

**SURVIVING THE FIRST PAPER: A WRITING HANDBOOK**BY STACEY PEEBLES

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As an Honors student, you will take many writing intensive courses during your college career, and one of the first is The Human Situation. In this class, you will typically be writing relatively short papers that make an argument about a primary text or texts. Although writing assignments can vary widely, the practice and training you get in The Human Situation will also serve you well in your other classes—and the ability to think critically and communicate clearly will be a valuable asset in a variety of other contexts in college and beyond.

What follows is a set of guidelines for writing that is geared specifically toward Honors students—students who are taking or have taken The Human Situation. Most of these guidelines concern the kinds of papers you will be asked to write in this class, but taken generally, they are applicable to other classes and assignments as well. (As such, this guide will not cover research methods, or how to locate and use particular kinds of secondary or critical sources. Research methods can vary by discipline, and courses in your major will likely cover such topics.)

**1. THE THESIS STATEMENT**

In many ways **the thesis statement** is the most important part of the paper. It should be a clear, well written, and specific statement of argument, and should indicate in some way how you are planning to reach the conclusion you propose. That is, the thesis should be a detailed statement explaining what you’re going to do in the paper. If you plan to organize the paper into, say, four main points, or consider three important passages in a book that you are writing about, the thesis should say that as well.

This is why it’s called a thesis statement, rather than a thesis sentence—it may very well need to be longer than one sentence. You may wish to explain the argument in one sentence, and then say how the argument will be organized in another.

Often students learn in high school English that they shouldn’t use **the first person** when writing papers. Generally this is so that students can learn how to write research papers or arguments rather than personal narratives. (It wouldn’t really be appropriate in a research paper, for instance, to say “I went to the library, and I found a book by John Doe, and on page 10 I read this...”) But in college, writing in the first person is useful

and often necessary. If you are writing a paper that makes an argument, an excellent way to begin a thesis statement is to use the phrase, “I will argue that...” If you can finish that sentence, then you’ve got a thesis—or at least the beginning of one. Trying to avoid the first person can often lead to awkward phrasing: “One could argue that...” “It can be said that...”

**Choosing a good topic** and writing a good thesis is crucial to producing a good paper. If you are writing a paper that makes an argument, keep in mind that some theses are better—or more conducive to good papers—than others. An argument is a statement that could provoke a debate—it’s something that people would disagree about. If your thesis is something that everyone would probably agree with, then it’s not going to make for a very interesting paper. On the other hand, if your thesis is something that everyone would probably *disagree* with, then that may be because there’s no way to support it with valid evidence.

For example, a thesis that argues “the *Iliad* is an anti-war poem” would be appropriate. This statement could indeed provoke a debate, and there would be valid evidence from the text to support this claim. A thesis that argues “the *Iliad* is an epic poem” would *not* be appropriate. The difference: Homer’s stance for or against war is debatable—different people have different, viable ideas about this, and the different stances can both be supported by evidence in the text. It’s a topic worth discussing. The *Iliad*’s status as an epic poem is not debatable—this is something upon which everyone agrees. It is a statement of fact, and not a statement of argument. On the other hand, “The *Iliad* is an epic poem about aliens” is also not a good thesis. Everyone would disagree with you, and that’s because you are wrong.

## 2. THE BODY OF THE PAPER

The body of the paper should **support that thesis** with appropriate discussion and examples from the text or texts. The paper should consider those texts carefully and accurately, and reflect substantially on the questions raised by the texts.

As you develop your argument, you will want to support the claims you make by explaining them and offering **evidence** from the texts you are writing about—that is, quotations. If you say that “Achilles is immature,” for example, you would need to back that statement up. What constitutes immaturity? Where do you see that in the text? Is he immature by our contemporary standards, or by Greek ones? (Remember that concepts like immaturity, masculinity, and virtue, among many others, are defined differently by different cultures, and it’s important to be clear which perspective you’re coming from. And judging an ancient character by modern standards is not always appropriate—ask your professor.)

When you do quote from a text, it should be clear why you’re including that particular quotation and what its context is. If it’s a line of dialogue, who’s speaking? Are they speaking to someone else?

A paper that uses no quotations at all immediately raises a red flag, as does a paper that is so thick with quotations that the writer can't get a word in edgewise. You should use quotations from your sources like backup singers—they should harmonize with what *you*, the writer, are saying, but they shouldn't drown you out.

