Paper Writing Standards and Advice

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This document has two sections. The first outlines the basic physical and layout requirements for any paper written for a course I teach, unless I specify otherwise on that assignment. The second section offers some broader-scale writing and revising advice.

A. Paper Writing Physical and Formal Requirements:

Basic Physical Paper Format:

- unnumbered title page with a good title, and then your name, course number and title, my name, and date. A good title is interesting, and gives a sense of what is inside
- double-spaced body text, but single spaced block quotes, endnotes, acknowledgments, and works-cited list
- numbered pages. The *title* page should be unnumbered, with the first *text* page thus numbered 1, rather than 2. (By the way, figure out how to use Insert PageBreak, Insert SectionBreak NextPage, and Insert Pagenumber Format Startat1 in Microsoft Word. When I get files emailed to me, I am surprised how many students generate a new page by the crude method of repeatedly hitting the Enter key.)
- neatly stapled
- text on the first body page should start 2-3 blank lines down from the top
- one inch margins (not Microsoft's default 1.25") right, left, top, and bottom
- twelve-point font everywhere except the main title – even for block quotes, endnotes, and such. I assume your font (TimesRoman is a good choice) gives you 300 or more words per page.
- longer quotes in "block" form. That is, quotes of longer than about 35 words should be single-spaced, indented 0.5" both right and left, and not bounded by quotation marks.
- right margins should be *ragged*. Do not justify right margins – it reads badly, unless you own and use professional typesetting equipment.
- include any endnotes, generous acknowledgments (see below), and the works-cited list at the end of your paper, several blank lines after the end of your text. Conserve resources: do not start a fresh page for any of these three items.
- to conserve resources, print on both sides of the page if possible.
- when quoting from poetry, use the slash / to indicate line breaks if you put the quoted portion in the main text. Here's an example from Langston Hughes's "Afro-American Fragment": "So long, / So far away / Is Africa. / Not even memories alive / Save those that history books create […]" A stanza break (i.e. a blank line) would be a double slash: / /.

Notes and Citations:
Anything quoted or learned from an outside source (be it a novel, essay, work of scholarship, website, film, etc.) should be properly cited. My preference is the MLA (Modern Language Association) "parenthetical" style. In this style, footnotes and endnotes are *not* used for simple citations. Instead, author-name and page number is given in parentheses at the end of the relevant passage. Then, all sources cited parenthetically in the paper are listed in the works-cited list at the end of the paper. The author name may be omitted where it is obvious, or where you are citing the same author repeatedly in a short space. Here is an example:

> Though a distinguished nineteenth-century commentator once termed the nation the result of "a daily plebiscite" (Renan, 116), in his book *In My Father's House* Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that sometimes nations "are not the identity we need" (147).

Note (as just above) that when you use parenthetical references, the "quotation marks" nest snugly around the quoted text, with the parenthetical reference beyond. The period or comma comes *last*.

The Works-Cited List:
At the end of your paper, give a list of all the works cited in your paper. (If you are working only with assigned course texts, you may omit this step.) Standard format for several types of works follows. If in doubt about what to include (such as, for example, the name of a work's translator), include more rather than less information. For older texts, include in brackets the original date of that text.

A. Books and Films:

Lastname, Firstname. *Title in Italics*. [original date of publication]. Place: Publisher, year of publication.

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. [1989] New York: Grove Press, 1999.

B. Journal Articles:

Lastname, Firstname. "Title in Quotes." *Name of Book or Journal in Italics*. Volume.number, Date, year: pages.

Patterson, Orlando. "Ecumenical America: Global Culture and the American Cosmos." *World Policy Journal* 11.2, Summer 1994: 103-117.

C. Book Chapters:

Lastname, Firstname. "Title in Quotes." In *Book Title*, edited by Editors. Place: Publisher, year: pages.

Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. "The Repeating Island." Transl. James Maraniss. In *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* ed. Gustavo Pérez Firmat. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990: pp. 85-106.

Renan, Ernest. "What is a Nation?" [1882]. Transl. Martin Thom. In *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha. NY: Routledge, 1990: 8-22.

