

Student Handbook for Writing Papers
Department of Political Science
University of North Carolina Charlotte

General Points

This short handbook will help students to write better papers.

Before beginning to write, give thought to the main points that you wish to make and the structure of the paper that will best convey these points to the reader. It is often a good idea to begin by creating an outline of the major points and the order in which you will present them. This may help clarify your goals for the paper. The precise structure of your paper will vary depending on the assignment. A literature review, for example, must be relevant to the hypotheses or conclusions presented; facts or figures you cite in a traditional research paper must be relevant to the conclusions that you reach.

A great deal of good advice is available about how to choose a paper topic, how to organize your research and your paper, and related topics. In addition to consulting with your professor about the specific assignment, you may want to consult the following:

- The Writing Resources Center here at UNC Charlotte, which provides free, one-on-one writing consultations for students and has many on-line writing resources, such as a grammar guide, on their website at <http://www.uncc.edu/writing/WRCindex.html>
- Charles Lipson's "Grumpy but Useful Advice for Writing a *Great Thesis*" (available at <http://www.charleslipson.com/courses/Grumpy-but-Useful-Advice-for-Theses.htm>). Lipson teaches political science at the University of Chicago and has authored two books on academic writing for students
- Stephen Van Evera's "How to Write a Paper" (available at <http://web.mit.edu/17.423/www/writingtips.html>). Van Evera teaches political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; this page is based on the appendix to his book *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*
- The book William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, fourth ed. (New York: Longman, 2000). This is a classic that everyone should read; any edition will do nicely. Available online at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/index.html>

Formatting Your Paper

Follow these instructions when formatting your paper:

- You may either prepare a cover page or place this information at the top right of the first page; consult your instructor to see which style he or she prefers or if there are additional requirements for your class, such as the use of your student number rather than your name. For a cover page, center the title of your paper on the first page; center your name, the name and number of your class, the name of your instructor, and the due date at the bottom of the page. The text of the paper begins at the top of the next page. If your instructor prefers that you dispense with a cover page, place your name, the name of your class, the name of your instructor, the due date, and your paper title in the upper left corner of the first page. The text of your paper follows this. The first page of your paper should look something like the following:

Name: Jane Doe

Class: POLS 1150 Introduction to Comparative Politics

Instructor: Smith

Due Date: February 1, 2005

Paper Title: Ethnicity and Civil War

Most countries in the world contain more than one major ethnic or religious group. Yet in only a minority of countries do such ethnic or religious divisions lead to civil war. This paper investigates.....

- Double-space all text.
- Include margins of at least one inch on all sides.
- Number each page. Do not number the title page but do number the pages with references.
- List your references beginning on a new page at the end of the text.
- If the text is divided into sections, precede each with a short description in bold text flush to the right.
- Use a twelve-point font.

- Before handing in your paper, ensure that you have used proper spelling and grammar. Most word processing programs can check spelling and grammar. Do not rely on these exclusively, as they often miss problems such as common homonyms (i.e. bear and bare; their, there, and they're). Read and re-read your text to catch errors and to improve your writing.

Sources and Citations

Use the author/date/page method to cite your sources. You should follow the style guide of the American Psychological Association (APA), which is very similar to the style guide used in most professional political science publications. You can find a very detailed discussion of the APA style online at http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/social_sciences/intext.html; click on the categories under the heading "Documenting Sources" at the upper right of the webpage. Hard copies of the APA guide are available in Atkins Library at call number BF76.7.P83 2001.

The Landmark Project for Schools provides a useful web-based tool for generating proper citations. You simply enter information about each source in fields and their website generates APA citations. You can access this tool by point your browser to: <http://citationmachine.net/>. Select the local time in the drop-down menu on the right side of the screen. Then click on the type of source you would like to cite from the yellow list on the subsequent screen, fill in the requested information, and click "Make Citations". Your source will appear correctly formatted on the screen; you may cut and paste this citation into your paper.

The specific assignment for your paper determines the number and type of sources you should consult and cite. A review of the academic literature, for example, would likely draw very heavily on academic books and articles in scholarly journals. Other papers might draw on these sources as well as quantitative data, primary historical sources, newspaper articles, or works of political philosophy. Before beginning your paper, ensure that you have a solid understanding of the number and type of sources that your instructor expects you to use. Use caution when relying on sources that are available only on the Internet. A useful guide for evaluating website is available at <http://library.uncc.edu/display/?dept=library&format=standard&page=38>

Footnotes

Because you will be using the author/date/page method of citation you will not need to use footnotes to cite the literature. Although explanatory footnotes are sometimes useful in a paper, in most cases you should avoid footnotes altogether. If a point is important enough to your paper, arrange the text so that it fits appropriately in the main body. If it is not important to your paper, leave it out.

Plagiarism

The UNC Charlotte Code of Student Academic Integrity forbids, among other things, fabrication or falsification of information, multiple submissions of academic work, and plagiarism. The Code also requires students to report cases of academic dishonesty to the course instructor. Faculty in the Political Science Department take this Code very seriously and punishes violations in accordance with University policy. You may access the entire Code at <http://www.legal.uncc.edu/policies/ps-105.html>

Students are required to submit all of their papers to the turnitin.com service (available for free at <http://www.turnitin.com/>). Turnitin.com detects plagiarism by scanning papers against the content of the World Wide Web, published materials such as articles from journals, newspapers, and magazines, and papers submitted by other students from UNC Charlotte and other universities in current and past semesters. The homepage has detailed instructions for uploading your paper. Turnitin.com will report any plagiarism in your paper to the instructor.

Avoiding plagiarism is easy. When you use ideas, facts, or figures from someone else, simply cite that work in the manner indicated in the *Style Manual*. If you use words from another's work—even as much as a phrase—cite that source with the page number and put the words in quotation marks. When in doubt, cite. The University provides clear explanations of plagiarism, including examples of what does and does not constitute plagiarism, in the Code of Student Academic Integrity. To access this, point your web browser to <http://www.legal.uncc.edu/policies/ps-105.html> and click on the link “Appendix: Plagiarism”.

Quotations

Use care in selecting quotations. Good papers are not collections of quotations strung together. The instructor wants to see your ideas expressed in your words. Quotes should be short and few in number. If as much as five percent of your paper is made up of quotations, then you are quoting too much. You should paraphrase the work of other authors citing them, but not quoting them, unless what they have said is particularly eloquent and vital to your paper.

Multiple Submissions of Academic Work

Note that the Code prohibits the submission of the same paper to more than one class unless you first obtain permission from all instructors involved. If you are working on a paper with the same topic in two or more classes, provide all the instructors with details and secure their approval in advance.

Help from Others

If you would like help in structuring and writing your paper, you may consult with the University Learning Center on the third floor of the Fretwell Building. Details about the services the Center offers and its hours are available at <http://www.ucae.uncc.edu/>. Center staff will report the help they provide you to the instructor. If you want detailed help from a friend or tutor you must first obtain permission from your instructor. Generally it is permissible for you to ask a friend to read your paper and mark unclear passages.

This page updated July 28, 2006. Report any problems or suggestions to Jim Walsh at jwalsh@uncc.edu.