

The Ten Commandments for writing academic papers

Academic life has a certain "morality" attached to it. Research is cooperative, and we all depend on each -other to make progress. Ideas are free and freely given, so we all have a responsibility to treat each other's intellectual property with respect. There is, therefore, an onus on everyone to abide by certain rules of behavior, particularly when writing ideas down in the form of academic papers. Good habits acquired now last a lifetime, and these are the main ones to cultivate.

1. Be explicit about the structure of your argument by spelling it out at the beginning. Every paper needs an introduction, a main argument a discussion and a conclusion. Outline your argument in the opening stages -i.e. I say what you are going to do, then do it, then say what you have done. This means that your reader is in exactly the same position as you at the start of the paper and can interact with your ideas as they come up because he/she knows where the argument is heading. The opposite is to keep the reader in the dark about the thrust of your argument so that he/she has to take it on trust at every stage that what you are saying is relevant, and then pulling a rabbit out of the hat at the end in the form of some ideas or concepts which you have been saving up to get you out at the end of the argument. This is impermissible because it means that in order to be able to take issue with you, your reader has to read the paper twice. Sometimes this happens to you in writing a draft, and you only realize that the paper is actually about when you come to the conclusions, in which case you have, I am afraid, to put the main ideas at the front and re-write the paper with hindsight.
2. Begin with the problem or question to which you want to find the answer, not with grand theory. One of the most often-repeated mistakes is to set theoretical ideas up at the beginning as a general framework for your work. This raises the expectations of your reader that you are going to make progress with these major theoretical problems. The chances are that you will not be innovating at this level, so when you do begin to unpack your ideas they are hard to relate to the framework you have set up; if you start with a modest problem you not only have a chance of making progress with it but you can then surprise your reader by bringing theoretical ideas to bear on it which actually shed light on your problem. This is the best use for grand theory.
3. You only need one good idea to write a paper but you do need an idea or a hypothesis somewhere. Presenting other people's work in a descriptive way is not enough. The next level of "lets suck it and see"(trying a piece of analysis without any idea of what you might hope to find, just to see if you can find anything out) is OK in the initial stages of your course but not for a substantial piece of work like a paper. You have to add something of yourself in the form of an intuition which you hope to pin down by taking thought. On the other hand don't try to solve too many different problems in one paper -the "and while we're at it" temptation. If you aim to discuss more than one set of ideas in the foreground of any piece of work you are likely to end up with a mess, so you have to select the best line of inquiry pursuit and hope to raise all other relevant problems through its pursuit.
4. Every paper needs a problem (which is different from a field or area of research), a body of data, a body of literature and a hypothesis. You cannot manage without all four. A field of study is a broad

area- e.g., the relation between housing and the state -which contains many possible lines of research. To name the field locates you in a research community but it does not help you to be clear about what you are actually going to do, and where you will make your contribution. You need to identify a specific problem where you hope to make progress -e.g., the extent to which participation by prospective users in the housing process influences the actual form of housing. You will know when you have identified a problem, or rather a question, because at that point you will be able to see how you might be able to find out the answer by reference to some body of data. Do not even attempt to write about something without good data to test your ideas against. In our hypothetical case it would be a sample of housing projects with known different degrees of participation by users in the design process, and every other possible variable which might account for difference held steady. There is an art to selecting data to test ideas and you should be rigorous about your choice of data, as with everything else. Do not select your data to disguise a lousy argument. If you do so, your enemies will unmask it for you. You should be the first to spot difficulties in your choice of data, not the last. In the final analysis selecting data to prop up weak ideas is cheating and even if you get away with it you are cheating yourself. Next, you should always rehearse the conventional wisdom or state of the art knowledge before you present your own ideas. Set your work in context and show that you know how it relates to other people working within the field.

