

Helping Writers across the Curriculum

Most schools encourage writing across the curriculum—that is, papers are assigned not only in English classes but also in biology, psychology, engineering, and other classes. You will probably tutor papers from a variety of disciplines, some of which are unfamiliar; however, even if you are not an expert on the topic of a paper, you can still help the writer. Tutors often help writers with papers on subjects about which they have no knowledge, such as the benefits of shale for a geology paper or the treatment of knee injuries for a sports-medicine paper. Tutors also help writers with literature papers about works they have never read.

Regardless of a paper's topic, you can determine whether the ideas are presented in a cohesive and persuasive manner. You can look at larger issues—like organization, style, and tone—or at smaller issues—like grammar and mechanics—and determine whether the writing is effective.

It is also helpful to know about conventions for particular kinds of papers, like lab reports or résumés, so that you can ask specific questions to ensure that the assignment is done effectively. Be aware of various citation styles and distinctions among different fields. If you are unfamiliar with the conventions of the kinds of papers discussed here, check your writing center's print and online resources—writing guides and handbooks, handouts, other information that may be on file, and Web sites. When possible, use the assignment description as a resource. If questions still arise, suggest that the student check with the instructor.

Research Papers

The research paper is a common genre of academic writing, and you will undoubtedly tutor many authors of such in the writing center. To write an effective research paper, the writer will need to conduct research, interpret that research, and compose a paper that synthesizes both the writer's and



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the experts' views of the topic. Proper documentation of evidence is particularly important in research papers; writers may need help selecting appropriate resources to substantiate their claims, integrating information and quotations into their papers, and citing sources within their papers and in their bibliographies.

A CHECKLIST FOR RESEARCH PAPERS

- ☐ If there is a title, is it informative and appropriate?
- ☐ Is the thesis clear? Is the organization logical? If headings and subheadings are used, do they consistently follow an accepted format?
- ☐ Are sentences varied in length and structure?
- ☐ Are tone, voice, and diction consistent and appropriate?
- ☐ Are transitions smooth from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, section to section?
- ☐ Are credible sources and evidence used? Is the supporting material suitable and persuasive? Does it adequately support the thesis?
- ☐ Are quotations and paraphrased and summarized passages properly introduced with a signal phrase?
- ☐ Are visual materials—tables, figures, charts, maps, and the like—introduced before they appear in the text?
- ☐ Are long quotations set off from the text?
- ☐ Is proper credit given to sources throughout?
- ☐ Does the paper consistently adhere to the style used (MLA, APA, *Chicago*, CSE, and so on) in format and in documentation, both within the text and in the reference list or list of works cited?
- ☐ Were the instructions for the assignment—length, number and kinds of resources to be used, directions for title page or documentation—followed carefully?

Lab Reports and Scientific Papers

Lab reports and scientific papers document the results of scientific experimentation and communicate its significance. Typically, lab reports and scientific papers contain the following sections: title page, abstract, intro-

duction, materials and methods, results, discussion, and references. The *title page* includes the name of the experiment, the participating lab partners, and the date; the *abstract* summarizes the purpose, findings, and conclusions of the experiment; the *introduction* contains a statement of objectives and background information; the *materials and methods* provide the list of materials and the procedure (in chronological, narrative format) used for the experiment; the *results* contain the major findings of the study, including calculations and data; the *discussion* includes interpretation and analysis of the data; and the *reference* section lists full citations for all references cited. Lab reports and scientific papers may also contain acknowledgments and appendices.

The major difference between lab reports and scientific papers is that lab reports are shorter documents whose audience is typically a teacher and classmates. A scientific paper contains the same sections as a lab report; however, beyond presenting and interpreting the experiment, it also puts the experiment in conversation with other research in the field and invites further study. Its audience, therefore, is the scientific community at large.

