

# Writing Tips for First-Year Students



**The Writing Center**  
Hamline University  
Bush Library, Lower Level  
651-523-2026  
[writingcenter@hamline.edu](mailto:writingcenter@hamline.edu)



Writing papers in college can be a daunting experience, no matter how much writing instruction you received in high school. You will find many sources for help on campus and online, including the Hamline University Writing Center, located on the lower level of Bush Library.

The process described below can help you start writing your first college papers.

### **Understand the Assignment**

Read the assignment sheet carefully. If anything is unclear to you, ask your professor about it. Don't be afraid of appearing dumb; clarifying the assignment will save you unnecessary work and can prevent a bad grade due to a misunderstanding.

Make sure you know which editorial style (MLA, APA, etc.) your professor wants you to use when citing outside sources. For more information on these styles, see additional brochures in the Writing Center.

### **Do the Necessary Research**

If the assignment involves gathering information, start immediately to ensure the books and articles you want are available. Choose a topic that matters to you; find resources at the library or online.

Understand the difference between a topic and a thesis. A topic is what your paper is about, such as *Roe v. Wade* or the novel *Crime and Punishment*. A thesis is your insight into your topic, such as the idea that *Roe v. Wade* has led to divisions within the United States, or that Tolstoy wrote *Crime and Punishment* as a criticism of Russian society. You will develop a thesis *after* you have read all your sources.

As you read, you will begin to form conclusions and opinions that will become the basis for your paper. Use your initial reactions as a starting point in forming your thesis. If you find yourself disagreeing or agreeing with some of the ideas

presented in what you are reading, write down why you disagree or agree.

When you finish your research, look at the opinions and ideas you have jotted down. Does a thesis emerge?

### **Organize and Write**

Use your thesis and the main points you learned in your research to sketch a plan or outline for your paper. The plan may be as simple as a thesis and three main points.

When you begin your first draft, stick to your plan. Write the introduction, the body of your paper, and the conclusion. Put down all the information and ideas you have on paper during this phase.

While writing your first draft, don't worry about grammar, punctuation, or sentence structure. Don't worry overly much about the page requirement. After all your ideas are down, you will use the revision process to shape, refine, trim, or expand what you have written.

### **Revise**

Read your paper. Look for topics or points you have skipped over (not explained thoroughly), or places where you have made intuitive leaps. Go back over your notes and add material to support these ideas. Cut passages that do not support your thesis.

Remember that writing clearly is more important than sounding sophisticated. As a writer, you're not trying to prove you're smarter than your reader; you're trying to get the reader to understand what you are saying, and perhaps to nod in agreement. Short sentences and clear language communicate best.

### **Allow Time to Develop “Fresh Eyes”**

Always ask someone else—a friend, a roommate, a Writing Center consultant—to read your paper. You might want to exchange paper-reading services with a classmate. Friendly readers can help identify passages that are unclear or not well organized. And by putting your paper aside—for half a day, a day, a week—you will develop the fresh eyes that will allow you to identify errors, awkward transitions, and unclear passages.

### **Read, Read, Read**

The more you read, the better will be your word usage, spelling, organization, and your overall ability to express yourself effectively. Scrutinize writing you particularly like, paying attention to word choice, rhythm, tone, and pace. This will help you begin to find the style that works best for you.

### **Accessing More Information**

- Raimes, Ann. *Keys for Writers*. 5th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008, available at the Hamline University Bookstore.
- The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

### **Where to Find Help on Campus**

Consultants at the **Hamline University Writing Center**, located in the basement of Bush Library, are eager to help you with all stages of your writing. We will work with you whether you have just received an assignment and have no idea how to begin or you have a finished draft and want help with revisions.

You can make appointments online at WC Online. Simply follow the instructions at:

<http://rich37.com/hamline>

We look forward to seeing you!