D. Websites:

Citation protocol is emerging here. You are advised to include as close to a full title for the web-page as possible, and the personal (e.g. John Smith) or corporate (e.g. Amnesty International, CIA World Factbook, etc.) author, as well as the URL and the date you accessed it. Thus, for example, for information about Ghana, or an obituary for the scholar Edward Said,

Ghana. *The CIA World Factbook*. www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/gh.html Accessed on March 25, 2009.

Ruthven, Malsie. "Obituary: Edward Said." *The Guardian Unlimited*, September 26, 2003. www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,2763,1049931,00.html. Accessed on February 8, 2009

E. Citing Audiovisual Media:

Often I am asked how to cite dialogue in a film or television show, given that page numbers do not exist, and time-citations from DVD-player timers are clumsy. The best way is to handle this in your paper is narratively, with good identifying information. One might write, for example: "About halfway through the 'Bart vs. Australia' episode, shortly before the Simpson family departs for Canberra, Bart charmingly suggests that 'I can handle that: I'm an expert at phony apologies'." Then be sure to include that film, television show, or other audiovisual text in your works-cited list.

F. Special Note on Wikipedia and other "general" sources:

At present, I regularly see unfootnoted passages in student papers with a strong Wikipedia aroma. A student might be analyzing Langston Hughes's poem "I Thought it Was Tangiers I Wanted," and suddenly veer into a full paragraph on the history of the Moroccan city named in its title. Such imported knowledge can be valuable, and Wikipedia is, in general, reliable – though often problematic on controversial topics where edit-wars occur. But Wiki-sourced information stands out as if printed in a bright red font. So, endnote Wikipedia and similar sources with a phrase like "the general description of Tangiers offered here is drawn from …" Then be sure to put that Wiki site in your works-cited list as well.

Endnotes and Footnotes:

In the style that I prefer – called the MLA style – the use of endnotes (which are preferable to footnotes – word-processing software switches easily between footnotes and endnotes) should be restricted to lengthier discussions and points that are best not included in the text proper. As noted above, basic citations should be handled parenthetically.

When to put the title of a given text in "Quotes" vs. when to put it in *Italics*:

Titles of big things, like books, films, journals, magazines and newspapers, are rendered in *italics*.

In contrast, the titles of smaller things, especially articles, chapters, songs, and poems, are rendered in "quotes." No exceptions.

Hanging Indents:

Hanging indents offer a visually clear way of organizing works-cited lists and other matters. It is an easy paragraph format on most word processors.

Use of <u>Underscore</u>:

<u>Underscore</u> is almost never appropriate for those who are capable of *italic* fonts – see below.

Why you should use *italics* but not <u>underscores</u> – a technical-historical note:
There is no need anymore, in the word-processor world, to use <u>underscore</u>, which conveys the same meaning as *italics*. Both are traditionally used for book and film (but not article or poem or song) titles, and for words requiring particular emphasis. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the *italic* font was first introduced in 1501 by the typographer Aldus Manutius of Venice. Here the letters, instead of being erect as in Roman, *slope towards the right*. They were first used in an edition of Virgil, published in 1501 and dedicated to Italy – hence the name. When typewriters were introduced in the mid-19th century (I take it that at least some of my students will have seen one of these ancient writing instruments), they had only one font, because of the physical limitations of typewriters themselves. To indicate emphasis in the absence of a separate *italic* set of keys, people using typewriters would type a word, then backspace to the beginning of that word, and then type out a series of underscores (which was a separate key) _ _ _ _ _ _ under each word they wished to <u>emphasize</u>. Since none of you use <u>typewriters</u>, you are best advised to use only *italics*, except in special cases such as an outlined document with headings.

Generous Acknowledgments:
I require all students to include, in all papers submitted to me, a list of generous acknowledgements to all contributors at the end of the paper. This includes anyone who read a draft, supplied specific ideas, checked for grammar, or provided any other sort of direct support in the composition of your paper. Some folks go well beyond this in offering thanks – to parents, benefactors, deities, coffee shops, influential books not directly referenced, and more. I welcome that. Acknowledgements to others do *not* diminish one's achievement on a paper: instead, they enhance it. Look at the early pages of almost any serious book of scholarship: they go on for paragraphs and often pages thanking those who have contributed to the text, often with the caveat that "all errors are my own." Good scholars, good writers, and good students emerge from supportive intellectual networks.