A CHECKLIST FOR LAB REPORTS AND SCIENTIFIC PAPERS

- ☐ Is the title concise, and does it adequately describe the contents?
For example, with the title "Substance Y Alters Blonial Structure of Elephant Bone Marrow," researchers interested in substance Y, blonial structures, elephants, or bone marrow will recognize that the article may be of interest to them.
- ☐ Are the appropriate headings and subheadings included and in proper order?
- ☐ Are the tone and style appropriate? Scientific writing, for the most part, is intended to be more factual than entertaining and is not embellished with descriptive language, anecdotes, personal opinion, humor, or dialogue.
- ☐ Does the writer use passive voice, which is the generally accepted convention? The writer of a lab report, for example, should use the passive past tense: "Solution A was centrifuged," not "I centrifuged Solution A."
- ☐ Is past tense used for describing the procedures and present tense for describing the results and conclusions?
- ☐ Are sentences short and to the point, expressing facts clearly and concisely? Does the writer answer all basic questions about the topic?
- ☐ Have conventions related to symbols and abbreviations been observed?
- ☐ Are figures and tables numbered and accompanied by explanatory captions? Are they introduced before they appear in the text?

Argument or Position Papers

In argument or position papers, writers take stands on debatable issues, such as comprehensive examinations for graduation, required curfews for teenagers, or the causes of global climate changes. Such papers aim to get readers to think differently about a particular issue or to persuade them to take a certain stance. Writers of argument or position papers should envision skeptical audiences and build arguments that are strong enough to stand up to opponents' views. As they write, they should anticipate readers' objections, refuting them or conceding points while indicating, for example, that there are more important issues to be considered.

A CHECKLIST FOR ARGUMENT/POSITION PAPERS

- ☐ Is the claim or proposition—what the writer is trying to prove—clearly stated?
- ☐ Are all assertions supported by evidence?
- ☐ Is the evidence—facts, interpretations of facts, opinions—appropriate? Data should be accurate, recent, and sufficient. Cited sources should be reliable.
- ☐ Does the arrangement of evidence make sense? Does it emphasize the most important issues? Are there more effective ways of arranging the evidence?
- ☐ Are facts, statistics, examples, anecdotes, and expert opinions placed properly? Are they used in the appropriate context?
- ☐ Is the evidence carefully documented?
- ☐ Is the reasoning sound?
- ☐ Has the writer avoided all logical fallacies? (If you are unfamiliar with logical fallacies, refer to a writing textbook or handbook.)
- ☐ Are terms that might be controversial or ambiguous adequately defined?
- ☐ Have opposing arguments been considered and dealt with adequately?

Literature Papers

A literature paper analyzes, interprets, or evaluates a text, answering such questions as "What is the significance of the three scaffold scenes in *The Scarlet Letter*?" "What does the cherry orchard in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* represent?" "What is the significance of the setting in John Steinbeck's 'The Chrysanthemums'?" "How effective is the use of first-person narrative in John Updike's 'A & P'?" The writer of a literary essay should answer such questions with a meaningful and persuasive analysis that supports ideas and assertions with specific evidence from the text.

A CHECKLIST FOR LITERATURE PAPERS

- ☐ Is the thesis clearly stated? Is the organization logical and easy to follow?
- ☐ Does the writer use examples from the text to convincingly support his or her interpretation or analysis?
- ☐ Has the writer avoided giving a simple plot summary?
- ☐ Are parts of a work clearly and accurately indicated? Writers need to refer to parts specifically—for example, “the scene in which . . .” or “at the end of Chapter 3.”
- ☐ Does the writer use the present tense when describing events in a work of literature, as is the convention? (This practice often confuses students. You might explain that the author is communicating to a present reader in the present time.)
- ☐ Are titles properly punctuated? Titles of short stories, essays, and most poems appear in quotation marks; titles of books, plays, epics, or other long poems are italicized or underlined.
- ☐ Has the writer referred to the author properly, using the full name initially and the last name in subsequent references?
- ☐ Is quoted material properly punctuated, indented (if longer than four typed lines of prose or three lines of verse), and documented according to the format specified by the teacher?

Book, Film, and Play Reviews

A review describes and evaluates a book, film, or production of a play. Those published in newspapers and other periodicals help readers decide whether they wish to read a book or see a movie or play. They assume that readers are unfamiliar with the work and thus offer more summary than an analytical piece might. In reviewing a work, the writer often describes the criteria of evaluation and offers evidence (quotations, examples, and specific references) to support his or her opinions. Though reviews cannot deal with every aspect of a work, they should focus on several; for example, a play review might discuss acting, sets, costumes, lighting, and music in addition to the play itself. A review commonly addresses the purpose, idea, or theme embodied in a work, often in relation to other similar works, and judges its quality by pointing out both strengths and weaknesses.

A CHECKLIST FOR BOOK, FILM, AND PLAY REVIEWS

- ☐ Does the first paragraph include the title and other important information, such as the author's, playwright's, or director's name?
- ☐ Does the introduction give readers an idea of the nature and scope of the work? Does it establish criteria for evaluation?



