

How to Write a Paper for my Class
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As a general rule, try to write something along the lines of what you learned in a typical composition class. A paper with an intro paragraph that states the thesis (main point you're trying to prove) and a conclusion that provides a clear summary of everything you've said in the paper. Your audience is not me, your audience is an educated general reader. Don't write like you're writing me an email where you can be informal, conversational, or assume we share a frame of reference.

Each assignment will be based on a prompt I provide for you to follow. Sometimes I will pair the prompt with a specific reading assignment, other times I will simply mention some of the readings from the past week. The prompts will be somewhat vague and open-ended. This is so you don't just mechanically write whatever I tell you, but show some independent thought and judgment in figuring out what, exactly, to say and how to say it.

Here is a sample prompt:

Discuss Joseph Campbell's definition of a Hero in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Do this by providing an example from one of the stories we've read in class (Harry Potter, Lord Jim, Richard III). Explain your example in detail and then evaluate what you think of the definition.

All my examples in the guidelines below will refer back to it.

1. A clear summary of the chapter from the textbook, with a focus on the concept most relevant in the prompt.
 - a. In order to convey your grasp of the topic under discussion, I need to hear you repeat it back to me, in your own words, with some sense of understanding.
 - i. I also encourage you to use the occasional quote (properly cited of course) to ground your summary in the author's own words.
 - b. Example: you would clearly summarize what Campbell is saying about a hero, as well as mentioning anything else in the chapter that is needed to provide context to understand the definition properly. But there's no need to go beyond this in your summary.
 - i. Part of that understanding is to explain only what is necessary from the chapter to address the prompt. Don't just put in everything you see without imposing your own organization on it.
2. A clear summary of the reading that you'll be discussing along with the chapter.
 - a. You'll need some judgment about which articles go with which chapters, as you'll notice that some weeks we'll be doing more than one chapter as well as a number of supplemental readings. Just because they're in the

same week doesn't mean they all apply equally to the prompt. You're probably going to want to write about the readings that actually pair up with the chapter in question, otherwise you're going to be lost as the thing will be a mess.

- i. Example: The prompt asks you to pick an example from a list of literary works. This is where you have to use some judgment. Presumably, if you understand the concept well, you can demonstrate that understanding by picking the story that will supply the best example. Or, maybe you can find a good example in one of the other stories that might be more interesting. Either way, be prepared to explain your example in detail.
 1. Don't assume that either the definition or the examples are self-evident and don't require unpacking. The main point of the assignment is to unpack what might seem like "obvious" concepts to see if there aren't any hidden complexities.
 - a. You might think your example of a hero is good, but might realize as you're trying to break it down to illustrate the definition that it doesn't fit as well as you thought. In that case, maybe consider a different example.
 2. Don't spend a lot of time giving examples of things that aren't related to explain what a hero is (to refer to the example above), that will distract from the main focus of the paper.
 - a. And, as I indicated above, make sure the pieces of writing you're pulling your examples from are relevant in the first place. As this applies to our sample prompt, a story that doesn't have a good hero would be a bad place to look for an example.
3. A good, thoughtful use of examples. You can use your own examples, and I encourage that, but I mainly want to see you pulling examples from the readings.
 - a. The point of this is to show that you understand how Rachels is summarizing the much more complex ideas of others, including maybe oversimplifying them.
 - b. Another point is to show that you *really* understand what you're talking about. Part of my teaching philosophy is that asking for thoughtful applications of ideas in new contexts, or even just tracing commonalities between different writings is a better indication of knowledge (and the ability to use it outside of class) than memorizing answers or guessing on quizzes.
 - i. Don't give an example that fits poorly with the definition you're trying to explain. It would be bad, to again continue the example from above, to talk about a selfish anti-hero when the definition of a hero (let's suppose) prohibits selfishness. This would suggest that

you aren't especially clear on what the author of the textbook is trying to say about a hero.

1. Note that you can hold opinions outside of what the prompt is asking for, you can even disagree with the assumptions built in to the prompt, but humor me and address the prompt in good-faith, then raise your issues.
4. Please realize you aren't just talking to me.
 - a. I know that as "the professor" you assume that I already know everything you have in mind when you're trying to make your points, but the idea here is to write for an intelligent general reader, which means you have to spell things out a bit more than if you were writing to someone you know well who also knows you.
 - i. As I said a few times above, not taking the obviousness of your point for granted and spelling out what you mean, even to a point you think is unnecessarily pedantic, is a better demonstration of your understanding than assuming you and your reader will automatically understand your point.
5. Please Cite Properly
 - a. I don't especially care whether you use Chicago, APA, MLA, or whatever other style system you want. But please, pick one and use it properly and consistently.
 - i. Make sure to know when to cite.
 1. You have to do it anytime you're quoting someone else's words, or anytime you're making a point that isn't totally your own idea. This includes paraphrase.
6. Raise questions where appropriate
 - a. If you aren't sure something makes sense, go ahead and question it, just don't do it at the expense of addressing the prompt.
 - b. Example: If you really don't think the textbook's definition of a hero is a good one, (or maybe that no real person could ever live up to it) then you can raise the issue after providing the textbook definition of a hero and the example from an appropriate story.
 - i. You could say "though this example fits the definition, I wonder if it doesn't have some other shortcomings" or, "this example fits the definition, but since there's something off about the example, we can see that that might be because of a problem with the definition"
 - c. Please make sure to do this *at the end*. As a writer, you don't get the credibility to offer an opinion or a challenge to the idea raised until you've demonstrated your command of the subject matter through accurate summary, judicious use of quotes, and a clear focus on your main topic. Once you've done all that, the reader (not necessarily me)

When it comes to grading I'm reluctant to provide a rubric, because it's hard to judge the quality of an example based on a pre-assigned list. That said, doing these things well,

along with basics like providing a clearly structure paper, is what I expect for an A. If you get less than that, I'll try to provide an explanation as to where you went wrong and why I took off points for the problem. If you're still confused, please consult this guide before