<u>B. Writing Advice</u>

Headings within a paper – why they weaken an argument:
Most of the time, I find that section headings within student papers impede or even damage rather than enhance the arguments presented, especially in shorter assignments. The problem is that apprentice writers typically use headers to simply jump from one topic to the next when they instead should be *transitioning* or *arguing* or *linking* their way through what is supposed to be a sustained, developed essay.

The importance of narrated *transitions* within a paper. Why they are better than internal headings. How to write transitions using the "double-facing signpost."
Writers are tempted to use headings because papers often are written in or divide up into sections – such as when considering three poems one after another, or three case studies one after another. In order to create a *cumulative* rather than *iterative* paper (in other words, a paper whose sections build one on the next, rather than a paper which is merely the sum of its parts), you'll want to provide readers rich *transitions* from one section to the next.

There are three kinds of transitions: weak, good, and strong. A *weak* transition or non-transition just abruptly changes the subject. A *good* transition "carries" the reader across the divide. A

strong transition takes the opportunity to do some argumentative work while crossing the bridge. A solid basic template for a good transition is the "double-facing signpost": the kind of sign that says "entering Minneapolis" on one side and "entering Saint Paul" on the other. Here is a crude example of a double-facing signpost which "bridges" the reader from a discussion of Mira Nair's film *Mississippi Masala* to a linked consideration of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*.

> Now, having analyzed the production of Mina's "masala" identity in Nair's film, and having found it consistent with classic American melting-pot ideology, I will turn to the mirrored question of "exotic" identity in Mukherjee's novel.

The size of a double-facing signpost varies with the size of the overall document. A double-facing transition in a five-page paper might be one rich two-part sentence. A section-to-section transition in a 20-page paper could be a full paragraph. In a book, several pages at the end of each chapter might be devoted to "handing off" the reader to the next chapter.

Incorporation of material you have already written for some other venue, or are currently writing also for some other class:

I am asked from time to time whether it is right to incorporate material that you have previously written and submitted in some other venue, such as for a previous Macalester course or a course taken abroad. I'm also asked whether it is right to submit passages or pages for two or more courses taken simultaneously. In general, I welcome such synergy. For short "repeats" – such as a few sentences, or a particular fact – you can declare your debt compactly in the "Generous Acknowledgments." For longer text-sharing from *previous* work, you may do so so long as you explicitly footnote and describe the borrowing you have done.

For submitting the same paragraphs or pages to two courses in the same semester, you may do so subject to three strict conditions. First, you need to notify both me and the other professor(s) in writing and in advance that you will do so. Second, in the case of extensive re-use, you need to extend the length of the final document by half the amount of the re-used material. Thus a 12-page assignment for Postcolonial Theory which borrows 4 pages from a paper you originally wrote for Advanced Human Rights, would need to be a 14-page paper for Postcolonial Theory. Third, you need to write, in a short note at the end of the paper, how you have borrowed the material and what transformations you have made. Students who self-borrow without meeting these three conditions will be charged with academic misconduct.

All productive scholars, myself included, do this often – that is, re-use our own writing already produced for some other venue. Sometimes this is informally and oddly called "self-plagiarism" – and it is a widely accepted practice when it is fully acknowledged. One commonly sees, for example, a book chapter which includes a footnote like this: "the argument presented in this section of my book revises and extends my earlier essay "On Ethnographic Authority," which originally appeared in *History and Theory*, fall 1983."

For clearer, more powerful prose, *use the active voice*:

Macalester students far too often use the verb "to be" (is, are, was, etc.) in passive constructions which often turn some nearby good verb into a less useful noun. Thus "Jack kicked Bill" becomes "Bill was kicked by Jack," "Jack is the person who kicked Bill," or even "Jack is performing a kicking process on Bill." The problem here is that "is" is the weakest verb in the

English language, and that nearby, an even better word always languishes as a noun or some other form of speech.

What to do about this? Borrowing from Richard Lanham's book *Revising Prose*, I suggest this. Go through your paper and circle all "is" forms. Count them up, and then commit to removing at least half of them in revision. How to remove them? Near the "is" verbs you circle, look for another word which embodies the key concept or action of the sentence, and turn that word into the sentence's main verb.