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- ☐ Are evaluative terms or phrases, such as “good action” or “like a soap opera,” defined? (What are the characteristics of good action or soap operas? How does the work embody those characteristics?)
- ☐ Does an early paragraph orient the reader by briefly summarizing the plot or contents?
- ☐ Does the review make reasonable assertions and present convincing evidence (quotes, examples, and specific references) to support those assertions?
- ☐ Is the tone appropriate? Does it suggest that the reviewer is being fair? Does it indicate respect for readers?
- ☐ Does the reviewer avoid overuse of phrases like “I think” and “in my opinion”? (Such qualifiers may weaken his or her assertions.)

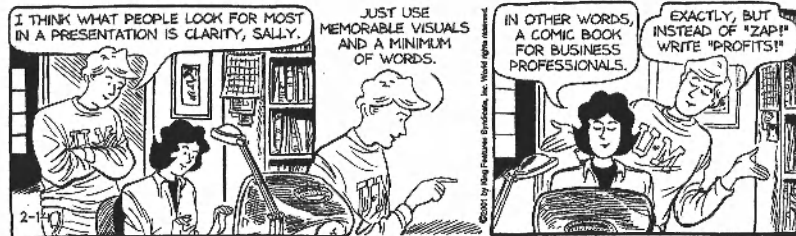
PowerPoint Presentations

A PowerPoint presentation facilitates an oral presentation that gives information, explores research, teaches concepts, or proposes a course of action. It offers visual guidelines that outline information as well as reinforce key terms and concepts. These guidelines may include pictures, video clips, or other visual aids that illustrate or highlight points made in the presentation.

Because templates make it easy to create PowerPoint presentations, some writers do so without carefully considering their audience, purpose, or ethos (their credibility or authority in the eyes of the audience). They may crowd each slide with information, expecting it to *be* the presentation rather than to facilitate it. Or, they may get carried away and load the presentation with visuals, so that the audience pays more attention to the glitz than to the presenter's ideas.

A CHECKLIST FOR POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS

- ☐ Has the writer carefully considered the audience, purpose, and occasion for the presentation?
- ☐ Has the writer carefully considered his or her position in relation to the audience and how he or she wishes to be perceived by them (ethos)?



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- ☐ Does the presentation truly complement the talk?
- ☐ Is the slide progression logical? Is the text simple and phrased in a consistent manner (parallelism)?
- ☐ If appropriate, does the presentation reinforce key concepts or phrases?
- ☐ Do the text, images, tables, and graphs, and other visual aids facilitate and complement the presentation?
- ☐ Does white space appropriately set off text, images, tables, graphs, and other visual aids?
- ☐ Are the background, colors, fonts, and themes appropriate and consistent?

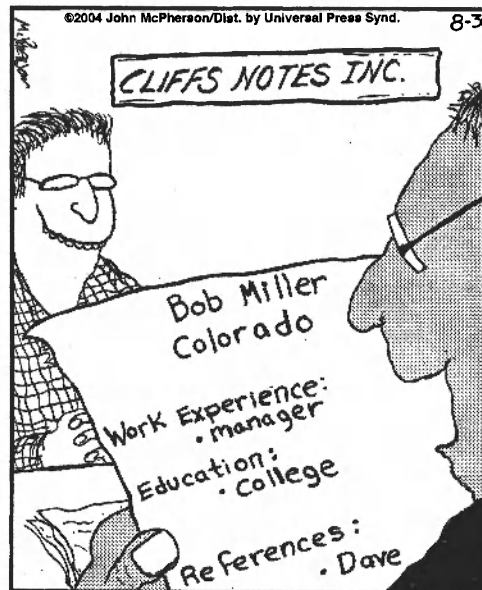
Résumés (Traditional)

The résumé and cover letter are designed to get a job interview, not to secure a job as some writers believe. The résumé used to simply offer a prospective employer a quick look at an applicant's educational and work history and provide other pertinent information, such as special skills, awards, and interests. It now also serves as a marketing tool for the applicant, highlighting relevant skills and successful work and education experiences and achievements. Nonetheless, it should be succinct and clear so that prospective employers can absorb information at a glance. (Keep in mind that the résumé you are helping with may be one of hundreds that an employer has to read.)

