

Guidelines for Writing Your Term Paper

by

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What is the product of archaeological research? In a word, *knowledge*. How do we share the knowledge that we have gained through research with other people? The possibilities include lectures and other forms of public presentations, television documentaries, illustrations, and now interactive CD ROMs. The greatest legacy that an archaeologist can leave to the future, however, is what he or she writes: reports, museum exhibit text, web sites, journal articles, monographs, and books. The idea behind term papers is to improve your researching and writing skills. I take these papers very seriously, and expect that you will turn in a final product that is professional in every respect.

These guidelines contain certain specific directions for preparing your papers for this class. Other comments are merely suggestions for improving your writing skills. Read these guidelines carefully before you begin your research, before you begin your writing, and especially before you hand in your completed paper.

Researching Your Paper

Term papers in graduate school should contain original research. This means seeking out *primary* data — archaeological materials or reports and original documents — to reach conclusions that are uniquely your own. You are enrolled in this program to develop your skills as archaeologists, and I expect that you will be particularly diligent about incorporating archaeological data into your papers.

Some advice for your research:

Get an early start in selecting and researching a term paper topic. If you leave enough time, you can always change the focus of your paper. I am not impressed by folks who change their paper topics a week before the due date because they could not find sufficient information on the original subject.

I recognize that your paper will have to be researched in a relatively short period of time, and that your sources will mostly be limited to the Texas A&M library, regional libraries, and the Interlibrary Loan Service. I expect, nevertheless, that you will make every effort to locate and examine primary source materials, and that your paper will reflect this research. Impress me with your persistence in finding unusual or obscure sources for your paper.

Secondary sources can provide important background information and the viewpoints of other scholars on your topic, and their bibliographies can serve as a road map for your own research,

but *be discriminating* about your choice of secondary sources. The sources you choose should cite the primary documents they consulted (in other words - do they have footnotes and a bibliography?). Whenever possible, avoid citing secondary sources that have no citations in the text; if you cannot tell where they got their information, how can you be sure that the information is accurate?

Your paper should have an adequate number of sources. Good research means collecting as much information as possible about a topic, comparing sources with one another, and weeding out unsubstantiated or suspect information. Papers based on only two or three, or even five secondary sources are not acceptable. I want to see evidence that you did some digging.

Do not pad your bibliography! Occasionally I receive a paper with an impressive-looking bibliography, but when I read the text I find that only a few of the sources are actually cited. The rest is just filler to make it look like real research has taken place.

Have you checked *all* of the potential sources? I rarely see *American Neptune* or *Mariner's Mirror* cited in term papers, yet to the best of my knowledge the Texas A&M Library has a full set of these publications, and both are filled with scholarly maritime-related articles. Have you looked through contemporary diaries, journals, logbooks, or memoirs to see if they have any information on your topic? I found some of my best horseboat material by going through published early 19th century travel accounts by European tourists (unlike most North Americans, Europeans thought horseboats were weird and worthy of mention). Have you looked at contemporary maps? They often yield a mariner's-eye view of geography and navigation. And by all means, do not neglect to examine contemporary paintings, sketches, ship plans, photographs, and other forms of illustrations - you may find a wealth of information for your research.

Choosing a Citation Style

At the bottom of the first page of text, cite the journal that you have used as a model for style and format. DO NOT FORGET TO DO THIS!!! If I do not know what format you are using, I cannot judge whether you are citing sources correctly! Your grade will suffer if the paper does not contain this essential piece of information. You will be required to cite the journal that you used as a model on the first page of your thesis or dissertation, so this is a good chance to practice for the big event. The journal that you select should be one that is commonly consulted by archaeologists.

The choice of citation style you wish to use is up to you:

In-text citation, with the author, date, and page number in parentheses (the style used by the *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* and *Historical Archaeology*). This

style is OK, but I find it awkward when citing primary documents; in-text cites also make it difficult to discuss a source or add additional comments.