So, instead of "There is a third-person narrator who follows Clarence," try "The third-person narrator follows Clarence." Instead of "One conclusion that can be drawn from the account given is that Chennai is being Americanized," try "The account concludes [or suggests, argues, claims, implies, asserts] that Chennai is being Americanized." Or, to supply two agents to the sentence, add an *agent* for the Americanization, as here: "The account suggests that the outsourcing industry is Americanizing Chennai."

Compress and thereby strengthen prose by reducing prepositions – a simple trick:
The "circle 'is' forms" suggestion just above is the first part of Richard Lanham's simple, useful, and influential "paramedic method for revising prose." Here is the second part – helpful especially for wordy writers. When revising, circle all *prepositions* (especially as, at, by, for, in, of, on, to, and with) in your paper, and then reduce these (by compressing your phrasing) by half. This simple revising trick can markedly increase your prose power and concision. Google "paramedic method for revising prose," and you'll find a number of good PDF handouts on Lanham's method.

Eliminate almost every emphatic adverb:
Somehow, many writers think that they can strengthen an argument by adverbial inflation. So instead of writing "Anderson's strong paper suggests that …", they will write "Anderson's extremely strong paper suggests that …" – as if "strong" were not itself a strong word. For this reason, I advise writers to cut every instance of "very" from your drafts, as well as every instance of words like "extremely," "highly," "quite," and so on. Why? These words add little. Make your arguments with active verbs, nouns, and at times adjectives.

The most flagrant instances of adverbial inflation are when redundancy is built into the couplings. Recent student papers submitted to me have offered both "violently lynched" and "brutally murdered" – as if the verbs themselves did not connote violence and brutality. Intensifiers also sap energy when the words they modify are already strong: hence "very complex," "highly beautiful," "very enlightening," "quite simplistic," "very personal," "extremely poignant," and so forth, simply mush up clear, strong words like complex, beautiful, enlightening, simplistic, personal and poignant. Cutting adverbs only adds force to your prose.

Make an argument in your paper:
Too often I see papers written by Macalester students which say a great deal about the texts or subject at hand, but which fail to make an argument: that is, they do not advance and sustain a central claim in their paper. Before you turn in a paper, you should be able to complete the following exercise: take a deep breath, and speak aloud a single sentence, in a single breath, that begins as follows – "In my paper, I argue that _____." What you say after the "that" should be, indeed, an argument or claim that is your paper's central contribution to the debates that it

engages. You should not finish the sentence with something general or vague, such as "I argue that globalization is an interesting and complex phenomenon," or "I argue that Anderson and Scott offer rich insights into these questions."

If you cannot complete the sentence clearly – which is a process called "nutshelling" – you'll need to work on your paper until you can. If you *can* complete the sentence, then you now need to go back and check on two things. First, you need to be sure that your paper in fact offers that clear sentence, or something close to it, either towards the beginning or towards the end of your paper. Some papers state their claim up front, and then go on to sustain it. Other papers only state the argument at the end, after working through all of the evidence or debate. Both approaches are good, though the second approach requires that early on in the paper, the reader be given a clear statement of the question the paper will pursue, plus a compact outline of how that pursuit will be organized. Doing this helps the readers know where they are in your argument as it develops.

The second thing you need to check is whether the paragraphs in your paper in fact make and sustain the claim central to your paper. To check on this, do something called "retrospective outlining." Let's say your paper is 12 paragraphs long. Write out 12 lines, each of which is under ten words, and each of which distills the main point of each of your 12 paragraphs. That "retrospective outline" of your paper should flow towards the argument you make.

Don't waste your conclusion restating what we've just finished reading:
Many high school students are often advised to structure a paper as "tell them what you're going to say, say it, and then tell them what you just said." I see papers like this at Macalester too – papers where the final paragraph or few paragraphs mainly rehash things your reader encountered only minutes before and remembers well. While you might want to compactly re-state (or freshly state) your main claim, and ultra-compactly review the support for that claim, you can do much more in a final section than that. You might bridge to wider questions, offer a fresh insight of your own, reflect on the importance (or unimportance) of the debates, link to other central questions featured in your class, point to still-unanswered questions – or any of a variety of interesting, useful things beyond a laborious rehash of the already well-remembered.

