

How Do I Write Longer Papers?

Making the transition from shorter high school and college papers to longer ones can feel intimidating. Here are some tips for writing longer papers and forming more complex arguments without falling into the traps of tangents, unnecessary fluff, or rambling.

Managing the Writing Process

Choose the Right Topic

Try to pick a topic that interests you to keep you motivated. Also, it's always a good idea to run your topic /thesis by your instructor in office hours before you dive into writing your first draft.

Manage Your Time

Divide the time you have to complete the project into research & notetaking, drafting, and revisions, as well as a final proofreading stage. Consider including meetings with peer tutors in your plan as well as time to take restful breaks from researching/writing. Then, get started as early as you can!

Plan & Write Your Paper in Sections

Try to split your larger topic or argument into at least two or three sub-topics to make the writing process feel less intimidating and more organized. For example, an eleven-page paper might break down into 1 page for the introduction, three subtopics that take up about three pages each, and 1 page for the conclusion.

Use Section Headings and Subheadings

Use section headings and subheadings to break up your piece and add structure to your paper. Take a look at journal articles, book chapters, and reports or previous dissertations in your field for examples. This helps your paper feel more organized and helps readers follow your argument.

Stuck? Think Outside the Lines

If you're a writer who tends to get "stuck" on one section of your paper, don't be afraid to **write non-linearly**. You might start by drafting the paragraphs where you feel the most confident about your argument, sources, and analysis, or with the ideas you find most compelling.

Check for Clarity

Sometimes, longer projects can feel disorganized when they're finished. Try a tactic called "reverse outlining" to visualize whether each paragraph's main point logically connects to the one that follows. This video from the UNC Writing Center shows the reverse outline in action: [Reverse Outline](#). It can also help to highlight the topic sentences (first sentences) of each paragraph. If a reader only reads your topic sentences, can they still follow your argument?

Go to Page 2 for specific suggestions on expanding your content!

What about adding length to your paper itself? Here are some suggestions - in approximate order of where they tend to appear towards a paper's beginning, middle, or end - for making your arguments more complex without simply rambling.

Adding Complexity to Content

Establish Context

Think about adding context to the problem or argument at hand (like a short literature review) near the beginning of your paper. What are the stakes? What is the state of the problem? How does your take on this topic relate to research that has already been done?

Define Terms

If there are key terms, phrases, and ideological concepts related to your topic, spend some time defining them. Note: this doesn't mean use long, jargon-filled definitions just to take up space. Instead, offer your readers thoughtful analysis. Are these terms/concepts contested or controversial? Is there relevant context or history related to the term?

Use Close Readings

Especially for literature courses, close readings of significant passages will be fundamental to your paper. Choose relevant passages and carefully consider how the author uses features like language, tone, syntax, connotation/denotation, imagery, alliteration, and more to convey their point. Be sure to add your own analysis to any direct quotes you include.

Evaluate Counterarguments

Analyze one or two of the most reasonable objections someone else might pose to your argument; be fair to your imaginary opponents (don't just bash their ideas without proof) and recognize where there could be merit in their objections, but then explain to the reader why you feel your claims still overcome these challenges.

Acknowledge Limitations

No study is 100% comprehensive, so writers often delineate the "scope" or focus of their argument (and what's beyond that scope) near the beginning or the end of the paper. Depending on the class, you may be required to discuss your study's restrictions in a methodology section. Even if this is not a requirement, consider acknowledging any potential gaps in your conclusions and how they could be addressed in future research.

Suggest Significance & New Directions

Once you draw your final conclusions, flesh them out by showing their significance to readers: why do these conclusions matter? Are they connected to any larger, timely questions or problems about society, history, a certain methodology/ideology, etc.? You can also suggest a couple of new directions your research could lead to.