

HOW TO WRITE A COURSE PAPER

TRAIN TO LEARN EFFECTIVELY: TIP SHEETS

Writing assignments differ: some professors may ask you to write a press release, while others expect a case study analysis. Nevertheless, most university courses require students to write a research paper. Not all course papers require original primary research, where you will have to apply complex statistical models to new data or interview participants in the natural settings. In most cases, you will need to review the existing literature to answer your own research questions developed for the course paper.

Crafting a course paper can seem complicated. To help, here is a short plan to follow when writing a course paper:

Where do I begin?

1. Understanding your assignment

First, read the assignment description and/ or rubric to make sure you know what the question is, how it could be answered, and if there are any specific requirements for the paper format and submission guidelines. If you have any questions, talk to your professor. Locate the question that has to be answered, when you first begin to [analyze the assignment](#). The assignment usually gives you a range of possible approaches you can take to answer the questions. Keep in mind the technical requirements: the word count, font size, submission deadline, etc.

2. Select and focus your topic

When you know what the expectations for the course paper are, it is time to select your topic and establish the focus. This is not an easy task! A good research topic is one which is worth studying. You should be able to answer the “so what?” question if anyone challenges your choice. It should also be feasible for the purposes of a typical 13-week course. You will not be able to interview 235 people or work through 100 sources. Need help?

- Book an appointment with the [Writing Specialist](#) at the Program Advising and Student Success;
- Access [writing support](#) through Student Life & Learning Support;
- [Or ask a Toronto Metropolitan University librarian](#).

3. Write a working-thesis

Any course paper needs a main idea, an overarching point that you will be making. A good thesis statement will make this idea explicit, so that readers know what your paper is going to be about. Some recommendations for writing a working thesis include: prepare a thesis that is restricted (not too broad), unified, precise, and arguable. For more information about thesis statements, please see the following [tip sheet on Thesis Statements](#).

4. Design your research strategy

Equipped with your carefully selected research topic and a strong thesis statement, you can now think of developing your research strategy. What do you need to do in order to answer your research question? Where will you get data from? Will you work with scholarly sources, or will you need to generate your own data? Review Toronto Metropolitan University Library’s page on [The Research Journey](#). Do not forget that you need enough information to deal with the paper question, but the design should be feasible.

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Getting down to business

1. Find and evaluate sources

The library is a student's best friend. It is not limited to the physical buildings and thousands of books inside, but it increasingly stands for its [online catalogue](#) and resources that you could access electronically. Not all sources are created equal, so do follow the advice from the Toronto Metropolitan University librarians to make sure you get the best possible information. Make sure that your sources are current, relevant, accurate, authoritative, and purposeful.

One example of a helpful resource compiled for students is the page called: [How to Read a Scholarly Article Guide](#). In a nutshell, read the abstract first to see if the article is relevant for your purposes. References provided at the end will help you find additional sources. Pay attention to the article's research questions and go to the findings section to find the answers. Looking for implications and takeaways from the article? Go straight to the discussion and conclusions.

Finally, check your assignment guidelines if you need to incorporate course readings, the textbook or use any other prescribed sources. Find all websites you may need to access primary data for the course paper.

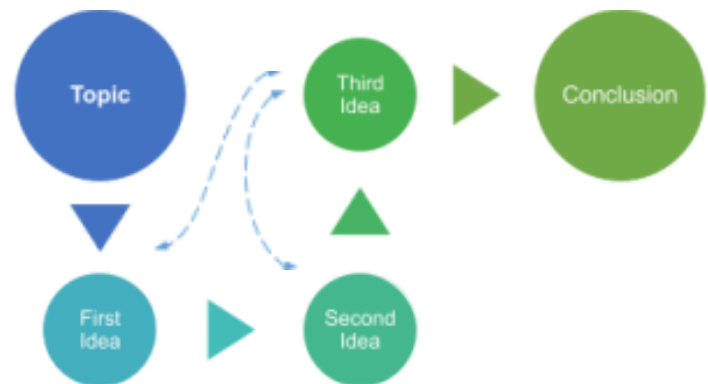
2. Create an outline for the paper

Having secured the content, it is time to develop a structure. A typical course paper will have the introduction, main body with several subsections to deal with research questions, and the conclusion, which presents a summary of findings and implications. To stay on track, [develop an outline](#). Put the biggest ideas first and then add the supporting details underneath. Make sure that the order of elements is logical. Outlines do not always have to look like full sentences. Lists, maps, timelines or flowcharts are also helpful.

List Example:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Topic
 - B. Get audience's attention
 - C. Thesis statement
- II. First Main Idea
 - A. Supporting points
 1. Detail
 2. Detail
- III. Second Main Idea
 - A. Supporting points
 1. Detail
 2. Detail
- IV. Third Main Idea
 - A. Supporting points
 1. Detail
 2. Detail
- V. Conclusion
 - A. Detail

Flowchart Example:



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3. Write your first draft

This is where you write, write, write! Focusing on language should be less daunting when you know what you are writing about (content) and in what order (structure). Start writing by expressing your ideas on the topic. You can organize information and ideas in the order they come to your mind. Do not worry about producing the impeccable first draft as you should have plenty of time to edit. Want more information on how to structure your essay, consider reviewing the [Four Teachings Writing Guide](#) compiled by the Toronto Metropolitan University Library.

Finishing up your paper

1. Conduct additional research as needed

You may have several pages written, ready to be polished and checked, when deciding that you may need to conduct additional research. At this stage, you could ask the Toronto Metropolitan University librarians for extra help. Use [Ask a Librarian Chat](#) for advice whether you are working on or off-campus.

2. Review and re-write

Getting your writing perfect from the first attempt is not really easy even if you are a Nobel Prize winning author. Make sure you have enough time to revise and make minor changes to the text before submitting the paper for grading. A good strategy is first to address the high order concerns, rather than the low order concerns (i.e. sentence structure, punctuation, word choice, and spelling). High order concerns pertain to the thesis and focus, audience and purpose, organization, and development of the paper. Ask yourself:

- Did I answer the research question fully?
- Does my paper have all the required sub-sections?

Serious issues with content and structure can cost you 30% to 50% of the overall grade. Now, move to the polishing stage and address the low order concerns (sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, word choice and usage, spelling, etc.).

Need assistance? Book an appointment for writing support at either the [Program Advising and Student Success](#) (for Ted Rogers School students) or at [Student Life & Learning Support](#) (for all Toronto Metropolitan University students).

3. Put the paper in the final form

You are almost done. Proofread for minor typos and double-check your references and citations. As you know, plagiarism is a serious academic offence, so make sure you know [how to cite](#). Briefly speaking, if you use someone else's idea, you need to acknowledge it by the in-text citation and the entry in the reference list. Did you use more than four words in a row as they were written in the source? Put them in quotation marks and cite the source.

Want to know more? APA and other [citation guides](#) are available from the Toronto Metropolitan University Library website to help you out.

Congratulations, you are done! Now it's time to submit your work.

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References

Apart from numerous resources embedded through hyperlinks, this document was inspired by the following sources:

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