

HOW TO GET AN “A” ON A RESPONSE PAPER

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The secret to writing a good response paper is a) closely reading and mulling over the assigned question b) closely reading the assigned readings c) using evidence and ideas from the readings to come up with your own unique answer to the question posed.

Mechanics:

- Double space
- 1” margins
- No weird ink or silly fonts.
- Staple your paper
- You may use the backside of paper

Coming Up with A Thesis: Closely read and mull over the assigned question. If you haven't done so, be sure to read and consider all assigned readings and/or documentaries. Your unique answer to the paper prompt will serve as your thesis. Remember that there is rarely one right answer to an assigned paper prompt. Your professor is most interested in the way you go about demonstrating your thesis. If you have trouble coming up with a thesis, refer back to the historical question posed, re-read your assigned reading, and talk with your professor.

Organization: Perry Mason time. Imagine yourself a trial lawyer, preparing to argue a case. You have a basic position which you want to prove—for instance, if you're the defense attorney, you're going to argue that your client is innocent of the charge alleged against him or her. If you are the prosecuting attorney, you must prove that the defendant is guilty. In order to persuade the jury to agree with you, you must provide specific and pertinent evidence for your stance, arranged in a way that presents each point in its strongest possible light. You will make a stronger case if you can anticipate what weaknesses in your argument the lawyer for the opposing side will pinpoint. At the end of the trial, you will sum up your case to the jury, tying all your evidence together and linking it to your original thesis: the individual on trial is wholly innocent or guilty, or perhaps guilty of a lesser charge but innocent of larger charges.

A. Introduction: Reveal your Argument. This paragraph must contain your thesis statement (what it is that you're arguing, put concisely and directly). If you have trouble coming up with a thesis, refer back to your historical question, look at your data, and talk with your professor. After the thesis statement, give your reader a brief roadmap. In other words, tell the jury how you are going to go about making your case. Like any good lawyer, you should reveal your sources (name the books, primary source documents, etc.; surprise witnesses can be grounds for a mistrial) up front.

B. Body: Demonstrate your case with evidence. Each new paragraph must have a topic sentence, usually the first, which indicates the nature of the material that immediately follows. Provide specific examples from your sources to illustrate your points. Examples are not substitutes for your explanations about their meaning! You cannot simply show the jury a punched timecard—you have to tell them that this is evidence that your client was at work at the time the crime in question was perpetrated. You also have to explain why this is proof—that it would not have been possible for your client to duck out on a coffee break and, say, murder the mad professor. You also have to say where the timecard came from if it's to be admissible as evidence—it won't do if it's not from your client's workplace, or from a different week than you claim. For your paper, that means that you need to use footnotes or endnotes.

Historians use footnotes/endnotes for a variety of purposes:

- 1) To show the source of little-known facts. For instance, you do not need to footnote the fact that the Civil War started in 1861. But you should footnote, say, the number of southern soldiers who died of epidemic disease.
- 2) To show the source of all direct quotations.
- 3) To show the source of all indirect quotations, otherwise known as paraphrases. What is a paraphrase? A paraphrase is your own version of someone else's words.
- 4) To show the source of an argument that you use.
- 5) To add extra information that is not directly relevant to your argument.

For footnote/endnote style, click here: [How to Cite Using the Chicago Manual of Style](#).

Beware of plagiarism: Plagiarism is the stealing of another author's words or ideas. Plagiarism includes: directly copying from a secondary source (a textbook, a documentary video, or a web page) without the use of both quotes and a citation; presenting someone else's argument, idea, or concept as your own (that is, without crediting the original author); or making minor word changes to a secondary source, even with proper citation (there is an important difference between making minor word changes and paraphrasing, that is restating someone else's idea in your own words). Click here for more on **Avoiding Plagiarism**

C. Conclusion: Final Argument. Now tie things up, summarize your evidence, and sell your thesis to the jury, me, your friendly Professor.

Troubleshooting:

1. Have you answered the question? The whole question? Is it focused? Did you defend your argument well?

2. Compare your conclusion with your opening. If they don't agree, you have a problem. Solution: maybe your conclusion—the terrific idea that just hit you about what all this really means—ought to be your original thesis. If so, move the conclusion to the beginning, edit the body of the paper so that it reflects the new thesis, and write a new conclusion. Almost all papers benefit from some version of this step.

3. Read your paper again. Do your ideas follow each other in a logical progression? Can a dumb reader (or a harried Professor) figure out where you're going? Do topic sentences effectively introduce paragraphs? Can you make vague language more precise? Most importantly, does everything in your paper contribute to your argument? Trim the excess. Most good papers start out at least half a page longer than the final draft.

4. Read the paper out loud. I know this sounds stupid, but it helps. Check that each sentence is complete. Make sure that your sentences are of different lengths and structures. If you have to pause for breath in the middle of a sentence, it's (almost always) a run-on and should be cut into shorter statements.

5. Proofread the draft. Check for spelling, punctuation, and typos. If you are using a computer, use the spell checker function. If not, get a dictionary and look up words that you are unfamiliar with. Grammar is important.

6. Have someone else proofread the draft. Print out a copy of your draft. Show this to a classmate -- get them to sit down with a pen and to critically read your work. Tell them to be honest about what they think of your argument. Get them to point out any errors they see. Are your points absolutely clear to your reader?

7. Incorporate all revisions and polish the draft into a Final Paper. Read it over one more time before turning it in. If you catch a last-minute typo that escaped detection, correct it neatly.

CONGRATULATIONS, YOU'RE FINISHED!!

Remember, your professor is available to help you at any step of the process. Students rarely visit during office hours, so sometimes we pass the time working grading, reading the *New York Times*, or playing Words With Friends. We would much rather meet with you, so take advantage of listed office hours!