

1. Start out right by writing a strong thesis statement. Make sure your thesis statements are:
  - a. **on topic**-- Thesis statements should answer the question posed by the prompt.
  - b. **debatable**-- Thesis statements should not be common knowledge. (eg. "The Civil Rights Movement was a pivotal moment in American history.")
  - c. **narrow**-- Thesis statements should be narrowly fit to the topic, not too broad.
  - d. **position-taking**-- Thesis statements should take a position, rather than trying to equivocate between two sides (eg. "Both liberals and conservatives have good points in their arguments.") or simply discussing the paper topic without making a claim (eg. "This paper will discuss the importance of the Civil Rights Movement.").
  - e. **evidentiary**-- Thesis statements should indicate what sorts of evidence or reasoning you will use to support your claim.
2. Answer the question. Answer **the whole** question. If the prompt has multiple parts (as this first prompt most certainly does), make sure to answer each part of the question.
3. Write concise paragraphs. I know that you were taught to write 5-paragraph essays in high school, but longer essays require more paragraphs between the introduction and the conclusion. Paragraphs are a tool to organize your thoughts, and super-long paragraphs tend to devolve into very disorganized thoughts. If you find that your paragraph has 2 topic sentences or 2 or more ideas, you should split it up. As a rule of thumb, paragraphs beyond about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of a page are unwieldy.
4. The use of big words and unwieldy constructions when simpler language and syntax would do is problematic. At best, it looks like it's a desperate attempt to make your paper longer. At worst, it exposes your inability to successfully use big words and complex syntax. Example: You do not need to say "X can be shown to be Y," you can really just say "X is Y."
5. In the same vein, when you introduce sources, do so concisely. Don't introduce them by the full title or the author's full name. Academics are famously long-winded, and their

book and article titles are no exception. Writing out the full title of the work in the text of your paper is, at best, clunky, and at worst it looks like you are trying to stretch out your paper length again. Compare: “In Paul Frymer’s 2010 work, “*Uneasy Alliances: Race and Party Competition in America*,” he advances the theory of electoral capture.” vs. “Frymer (2010) advances the theory of electoral capture.” The latter is really all you need.

6. Use quotes in context, to support your own ideas. When you decide to incorporate a direct quote into your essay, it should work to further your argument. Quotes should not be used in place of your own argument! If you drop quotes into your paragraphs without first situating them within the context of your argument, they do nothing but take up space. Quotations must always be bracketed with your own ideas! Avoid stand-alone quotes, paraphrase and state how the passage or idea supports your thesis.
7. When quoting, make sure you include page numbers for all direct quotes, and year of publication for all citations. Most of you are familiar with MLA style papers, which do not require year of publication in parenthetical citations-- but MLA is a style designed for literature, with largely static bodies of work. Social science is dynamic, and new arguments are being advanced all the time-- what a scholar says in 1966 (as a graduate student or junior professor) may be very different than what that same scholar says in 1996. It’s your job, when writing, to make sure that your readers can find where you’re sourcing your ideas from.
8. If a rubric is available (and we’re making it available!), be sure to read it and understand it. Rubrics are the standard by which your paper is judged. If you were playing a sport, you would want to know how you score points. The same applies to your written work.

9. Be specific! Vague generalizations and redundant statements (“<important concept> has had a dramatic impact upon society”, “uninformed voters are uninformed because of a lack of knowledge,” etc.) do nothing to advance your arguments.
10. Proofread! Proofread more than you think you need. If you are transitioning smoothly between finishing a paper and submitting it, your paper has unnecessary errors in it-- this is as true for working scholars as it is for undergraduates. Some tips for effective proofreading:
  - a. Put at least a night of sleep between finishing your paper and proofreading it. The distance will help you see the little mistakes that your tired-and-triumphant brain will gloss over.
  - b. Read your paper aloud. The parts of the brain involved in processing written language and those involved in processing spoken language are different, and native intuition is stronger when speaking than when reading. (Non-native speakers of English should consider having a native English speaker reading their paper aloud.) When your tongue trips over a sentence, but you’re not quite sure why, examine that sentence closely. There’s probably an error in there somewhere.
  - c. Have somebody else read your paper. Everyone thinks their own writing is awesome. Other people are more likely to provide an objective opinion.