, examples, or arguments that directly relate to the topic sentence. Remember that support for the claims of your paper will make them much easier to grasp, let alone accept. There is no standard length for a paragraph, although one-sentence paragraphs can't help but be under-supported, and paragraphs that go on at great length run the risk of **incoherence**: straying from the initial

topic sentence to include tangential rather than directly-relevant information (watch for signal words that suggest a new topic ("On the other hand," "Conversely," "Another reason," etc.).

A well-developed, well-organized essay will probably have at least four or five paragraphs. Two paragraphs that serve specific functions within any good paper are the **introduction** and the **conclusion**. The introductory paragraph isn't constructed quite the same as any of the others in the paper. Rather, a good introduction ought to provide a general discussion of the problem or idea you wish to discuss, including the paper's focus (if it's a response to a book, for instance, include the book's title and author and, if relevant, background information). After these opening sentences, you're ready to present your paper's **thesis statement**, which will serve as the controlling idea for the remainder of the paper (in other words, all your topic sentences -- and the paragraphs to which they belong -- ought to be claims of support for your thesis). The thesis becomes a kind of contract you make with the reader: this, in a sentence, is the "point" you're trying to get across with everything that follows. The conclusion is more than a summary (which is why it isn't called a summary). True, you will need to summarize not only your argument but also your thesis; beyond this, however, you ought to be prepared to draw some conclusion about the significance of the ideas you've just discussed. Sandwiched between the introduction and the conclusion is the **body** of your paper: your argument or support for the thesis statement. As its formal name implies, this section of the paper is the flesh of your essay, the way you make your reader see or feel that your thesis is, in fact, true.

Sentences

Many people take a free-associative approach to their writing. In essence, they're **writing letters** to their teachers. You can do what you like with syntax in your letter-writing, but here at college, you ought to take more care. Here are some basic rules of sentence-writing:

- 1) Understand that every sentence, by definition, must include a **subject and a verb**. Remember that, in the wonderfully complex world of English grammar, verbs can dress up like nouns and vice versa. To figure out if your sentence has a legitimate subject and verb, try this: ask yourself what the action of the sentence is, and after establishing this, ask yourself who or what is performing that action. If you still need help, please call the ARC.
- 2) Keep it **simple**. Particularly if you're having trouble identifying subjects and verbs in your sentences, don't stretch the boundaries in the name of style. Write clear, concise sentences with less words to sift through to find the action and who or what is performing it. Develop a style only after you've developed a command of basic syntax.
- 3) Avoid **fragments, comma splices, and run-ons**. Fragments are incomplete sentences; they lack either a subject or a verb (see #1 above). Comma splices are improper uses of the comma -- connecting two complete sentences with a comma, instead of using the more traditional method of a period, two spaces, and a capitalized first letter. Complete sentences may be grammatically connected, by the way, using a semi-colon (;) -- but don't abuse the privilege. Run-ons are the strangest sentence-boundary problem: sometimes called fused sentences, run-ons literally run two complete sentences together without any mark of punctuation at all. See the ARC for specific discussions of any of these errors.
- 4) Expect that you will not get everything right the first time. This is part of the letter-writing mentality of most students: they put their raw thoughts down on paper and never go back to refine them. The best writers **revise** tirelessly -- and not because they enjoy it, either. Make yourself do at least a second draft to clarify your sentences and your ideas

and to re-examine the organization you've given your paper, from how you've ordered your main points in the body to where and why you've created paragraphs. Read your paper aloud to hear it in a new way. Budget enough time in the assignment process so that you can let the first draft cool for at least 24 hours before returning to it with fresh eyes and ears: the longer you let it cool, the more chance you'll have of truly revising, of seeing your words from a new perspective. In a sense, you'll be giving yourself a second opinion.

A Final Word to the Wise

These guidelines are the bare minimum of what constitutes an effective college essay. The ARC recommends The Heath Handbook by Mulderig and Ellsbree as a handy one-stop reference tool for college writing standards. **If you would like to discuss any specific assignment or writing problem, please do not hesitate to call the ARC at (304) 243-4473 or drop by Ignatius Hall - Ground Floor.** (We also offer help in your other subjects and guidance in how to study, take tests and notes, and manage your time.) **Another suggestion: keep the lines of communication open with your professor or instructor,** who will want to know (and will not hold it against you) if you want further clarification or an opportunity to express your ideas or anxieties.