

# How to write an ‘A’ paper

Jack Santucci

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## 1 Absolute basics

- 1- or 1.5-inch margins.
- Double-spaced text.
- 12-point font.
- Chicago author-date citations.
- Respect the word limit.
- Your name, the date, and a title.

## 2 Criteria for a grade of ‘A’

The goal of a paper assignment is to test your understanding of course material. A paper that deserves an ‘A’ will make one point and do so clearly. It will not force the reader to hunt for that main point. And it will reflect consideration of all major, relevant issues. Here is a checklist to consider:

1. The title indicates the paper’s main point.
2. The introductory paragraph gives that point, as well as a preview of major steps in the argument.
3. Each paragraph’s topic sentence corresponds to a step in the argument.
4. The argument takes account of the strongest possible objection to it.
5. Relevant theories, models, and/or course readings are covered.
6. There is very little extraneous information. This includes irrelevant theories, models, and/or readings.
7. If you are responding to a **prompt**, your argument answers that prompt directly. Please do not reframe the question.
8. If you are writing a **research paper**, see 1-6 above.

### 3 How I will read your paper

I will read your paper closely just one time. Before that, I will skim it, focusing on the title, introductory paragraph(s), and topic sentences of body paragraphs. If you are writing a research paper, I also will focus on section headings, which give a big-picture view of the argument's structure.

Write your paper for a busy reader. I am busy because I have many papers to grade. But the outside world is even less forgiving. Many people stop reading after the first few sentences. Think of someone riding the subway on their way to work in the morning. I am not that person, but if you keep them in mind when you write, you are more likely to succeed.

### 4 Constructive tips on the writing process

Paragraph structure is critical – to making one point, and making it clearly. I strongly recommend [this short piece](#) on how to write good paragraphs. See the footnote for the Web address.<sup>1</sup>

Start your paper a few days (at least) before it is due. You need more than one day to work through your ideas, figure out your point, and build the paper around it. Even if they make sense when you proofread, your words may not make sense to someone else. You might have formulated your ideas too recently to be a good judge of this. Write your paper in advance, put it aside for at least two days, and reread it when you've forgotten what you wrote.

### 5 Criteria for grades lower than 'A'

It is difficult to say what factors lead to A-, B+, and so on. Usually, it is some blend of the following:

- The paper's structure is difficult to follow in one close reading.
- The main point comes at the end, not the beginning.
- The text comes in one or just a few large paragraphs, which indicates lack of planning and/or understanding.
- The writer answers some other question, not the one in the prompt.
- The writer ignores major models/theories/readings, etc.
- The writer misunderstands major models/theories/readings, etc.
- The writer cites lots of lectures and/or outside literature instead of showing that they thought about relevant syllabus items.

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<sup>1</sup><https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/writingforresearch/2017/07/17/how-to-write-paragraphs-in-research-texts-articles-books-and-phds/>