Use commas properly around restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses:
Students often incorrectly surround the title of a given author's book or article with commas. They may write, for example, "Hughes's short story, 'Home,' tells the tale of a musician who has returned to the U.S. South." But such commas are only appropriate if that story is Hughes's *only* one. Put another way, surround something with commas if what is inside the commas does not fundamentally change the meaning of the sentence. If the information is *essential* to the meaning of the sentence, then it should appear without commas. Here are some examples.

<u>These sentences use commas, since what's inside is "extra" information:</u>
James Scott's third book, *Seeing Like a State*, argues that …
Hughes's sole work of traditional history, *Fight for Freedom*, tells the story of the NAACP.
Hughes's last poem, "Undertow," is set in the suburbs of New York.

<u>These sentences do not use commas, since the clause is essential to the sentence's meaning:</u>
James Scott's book *Seeing Like a State* argues that …
Hughes's short story "Home" tells of a musician returning to the South.

Hughes's poem "Christ in Alabama" opens with a shocking image.
→ if you put commas around the titles in the three sentences just above, that would imply that Scott has written only one book, and that Hughes wrote only one short story and one poem.

Work with, and do not simply dump on the page, your quotations from sources:
College writers often mistakenly just "dump on the page" a rich, suggestive quotation from an author, but then do no analysis of the quotation. Such student writers might preface the quote with a brief announcement of what the quote is supposed to demonstrate or show, and then hope or assume that the quote transparently displays those properties. It is in general advisable not to assume that your quotation "does the work" you want it to do. Instead, work with the quotes you use – especially the extended ones – to bring out their richness and highlight their key attributes.

A next-to-final note – this document gives you mostly *revising* advice, not *composing* advice:
Writing has many phases, often done in multiple cycles for the same paper: pre-writing, outlining or brainstorming, drafting, revising, more drafting and revising, and final polish. Most of what I have offered here is good for *revising*. If you compose naturally in the passive voice and with tons of heavy adverbs, by all means continue to do so. Trying to do what I describe here when you begin writing your paper may block you up and leave you unable to get your ideas out. So compose however you are comfortable composing, and then use the bulk of this document in the critical and multiple *revising* segments of your prose production.

Finally, here are my own generous acknowledgements for support in composing this document:
This document was assembled piece by piece over many years. Much of it flows from specific questions that insightful Macalester students have posed to me over time, or from writing challenges that I have repeatedly encountered in student prose. Professionally, I have been especially influenced by George Gopen (my instructor in the pedagogy of composition at Duke University) and Richard A. Lanham (author of the indispensable book *Revising Prose*).

Sample sentences from student papers, for a compression exercise
David Chioni Moore, March 2009

1. *Cross* is a poem in which Hughes addresses the problems arising from having a white father and a black mother. The title, *Cross*, is an interesting one as the word cross has many meanings to it.

2. The implication of this statement is that the speaker has traveled to the places listed in the poem.

3. [A first sentence speaks of the moon in Hughes's poetry. Then the next sentence reads as follows:] It is an omnipresent reminder to both Hughes and the readers that there is a separation between the various worlds that are colliding that night.

4. There is a third-person narrator who follows Clarence from the onset until he leaves Becky's house.

5. The concept of nation building is also a recurring theme in the work of Langston Hughes.

6. "America" is a poem that highlights this idea.

7. Minstrel shows not only inflicted emotional pain on participating individuals, but they were very successful in perpetuating ridiculous stereotypes of blacks, which propelled racist attitudes wherever they were performed.

8. However, in less obvious terms, Roy Williams is lynched because he is a treat to the superiority or domination of the White race. He is a witness to the presence of multiracial solidarity in the world through his observations of Europe and America in the midst of the Great Depression.

9. But Hughes's realization at the end of the poem is that it is not what exists in a place that makes it, but an intangible quality.

10. One conclusion that can be drawn from the account given here is that, as Smith's title indicates, Chennai is being Americanized.