5. Write in the third person “this paper sets out to“ not in the first person. This may seem pedantic, but the aim is to distance you and your emotional investment in producing it as the author, from the actual paper itself as a product, by making it as self-contained as possible. The papers you write should be an independent structure of ideas which do not require you to intervene at any point to give an opinion express a belief or add a clarification. We assume that you are writing because you think you have found something out which is worth sharing. That goes without saying if the paper happens to be made by you is not really important we have to judge the quality of the ideas without reference to you as a person. Criticism is therefore likewise aimed at clarifying the ideas set out in the paper, and not at you.
6. Present ideas before you evaluate them. For a start, you should not assume your reader is acquainted with everything you have read, but more important, you should present the work of other people as clearly and dispassionately as possible in order that the reader can form an independent judgment as to its usefulness and limitations. Then you should give your evaluation, which again, the reader will be free to agree with or not. The aim is not to control the debate by giving a biased view, but to test all ideas to destruction, including your own. If you are not prepared to do this, you cannot learn. Likewise, don't be allusive. If something is worth mentioning it is worth saying properly. Allusion is a form of intellectual snobbery, rather like name-dropping. Always acknowledge the source of your ideas and the influence on your work of the ideas of others, to the best of your ability. Of course, sometimes it is hard so say where an idea comes from, particularly where it synthesizes the work of many others, but you should at least not do the opposite and steal intellectual property from authors unacknowledged. At its worst, where you copy the work of other authors and pretend it is your own, this is plagiarism -and it is the one thing you will automatically fail for.
7. Remember that all ideas are provisional. After you have outlined the problem, examined the literature, and analyzed your data, your ideas are still only provisional. You need to discuss your findings and interpret them in the light of everything you have said to date, and when you have done all this you might be able to reach a conclusion, but only might. You will never be able to prove anything and nothing is ever true. You might be able to show a relationship, suggest some findings, point to weaknesses in your argument (which you must always acknowledge as well as its

strengths) and indicate what seem to be most promising lines for further research. This above all should make modesty the order of the day, and once you accept that this is the best any of us can do, then research can be very relaxing. All we know is that probably someone will eventually come up with a clear formulation (but possibly not for a very long time if we have done our homework).

8. No purple prose. Your aim should be to convince by reasoned argument not by journalistic devices or use of adjectives. It follows that you should not ask rhetorical questions of the "who is so base that he would not be a Roman?" kind. You should not harangue the reader and tell him/her what to think. You should stop and take thought as soon as you are tempted to introduce normative ideas—key words to watch are the ones which you yourself have difficulty in pinning down, like 'success', 'good', 'failure,' 'inappropriate', and so on. No jargon either. Ideas are not measured by the length of words you need to use to express them. Often the best ideas can be most simply said, and it is slack thinking which gets dressed up in fine phrases. Imagine you are trying to explain your ideas to your mother, and take it from there.
9. Refer to examples wherever possible. It is always better to argue through cases than in the abstract since it gives your reader something concrete to hang onto, but your illustrations must be to the point. This applies as much to figures and drawings as to cases. Always interpret the diagrams you use in your text—even where you think they are self-evident—and conversely never leave room for a mismatch of interpretation to arise between you and the reader because you have not spelled things out and your reader has to do it for you. You cannot assume that your reader will see things in the same way as you do.
10. Like the radio programme "just a minute", your argument should contain no hesitation, no repetition and no deviation from the subject. Most chains of ideas are difficult to follow even where they are spelled out clearly and have no unnecessary elaboration. Censor your own work to eliminate everything which is not germane to your argument. Often it is the parts which you do not really need which cause the most problems in convincing your reader. For this reason alone, it is best to avoid committing yourself to paper about issues you do not absolutely have to raise in order to make yourself clear.

These are rules we all try to keep to when writing academic papers. Sticking to them may not produce a Nobel Prize for Literature, or even a journalistic piece worthy of a putative architectural correspondent to the Sun Newspaper, but they might give you the satisfaction of making a small but perfectly-formed contribution to knowledge. If you make a habit of testing your work against these criteria, you will deny me the satisfaction of saying "I told you so ...".