Guide to Writing Themes and Reports

STUDENT'S GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE STUDY #6

William F. Brown, Ed.D.
Southwest Texas State University

Today, college students are being given greater responsibility than ever for learning through independent student. Consequently, you will frequently be called upon to demonstrate your competency in organizing and presenting your own ideas on a topic of your own choosing. In fact, as an entering freshman, you can expect to immediately begin writing papers ranging from short in class themes written out of your own personal experiences and beliefs to lengthy research reports based on systematic and comprehensive library research.

Please keep in mind that the grading of all papers-themes, essays, critiques or reports—is a subjective process, with considerable individual differences existing between instructors. However, your instructors will generally be influenced by six factors in deciding your grade. You should, therefore, take these factors into account as you plan and prepare any written assignment.

1. Appearance - overall attractiveness of your paper as reflected by neatness, legibility, etc.

2. Organization - overall coherence of your composition as reflected by logical and effective presentation of material.

3. Originality - self-expression as reflected by the effective presentation of your own ideas and the uniqueness of your approach.

4. Variety - comprehensive of coverage as reflected by the types and number of reference sources you have used.

5. Mechanics - your use of correct English as reflected by the absence of grammar, spelling, punctuation and capitalization errors.

6. Format - your adherence to correct form as reflected by proper footnotes, bibliography, etc.
Suggestions for Writing In-Class Themes

Many freshmen have real difficulty coping with the short, in-class themes required for first-year English courses. If you dread writing these brief essays, the following suggestions should help you to improve your ability to handle such assignments.

Rule #1: When you are given a choice, choose your theme topic with the utmost care. Your topic selection should be based upon your familiarity with the interest in the various possible subjects.

Rule #2: If your theme topic is known beforehand, go into class mentally prepared with a reservoir of factual information about your subject.

Rule #3: If your theme topic is unknown beforehand, draw upon your own experiences as much as possible. Avoid experimentation with unfamiliar subjects when you are pressed for time.

Rule #4: Make your subject suitable for a short theme. Narrow your topic down to a definite, essential, interesting phase of the broad subject.

Rule #5: Allow yourself a few minutes to think about the subject and jot down ideas to be presented. You should quickly list both major concepts and important supporting facts as these come to mind.

Rule #6: Organize your ideas into a brief logical outline before you begin writing. Time thus spent in outlining your topic coverage will make for a much better presentation of your ideas.

Rule #7: Use simple words that you understand and can spell. Avoid the use of slang except for emphasis.

Rule #8: Unless you are good at punctuation, avoid long sentences requiring complex internal punctuation.

Rule #9: Check for readability as you write your theme. Pay close attention to coherence, to transition, to emphasis, and to smoothness.

Rule #10: Write legibly and make all corrections neatly. Neatness indicates pride in your work and make a favorable impression before your instructor starts reading.

Rule #11: Save a few minutes to reread and polish your theme. Carefully check for grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization errors.
Rule #12: Make your first draft your final one. Time will be too limited to allow for recopying.

Suggestions for Writing Research Reports

Writing a research paper is, of course, a much more ambitious and demanding activity than is the writing of an in-class theme. You will normally go through the following six fairly distinct stages in writing a research paper: (1) choosing our topic; (2) collecting pertinent information; (3) organizing your information; (4) writing your first draft; (5) revising your first draft; and (6) preparing your finished report. The suggestions given below are, therefore, organized according to this six-stage sequence in the report writing process.

Step #1: Selecting Your Topic

Rule #1: Be certain that you know precisely what kind of paper you expected to write, how long it should be, and when it is due. Listen to your instructor carefully as he explains the purpose, nature, scope, and limits of the assignment.

Rule #2: Choose a topic that really interest you - something that is intriguing, exciting, and personal. You will have greater confidence and do better work with a topic that has some special meaning for you or that you know something about.

Rule #3: Choose a topic having a variety of easily available sources of pertinent and timely information. Remember, the primary purpose of the assignment is to help you become skillful in using the basic tools of scholarship - reference books, professional journals, popular periodicals, and other publications.

Rule #4: Choose a topic that is neither too narrow and trivial nor too broad and ambitious. Adjust the focus of your topic to the assigned length and the available time without making your topic too limited or trite to be meaningful.

Step #2: Collecting Pertinent Information

Rule #1: Prepare a brief, precise statement defining the objective and scope of your paper. Your thesis statement will then serve as a point of reference as you seek information on your topic.

Rule #2: Use the card catalog plus appropriate indexes, abstracts, and guides to build up a comprehensive bibliography of appropriate references for your topic.
Rule #3: Quickly survey each book or article to determine whether or not it contains the kind of information you want. If the material is relevant to your topic, prepare a bibliography card giving all the information necessary for your future footnotes and bibliography.