When you finish writing your paper, it goes without saying that you should reread it, revise it, proofread it. (More on this shortly.) But you might also take care to check that the argument you make at the beginning of the paper is the same argument you are making at the end of the paper. Often a writer's ideas will change as he or she works through them, and this is often for the better—actually dealing with the texts at hand gives rise to new observations and reflections. Just make sure to go back and change your thesis to reflect these developments! You don't want to end up with a paper that says one thing on the first page and then makes the opposite claim on the last page.

### 3. ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

Your paper should be well **organized**, and it should have an obvious structure. In high school students are often taught specific formats for writing that they have to follow exactly—"the five paragraph essay" being one notorious example. These lessons are useful, in that they do teach students a model of what organization can look like, but of course more advanced writing can be organized in many different ways. Students often ask about "the best way to organize a paper," but really it depends on the paper and the argument that's being made. There are many ways to organize a paper—the main thing is that you *choose* a way, rather than stringing your thoughts together in random fashion.

Generally, papers will begin with **an introductory paragraph** that indicates the topic of discussion and includes a thesis statement. (A short paper, say three pages, will often only have one introductory paragraph. Longer papers, say seven pages, may have two or three. Books often devote a whole chapter to introductory material, as you've probably noticed.)

Avoid beginning your paper with huge, unsupportable statements. ("Throughout the history of the world, humans have debated about violence in the media." Um, really?) In fact, try to avoid referencing the history of the world at all. It's a good idea to "hook" your reader into being interested about your topic, but there are other ways to do it. You could begin with an interesting and relevant quotation from one of the texts you are covering. You could begin with a question. ("What does Achilles want?") You could say something provocative, as long as you make it clear that you will then support and explain that statement in the discussion that follows. ("Achilles *is* immature.")

You could also begin by considering **the meaning of a word** (like justice, or love, or nature). If you do so, however—either here or anywhere in your paper—don't just use a Webster's definition. Craft your own that considers the term in light of the ideas and texts you are discussing. Remember, too, that using "big" words like justice, love, and nature (and so many others—divine, good, evil, happy...) is often something that you have to support, just like any other logical claim. What do you mean when you say

something is just? Or that a character's feelings are "natural"? If much of your argument depends on discussing the love between two characters, you should probably define what you think love is in that context.

The body of your paper should **follow logically** from point to point, and each point should build on the previous point with focus and clarity. You want to avoid *non sequiturs* (in Latin, this term means "it does not follow.") A paper that moves from saying that "In this scene, Andromache grieves for her husband" to "Homer writes in dactylic hexameter" is going to confuse the reader.

A good way to ensure that your paper is organized is to start with an **outline**. Plan what you are going to say, and what order you will say it in. After you have written the paper, go back and see if you can outline it from what you have on paper. If you find that you can't seem to adequately summarize a certain paragraph, it may be because the paragraph has too many different ideas in it. The paragraph may need to be rearranged and broken into separate parts.

Most arguments benefit from addressing **counterarguments**, or objections. If you are making an argument to which there is an obvious opposing view, you should address that view, but then explain why you think that your argument is still the stronger one. This can be done at any point during the paper, though it's often most effective near the end, when you have already explained most or all of your argument. This doesn't mean that you're not taking a stance—it means that you're acknowledging the opposing view in such a way that you're strengthening the argument for your own view.

Finally, your paper should have a **conclusion**, even if it's a short one. You don't need to restate your thesis word for word. If you've done a good job developing the thesis, then that shouldn't be necessary. The conclusion is a good place to indicate the implications of the topic you chose to discuss. Why does this matter, anyway? What difference does it make? Does a consideration of Achilles' character lead us to larger considerations of human nature, the experience of war, mortality? If there are questions or connections that didn't fit into the body of your paper, this might be a good place to mention them.

#### 4. METHODS OF CITATION

The goal of all **citation systems** is the same—to provide a way for the reader to know exactly which sources have been used in a paper. If all sources have been properly cited, a reader should have all the information she needs to be able to track down the precise quotation or information that was used by the writer.

There are many citation systems, but most will use either footnotes or parenthetical citations within the body of the paper, and then include a bibliography at the end.

When you put quotation marks around a phrase, sentence, or sentences in the body of a paper, it means that everything in between those quotation marks should appear *exactly* as it did in the source from which you are quoting. If you need to change something in

the quotation in order to make it fit with your syntax, or to clarify something, then you can generally do that with brackets or ellipses. Use brackets [ ] to add something. Use an ellipsis ... to indicate that you have taken something out. Don't, however, use an ellipsis to indicate a gap of several pages, or use it in such a way that you change the original meaning of what you are quoting.