While composing their résumés, writers often downplay work experience that they think is irrelevant to the job that they are seeking. They assume, for example, that being a bartender or server in a restaurant has little or no relevance to a marketing position. What they do not realize is that the personnel manager of a marketing firm might be impressed by the fact that an applicant spent three years with the same restaurant, won the Employee of the Month award, or had responsibilities for handling money or training new employees. Writers should consider how seemingly irrelevant experience might relate to certain aspects of a particular job and play up those relations in their résumés and cover letters.

A CHECKLIST FOR RESUMES

- ☐ Is the resume pleasing to the eye? It should be balanced, not crowded at the top or off to one side.
- ☐ Is all necessary information included? (Check for the student's name, address, telephone number, and e-mail address. Review and ask questions about education, professional or related experience, and other experience.) References are not usually listed unless requested. Sometimes, resumes include a line indicating that references will be furnished upon request.
- ☐ Is the e-mail address appropriate for a prospective employer? It should contain the applicant's name and not be cavalier or suggestive.
- ☐ Has the writer eliminated all unnecessary information (such as gender, marital status, number of children, political or religious affiliation)?
- ☐ Are the parts logically and effectively arranged?
- ☐ Is the length appropriate? Unless there is a good reason, a resume should generally be no longer than one page and certainly no longer than two pages.
- ☐ If an objective is included, is it accurate? (As a professional or career objective, students sometimes write that they seek "an entry-level position as a . . .," but an entry-level position is an immediate objective, not a long-term goal. Applicants should focus on how the job fits into their career goals, not just their short-term job goals.)
- ☐ If a summary statement is included, would it catch the prospective employer's eye and begin to answer the question, "What can this person do for me/my company?" Does it succinctly showcase qualifications, strengths, and accomplishments, highlighting specific areas of expertise and the applicant's commitment to them?
- ☐ Are education and work history (and other such information) in reverse chronological order, with most recent activities listed first?
- ☐ Has the writer considered all relevant experience, such as volunteer work, internships, course work, and school projects?
- ☐ Are job descriptions unnecessarily wordy? (For example, phrases like "responsible for" can often be omitted or tightened.) Furthermore, has the writer emphasized his or her strengths without exaggerating or misleading the reader?
- ☐ In lists, are all the items in parallel grammatical form? (For example, the list "writing proposals, trained new employees, planned staff meetings, Employee of the Year" is not parallel. A parallel version is "wrote proposals, trained new employees, planned staff meetings, earned Employee of the Year award.")
- ☐ Is the resume error free? Misspellings, grammatical mistakes, and other errors may cause employers to ask, "If this person is careless in writing a resume, what kind of work can I expect from him or her?"



"VERY impressive resume, Mr. Miller!"

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Résumés (Scannable)

To sort through and store numbers of résumés, many employers use optical character recognition (OCR) technology, which searches for keywords. These words are nouns and sometimes adjectives that describe specific skills. While some are general—like *leadership*, *communication*, or *entrepreneurial*—most are specific to particular occupations, industries, and positions. For example, a list of keywords for a position as a social worker might contain *clinical experience*, *family services*, *crisis intervention*, and *LCSW*. For an accountant, the list could include terms like *CPA*, *G/L experience*, *public accounting*, and names of specific accounting computer programs. Keywords should be incorporated throughout the résumé and punctuation should be avoided as much as possible; the computer might not recognize a keyword if a comma or period immediately follows it. A keyword summary may also be placed at the end of the résumé.

A CHECKLIST FOR SCANNABLE RÉSUMÉS

- ☐ Do keywords define education, experience, and skills? Has the writer effectively turned verbs into nouns when appropriate—for example, *designing* into *design specialist* or *coordinating* into *project coordinator*?