Rule #4: Take brief, accurate, pertinent, usable, readable notes in your own words. Avoid the tendency to copy the wanted material word for word.

Rule #5: Take you notes on 3x5 or 4x6 cards because these will be easy to shuffle and rearrange later. Use a separate card for each major idea and each reference source and be sure to identify the idea source on the back of the card.

Rule #6: Check the references cited in those materials that you do find which are pertinent to your topic. Bibliography building usually becomes a chair reaction, with one source providing clues to additional sources.

Rule #7: Keep an “idea page” in notebook for jotting down possible sources of information suggested during lectures and conversations or encountered while reading and thinking.

Step #3: Organizing Your Information

Rule #1: Read through your note cards and sort them into piles according to whatever categories seem logical to you. All cards dealing with the same sub-topic should be placed together.

Rule #2: Scan the cards in each pile to determine what appears to be the central theme for that pile. Then organize each pile of cards into the most logical sequence, eliminating the duplications and irrelevancies that you discover.

Rule #3: Arrange the piles of cards into the most appropriate order to achieve the best possible organization of your major idea. When you feel that all cards are organized satisfactorily, number each card in order according to your final arrangement.

Rule #4: Using your organized note cards as a guide, prepare a detailed outline for your paper. Keep this tentative outline simple and direct by using cue words and phrases instead of complete sentences.
Step #4: Writing Your First Draft

Rule #1: With your tentative outline before you, dash off an initial draft of your paper in longhand. Write as rapidly and spontaneously as you can for you are simply trying to get your ideas down on paper in an organized manner.

Rule #2: Write the way you talk without worrying about misspelled words, proper punctuation, or grammatical structure. Use familiar words and uncomplicated sentences. Concentrate now on the development of your topic and take care of stylistic problems later.

Rule #3: Stick to the point and avoid interesting but distracting digressions. For each major idea, get to the point quickly and then systematically and logically develop the thought through examples and explanations.

Rule #4: Include concrete examples, illustrations, and factual details to back up your generalizations. Ideas expressed as generalities without supporting specifics are neither convincing nor interesting reading.

Rule #5: Do not be afraid to criticize, evaluate, illustrate, attack or defend where appropriate to your topic. Show that you have been thinking instead of merely copying.

Rule #6: As you write, indicate your information sources by placing the number of note card for a reference in the page margin beside the idea. Return later to complete the footnoting of your references after you have prepared your alphabetical bibliography.

Rule #7: Leave plenty of room for later correcting and editing. Wide margins and double-spacing will make it easier to insert the many additions and corrections that will most certainly be necessary.

Step #5: Revising Your Rough Draft

Rule #1: Set your first draft aside and allow a "cooling off" period so that you can re-read it with greater objectivity. You will return to the project after a couple of days with our judgment less contaminated by your previous thinking.

Rule #2: Check your paper for overall effectiveness of expression. Look at your sentence structure and paragraphing for clarify, smoothness, and effectiveness. Read for logical progression and smooth transition between the main thought in your paper.
Rule #3: Use a dictionary or thesaurus to help you find the exact word to express an idea or to find alternative words for those you might be overusing. Also check that you are correctly using unfamiliar or uncommon words.

Rule #4: Carefully check your paper for mechanical errors such as misspelled words, inaccurate punctuation, and incorrect grammar.

Rule #5: Watch carefully to prevent any possibility of plagiarism. Be absolutely certain that your footnoting gives full credit for all materials used directly or in paraphrased form.

Rule #6: Revise and polish your tentative outline for final typing. Edit it carefully for clarity, effectiveness and correctness of content.

Step #6: Preparing Your Finished Report

Rule #1: Type the final version of your report. Be sure to double space and allow proper page margins.

Rule #2: Follow the exact format prescribed by your instructor for the title page, table of contents, bibliography, footnoting, etc. The prescribed format may vary somewhat from course to course, so be sure to check with your instructor if you are in doubt.

Rule #3: Double check your footing against your alphabetized bibliography. Make certain that all of your footnotes are accurately tied to the references listed in your bibliography.

Rule #4: After typing your report, be sure to give it a final proofreading for careless errors - misspelling, punctuation errors, omitted words, etc.

Rule #5: Submit your report in an attractive binder. Let neatness show that you have pride in your effort.

If you will carefully follow the six-step procedure detailed above, your ability to handle term papers and research reports should quickly show much improvement. However, one other requirement is a must for effective report writing. Avoid that frantic, last-minute rush to meet your deadline. Allow yourself plenty of time to complete the project calmly, free from all pressure which is likely to produce foolish mistakes.