Footnotes at the base of each page of text (the style used by the *American Journal of Archaeology*). This style allows your reader to quickly examine your sources, and thus is very handy.

Endnotes, with all notes listed at the end of the paper (the style used by historical journals such as *Mariner's Mirror* and *American Neptune*). This is the style I prefer.

Do Not use the *Annual Review of Anthropology* style, which simply cites a numbered bibliography - there is no provision for citing page numbers. This has to be the most idiotic style of citation I have ever encountered, since it forces other scholars to read the entire book or journal article to find one bit of information.

If your paper has footnotes or endnotes, avoid the tendency to use the notes as a dumpster for left-over facts you could not fit into your text. Additional comments, comparisons or data are fine, but keep them very lean.

Once you choose a citation style, **be consistent!** If you are not sure how to cite a source, get a copy of your journal's style sheet, or look at sample articles. I have no patience with writers who cannot be bothered to stick to the style they have selected.

Include a separate bibliography at the end of your paper, even if the journal style you are following does not require a separate bibliography. This makes it much easier for me to review your sources.

Outlining Your Paper

A common problem that I encounter in term papers is a lack of organization: the narrative skids from topic to topic without any apparent destination. The secret to avoiding this kind of confusion is to **outline** your paper you start to write. Think through exactly what you intend to say, define the scope of your paper, and then stick to the outline. When I sat down to write my thesis for the Nautical Program back in 1983, I first outlined the whole thing on one sheet of paper (I write small) and then taped the outline on the wall over my typewriter where I could refer to it. I also wrote out more detailed outlines for each chapter. This proved to be a very useful tool for keeping the thesis on track.

At a minimum, your paper should include these elements, in more or less this order:

- 1) **An introduction**, where you provide a clear statement of your research objectives (Why is this subject important? What do I intend to accomplish here?), and perhaps an historical background or discussion of previous research; **presentation of data**, where you discuss the information that you have gathered; **analysis of data**, where you provide

your own original thoughts on what the data means; and finally, a **conclusion**, that summarizes the results of your work. What did you achieve here? What are the important points for the reader to keep in mind?

Keep the text reader-friendly in its structure. Grab your reader's attention with the introduction, and guide them through the rest of the text in a straightforward manner. Provide clear transitions between sections. Stick to the point.

Writing Your Paper

There are few born writers, and most of us have to struggle through the process of getting words down on paper and polishing them up for publication. Good writing comes with practice, and by *taking care of the details*. The following "helpful hints" are based on problems that I have encountered while grading papers written for this seminar.

Get your idea across with a minimum number of words. After you have written your paper, go through the text and edit, edit, edit.

Be consistent in your use of tenses (is/was).

Quotes. Use them sparingly. The words of an authority on your topic might be worthy of quotation, or you may wish to use a particularly telling passage from a contemporary document that will strengthen your narrative. Do not use quotes to convey basic information that could as easily be said in your own words.

Be sure to provide adequate citation for the information you provide in your text. There is a fine balance between over-citing a paper (a reference for every sentence) and under-citing your text (one reference every two or three pages); use common sense, and make sure that readers can easily locate the sources that you have employed.

Contractions (isn't, wasn't) do not belong in scholarly writing. Also avoid using abbreviations of words or titles (for example "Capt." for "Captain"), tic marks for feet and inches, and "%" for "percent."

Avoid imprecise wording such as "some," "a bit," "a few," and especially "etc." Be specific, etc.

If you have the least doubt about the meaning or spelling of a word, look it up in your dictionary. Using a word inappropriately is confusing to the reader and will cast doubts on your qualifications as a scholar. Frequent misspellings suggest that the writer is lazy, ignorant, or both, and is not really serious about his or her work. Keep a dictionary beside your computer and refer to it on a regular basis.