## 5. REVISING AND PROOFREADING

The best writing of all kinds (literature, philosophy, scientific articles, and even the humble college paper) is writing that has not just been written—it's been written and rewritten...and rewritten...and rewritten. James Joyce wrote three-quarters of his famous novel *Ulysses* in the margins of the proofs his editor sent him. Don't be satisfied with a first draft! There's always room for improvement—and most of the time, it makes a big difference in the quality of your paper.

After you write a first draft (which you may have begun with notes, brainstorming, and an outline), revise your paper, and then proofread it. What's the difference? **Revision** is reviewing a paper for “big stuff”—overall structure, logical development, clarity of argument. **Proofreading** is fixing the details—grammar, syntax, citation, punctuation. Revision comes first, since it doesn't make much sense to polish up all the details of a paragraph that may not end up fitting very well in the argument at all—and thus needs to get thrown out.

Don't be afraid to throw things out. It's not easy, but it's often necessary. If you're really interested in writing an excellent paper, write a first draft on a topic that you find engaging. Take a break. Then look back at your paper. Often, you'll find a sentence or two deep in that paper that really digs into something interesting—something that's not immediately obvious about the material you're covering, or that hits on a particularly complex issue. Maybe you think, “Gee, I wish I'd had more room to say something about that.” Surprise—that should probably be the material for your thesis. Write another draft, and start with *that*.

Once you have a draft that you are happy with in terms of argument, logic, and structure, you can move on to proofreading. Use the spelling and grammar features on your word processor, but don't rely on them blindly. “Kleos” is not actually the same as “Oreos,” after all. Don't forget to underline or italicize book titles, as appropriate.

Finally, give the paper a **title** that indicates something about its topic. “Paper #1” is not terribly descriptive. The title is the first impression, after all, so make it a good one.

## 6. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- Don't I need to know what a particular professor wants before I can write a paper for him or her?

Obviously, you want to understand the assignment and any particular instructions your professor has given you. But all professors look for organization, clarity, and a sophisticated understanding of the topic at hand. Different professors will indeed have different help to give you about different topics, but at the end of the day, we all want you to be smart and make sense.

- I should use big words, right? Because I'm an Honors student, after all, and I didn't memorize all those SAT word lists for nothing. And besides, isn't that what it means to write formally rather than informally or casually?

There's no substitute for using exactly the right word for the right idea. But using big words or flowery constructions for their own sake often results in statements that are awkward and unclear. Don't be afraid to say something simply—just because an idea is simply stated doesn't mean it's a simple idea! If you were sitting in your professor's office explaining your idea, what would you say? Often *that's* the clearer expression of your idea. Sophisticated writing doesn't have to be “fancy.”

- Okay, I have two ideas for a paper that I have to write. One is straightforward—it's not a very complicated thesis, but I know I could explain it and support it easily. The other is really interesting, but I'm not quite sure how I'll manage to explain it all. Which one should I do?

Most of the time, you should pick the topic that's going to be difficult but interesting. A paper that is clean and beautifully written but that doesn't really engage with the topic or text isn't a very good paper. It doesn't show real thinking about the ideas at hand. It's a little boring. But a paper that really grapples with ideas and texts—even if it does so less than perfectly—is usually a better paper. It *does* show real thinking, and that's what we want in the Honors College. Don't be afraid to reject the safe option, and go for something risky but potentially much more rewarding.

- I just can't quite figure out how to say what I mean.

Congratulations—you're a real writer! As your writing ability improves, you will also continue to take on topics and tasks that are more advanced. Thus saying what you mean is always a challenge—because “what you mean” gets more complex. This is good. It means that you're developing as a thinker and a communicator.

But yes, it is hard. Talking about your ideas with others always helps—friends, family members, and of course your professors, since this is what they get paid for. Your professors are invaluable resources for developing your ideas, and sometimes only a few

minutes of conversation can lead to a breakthrough. Most professors are happy to look at outlines or drafts if you make an appointment and don't wait until the last minute before a paper is due.

In addition to talking it out, there are other strategies. Many writers like brainstorming—taking notes, drawing diagrams, free-associating to see what they can come up with. Maybe start with a small piece of the problem and work that out instead of trying to do everything at once. If you're really stuck on something, you may want to sleep on it and see if the solution surprises you later. (And of course you have time for this, because you starting thinking about your paper well in advance of the deadline.)

Ultimately, being smart and making sense will help you do well in *The Human Situation*, but it doesn't stop there. Learning how to approach a task, think through a problem, and communicate clearly about complex ideas is invaluable in all aspects of academic, professional, and personal life. It's not always easy, but when you do it well, it's both productive and rewarding. Sometimes it's even fun.