Writing Papers

[This guide was prepared by Professor Herbert Wentz for his students in religion.]

Preparation of papers: Papers should be double-spaced and printed on 8.5" x 11" paper left flat and not folded.

Notes, quotations, secondary materials: The papers in this course are not "term papers" or "research papers," so you do not need to consult any secondary materials (other than the texts for the course). However, if you decide to use other materials, you should indicate those materials in notes.

Put all notes in parentheses, immediately after the conclusion of the quotation or reference; i.e. incorporate the note into the body of the text (not at the bottom of the page and not at the end of the paper).

If you quote from the texts, include only author's name and page(s):

e.g. (Bellah, pp. 3-4)

For other source, include the author, book or journal, date, page(s):

e.g. (P. Tillich, The Courage to Be, 1952, p. 21)

If you quote from the Bible, include book, chapter(s), verse(s):

e.g. (Genesis 12.3).

Remember, the reason for using notes or other bibliographical entries is to enable your reader to consult the materials to which you refer, not to prove that you did not cheat. Therefore, clarity and the reader's convenience are the considerations which should guide you.

Avoid long quotations, especially if your reader has easy access to the material and can look up your reference if he wishes to do so.

Some other things to keep in mind:

(1) Write as simply and clearly as possible. Do not try to sound formal or impressive or intellectual. Remember, if your paper does not sound like you sound when you are talking about something you understand, it is not ready to be turned in. And if you do not understand the meaning of what you wrote, certainly no one else will understand it.

(2) When you write one of these papers, you want to set out as clearly as you can the solution to a problem which you have analyzed. So you should use the simplest and most direct language you can and for the most part choose the active over the passive voice. For
example, don’t say something like this: "Communicating the mention of God in the inaugural addresses of Presidents of the United States has been done as an important aspect of the speeches at the ceremonies of inauguration made by all Presidents"; say instead: "American Presidents always mention God in their inaugural addresses." Remember also that there is nothing wrong with using 'I' or with addressing your reader directly.

(3) Never use—don’t even touch, look at or get close to—a thesaurus: these books are works of Satan. If a short and simple word best conveys your meaning, use it and not a long word you have found somewhere and probably don’t know the meaning of anyway. What matters most is that you use words which are exact and precise, which convey what you mean.

(4) When you use words like ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘it’, ‘these’, ‘those’, ‘who’, ‘which’ make sure that your reader knows exactly the idea or person or thing to which such words refer. It is your responsibility, not your reader’s, to bring your ideas into sharp and clear focus, so you must make absolutely clear the person or thing to which words like these refer.

(5) Also, avoid vague, useless, and ultimately meaningless words: relevant, meaningful, significant, important, special are some of the ones that come to mind. Don’t say, for example, that something is IMPORTANT but instead talk about whatever it is in such a way that your reader perceives both that the thing is important and also why it is important. Show; don’t just tell.

(6) Use dictionaries, the spelling checker on your computer, your friends, or anything else to make sure that you spell words correctly. An incorrectly spelled word is not just an annoyance, it can easily obscure your meaning.

(7) Bad grammar, eccentric idioms, stilted sentence construction, incorrect punctuation also obscure your meaning.

(8) Avoid any and all kinds of padding. For example, don’t write, "The subject of this paper is going to be..."; instead, get moving and write the paper.

(9) However, you should make sure that your reader is able to follow you from one idea to the next, from one paragraph to the next, and so on. Therefore, it is often necessary to join parts of your paper together with short statements—often a clause or a short sentence will do—which summarize what you have just described and tie it to what you are about to describe. Your reader should always know how and why you have got him from the place you started out to the place you have now brought him.

(10) There is no necessary shape or order to a good paper. Forget all you ever heard about "the five-paragraph theme" or "introduction-body-conclusion". Use what works best and will most easily guide your reader, step by step, through your analysis of the problem which you have been thinking about.

(11) And when you begin to think about your problem, write down ideas and make notes as you think of things; you can often use some of these to construct your paper.
That is, start writing when you start reading for and thinking about your subject. Don’t underline or highlight or make photocopies. Instead, make notes, write things down as you think of them: remember, whatever you write down has passed through at least a corner of your brain and so you have taken a first step in understanding the thing, whereas your brain has not encountered the things you photocopy or highlight.

After you have thought about your problem and before you begin to compose the first draft of your paper, you might try to write down a sentence of about 25 words, in which you state the essence of what you want to say in the paper. To be able to write such a summary indicates that you have a fairly good idea of what you want to say. And if you cannot do it, you are probably not yet ready to write the paper. This is a better way to start than by making an outline for your paper. (But make an outline, draw a picture, jump up and down, and stand on your head, if any of those things will help you clarify your thinking.)

When you have written your short summary, look again at the subject set for the paper and make sure you are in fact writing on the right subject.

If you have written such a summary but find when you have finished the paper that it has not quite conformed to your summary, do not worry so long as you have not strayed from the subject itself.

Even if you are already a very good writer, you will probably need to write more than one draft of your paper. Revise, revise, and revise again. Only a knave or a fool will tell you that it is easy to write well.

Try to find someone who will read your paper and then tell you whether it makes sense; ask your reader to suggest how you might improve your paper, especially how you might make it clearer. (You can use the "Student Writing Tutors’ Center" if you wish to do so.)

Evaluation:

In order to assure that papers are graded similarly, a point system will be used, based on the following criteria.

First: Is the paper on the assigned subject? and does it cover all aspects of the subject?

Points: 0 to 3

Second: Does it show a clear understanding of the subject? the reading? lectures and class discussions?

Points: 0 to 3
Third: Is the paper well organized so that the reader can follow the argument? is it cogently argued?

**Points: 0 to 3**

Fourth: Matters of form: grammar, spelling, etc.

**Points - 0 to 1**

The maximum number of points attainable is ten (10), and grades will be assigned on this scale:

10 = B+  7 = C+  4 = D

9 = B  6 = C

8 = B-  5 = C-  3 & below = F

In exceptional cases a grade of A- or A may be given to a paper which has a total score of 10.