On the other hand, you should not force your reader to constantly refer to a dictionary. There is nothing more irritating than a writer who tries to appear sophisticated by salting the text with obscure words. To me it all spells "pretentious nitwit." Again, use common sense here: if you must use an out-of-the-ordinary word, introduce it to the reader first.

Ship gender. Should you call a ship a “she” or an “it”? *Historical Archaeology* demands that you refer to a ship as an “it,” and many publishers are now moving to a more gender-neutral style. Check the style in the journal you are using, and *be consistent!*

Avoid overly-long paragraphs. The idea behind a paragraph break is to divide the text into manageable “bites”; a two-page-long paragraph represents too big a bite for your reader to swallow. Make it a practice to keep your paragraphs under half a page in length.

Avoid over-use of a particular word. Commonly over-used words include “however” and “vessel.” I once had a paper that used the word “vessel” six times in six sentences; another employed the word “then” seven times in one paragraph. If you are having trouble coming up with a substitute word, consult a thesaurus.

When introducing an individual into your narrative for the first time, use his or her full name and title (“Captain John Smith”); thereafter, you can refer to that person by the last name (“Smith proceeded to jump off the cliff”). Do not assume that your reader will automatically know the individual you are discussing. A word of warning here: I encounter this problem in many papers, and find it irritating.

Stay consistent in your units of measurement. Go with metric unless your paper concerns a ship or subject closely tied to the imperial system. If you do use the imperial system (feet and inches), provide the metric equivalent in parentheses.

Ship names should be italicized (or if you are using a typewriter, underlined). If a ship’s name appears within an italicized title, then it should not be italicized.

When referring to a naval vessel, omit “the” from in front of the name (“*Constitution*” instead of “the *Constitution*”).

If you have a load of raw data that you wish to include, such as an artifact catalogue, consider an appendix in the back of the paper.

In general, keep in mind the intended audience for your paper. Avoid slang or an over-familiar style in scholarly writing; an informal style in a professional paper is annoying and gives the impression of sloppy scholarship.

Assembling Your Paper

Keep these points in mind when you assemble your paper for me, or when you prepare a paper to hand in to a professional journal.

Give your pages a sufficient margin on the top, sides, and bottom. There should be at least one inch all around.

Number all the pages! Do *not* hand in a paper to me that does not have page numbers. Check that the page number sequence is correct. If you can’t get the page number function on your

computer to work correctly, type the page numbers on each page rather than hand-numbering them.

Make sure that all of the citations are in order. This means checking to ensure that the citation in the text or footnotes matches the information in the bibliography, that the citation numbers in the text correspond with footnote or endnote numbers, and that citations have the correct page numbers. Are the sources cited in the text also included in the bibliography? I do check these details to see that everything is in order.

You must cite the source for all of your illustrations. If you copy something directly, it should say “from”; if you modify an illustration to highlight a particular detail or remove extraneous information, your cite should say “after.” The source for an illustration is generally included in the caption.

Illustrations must have figure or plate numbers. When you discuss a particular illustration in the text, refer to it by this number. Do not include illustrations in the paper unless they are referred to in the text. Generally illustrations are placed in a paper after the place where they are first cited in the text.

I expect that any text in an illustration will be legible, that you will do a neat job of pasting illustrations into the text, and that they fit within the margins established for the text.

If your paper discusses a historical event that took place somewhere on our planet (and most papers do), be sure to include one or more maps. Make sure the maps include all the locations or geographical features discussed in the text. Maps should also have a legible scale and a north arrow.

Finally, a quote from Dr. Fred Hocker: “Proofreading is not a luxury, it is an obligation.” When you turn in a paper or manuscript that is filled with misspellings, errors in punctuation or grammar, and sloppily-prepared citations, you are essentially telling colleagues, professors or journal editors that your time is more valuable than their time. It is insulting. Proofread your work so others do not have to do it for you.

When you are all finished, securely clip your paper together or place it in a manila envelope when you hand it in. This allows me to disassemble it for reading. Do not staple or spiral bind your paper.