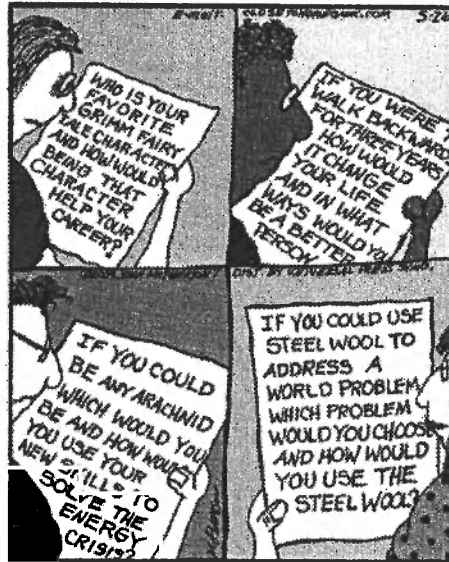
- ☐ Has the writer used common abbreviations, acronyms, and jargon specific to the field, like *BA* for *bachelor of arts*, or *CAD* for *computer-assisted design*?
- ☐ Is the resume left justified on standard 8 1/2" x 11" paper?
- ☐ Is the font a standard typeface? Is the size 10 or 12 points?
- ☐ Has punctuation been avoided as much as possible?
- ☐ Is there white space between words and letters (letters must not touch one another)?
- ☐ Has the writer avoided using italics, underlining, and special characters like bullets?
- ☐ Has the writer avoided using graphics, shading, boxes, and horizontal and vertical lines?

Cover Letters

Writers should know that a resume must always be accompanied by a cover letter. In these letters, applicants should clearly indicate the position being sought, mention how they learned about it (in a newspaper ad, through another person, and so on), and explain how their qualifications suit each requirement listed in the job description. Finally, they should request an interview.

A CHECKLIST FOR COVER LETTERS

- ☐ Does the letter follow an acceptable format for a business letter? (See a Web site or a handbook for a discussion of business-letter formats.)
- ☐ Is the letter addressed to a person rather than to a position? ("Dear Ms. Plotnic" is preferable to "Dear Personnel Manager.")
- ☐ Does the first paragraph specifically identify the position being sought?
- ☐ Does the letter indicate how the student learned about the position?
- ☐ Does the letter acknowledge all requirements mentioned in the ad or job description?
- ☐ Does the applicant talk in terms of what he or she can do for the employer rather than the other way around? (With the exception of those applying for internships, which are set up to help people learn and gain hands-on experience, applicants are assumed to bring knowledge or expertise to a position; therefore, statements like "I expect to increase my knowledge about the accounting field" are out of place.)
- ☐ Is the letter error free?



**The bane of every college applicant:
the admissions essay.**

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Essays of Application

Writers often ask for help with essays of application for undergraduate or graduate programs as well as other programs. Though you will need to consider the usual aspects of an essay—organization, tone, and grammar—you need to keep a number of other specific points in mind.

A CHECKLIST FOR ESSAYS OF APPLICATION

- ☐ Does the writer establish the point of the essay early on? Is the relevance of the information clearly established? Avoid the mistake made by one applicant, who wrote a lengthy essay describing her harrowing escape from her homeland. Though her point was that if she could withstand those rigors she could manage medical school, she confused readers by waiting until the end to tell them her reason for relating her story.
- ☐ Does the introduction engage the reader? Does it avoid trite statements like “Ever since I was four and put bandages on my doll, I have wanted to be a doctor”? How will this essay fare against the many others that are being read? A note of caution: Readers want to see how an applicant differs from other applicants, but they can quickly spot outrageous or excessive statements. The writer needs to consider the

readers of the application—who they are and what they might be looking for.

- ☐ On a related point, does the essay sound sincere and honest, or has the writer exaggerated? (For example, becoming a teacher to “change the world” is clearly beyond one person’s capabilities.)
- ☐ Has the writer completely answered the question being posed? Some applications simply ask why one has chosen a particular career or program. Others ask applicants to discuss their strengths and weaknesses, ethics, work experience, accomplishments, or extracurricular activities.
- ☐ Has the writer included sufficient evidence—often anecdotal—with details that show rather than tell? (For example, rather than write “I am a caring person,” the applicant should describe deeds he or she has done that demonstrate caring.)
- ☐ Has the writer appropriately eliminated extraneous details that do not contribute anything to the essay? (For example, Aunt Mary’s illness may have led the writer to consider becoming a doctor. Unless there is good reason, however, readers do not need to know what Aunt Mary prefers for breakfast or the kind of car she drives.)
- ☐ Does the writer use positive statements and subordination to downplay negative points? A student who received Bs while studying abroad deftly demonstrated this tactic on a law school application by explaining, “When I studied in Spain, I took all courses in Spanish, knowing that doing so would significantly improve my facility with the language, but also likely lower my grade point average.”
- ☐ Is the essay error free? Misspellings, grammatical errors, and other mechanical problems may cause readers to question an applicant’s attention to detail.

