



## Academic Writing in Grad School

**Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences:** A Thesis statement is key to the entire paper. You are probably familiar with them already, but they take on increased importance in graduate writing. They spell out what your stance or analysis is on the topic at hand. They should focus only on what you will discuss in the paper, should be supported by context (and link with later topic sentences), should not be too specific nor general, and should appear in the first paragraph of your paper. They should present the argument in a strong way, without passive language or numerous qualifiers. At the same time, thesis statements should not just be a value judgment or personal observation. You will have room to develop nuance throughout the rest of the paper, but the introduction needs to be clear, professional, and straightforward.

**Create an Outline:** Many of us simply start writing when we have an assignment. This can be helpful, but without an outline/skeleton, the paper will often require a lot of revision. Start instead by taking a blank sheet of paper, looking over the requirements of the assignment, then sketching out what you would need to include for each section. Include the relevant subsections, such as an introduction, literature review, method and procedure, data, analysis, and conclusion. From there you can develop your approach. What will your thesis be? What evidence do you need to support it? How can the argument build on itself? Some people actually write the topic sentences for every paragraph in the outline, so they can see how it will all fit together. Please note that it is fine to deviate from your outline as you write; it should be a guide rather than a set of rails. Just be certain your changes have purpose behind them.

**Support Your Arguments:** Academic writing is fundamentally about the collection and use of evidence, whether it is numerical data, predictive models, experiments, interview transcripts, physical proof, math equations, written materials, archive documents, or anything else. Research papers require significant and diverse data, deployed in a specific and measured way, in order to be successful. As you write, think about how bits of evidence support or oppose other evidence. It is useful to group your evidence using some form of organization. For example, in a theory section, start with the most relevant theory, show literature on how it developed and is used, then show the latest developments and/or competing theories. In your analysis, draw on data you already showed in tables, but then explain how it links to your main point. From there, show evidence about other variables, then postulate what else might be necessary. There are usually several ways to deploy any given set of evidence—what works best is up to you, but be certain that it will be clear to the reader.

**Cite Properly:** This is a common issue when people first enter graduate programs—citations are not always part of undergraduate coursework, but they are crucial at the graduate level. In order to use evidence successfully and avoid plagiarism, you must appropriately cite in your writing and presentations. In order to learn how citations work, look at examples from journals and review the style guide you use. You will have in-text citations (often in parentheses, like this) as well as a works cited or bibliography at the end of your document. Whether you are using a direct quotation, a paraphrase, or a theory/idea developed by someone else, you should provide both types of attribution. When your citation goes across multiple sentences, it is best to provide a lead-in at the start, then the citation at the end of the sentences.



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**Look Out for Common Grammar and Style Issues:** There is no single way to locate common grammar and style issues. Spelling is usually straightforward, but how will you know if you left a dangling modifier, missed a comma, or have an incomplete clause? The Purdue OWL is your best bet for concise and professional advisement on grammar, see here: [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/grammar/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/index.html) and here: [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/mechanics/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/mechanics/index.html). Those walk through many of the most common issues. We also recommend looking at the latest version of your Style guide, whether it is APA, Chicago, MLA, or something else. These usually have long sections on grammar, punctuation, formatting, and usage. The more you write, the more you will learn to avoid these mistakes.

**Self-Edit:** When you are finished with the rough draft of a paper, it is always a good idea to give it a round of editing (you may even need two or three rounds to iron out everything). There are a few steps to take when self-editing. First, take some time away from the writing, whether it is a few hours or a day or two. This allows you to revisit the writing in a new light, and is helpful in identifying both errors and structural issues you missed. Give the paper a full second reading, and mark on a paper copy if it is easier to read from a printed version. It is best when combined with reading aloud and by focusing one line/sentence at a time; it might not seem so different, but you can catch more errors this way because you are more likely to look at every word. This can also be done with a friend or classmate. From there, you can look to identify your topic sentences and use of evidence, keep an eye out for common or recurring errors, and see if you are meeting the professor's requirements. For longer works it is also useful to create a reverse outline—from the document, go through each paragraph and transition and sketch out the flow of your argument.

**Run Checks:** Another tip is to run spelling and grammar checks on your work. This should be done at the end of the review process. We all know that Word and other Word Processing programs offer their own checkers, but you should also consider using Grammarly <https://www.grammarly.com/> and the Repetition Detector <http://www.repetition-detector.com/?p=online>.

**Back Up Your Documents:** No one wants to lose their work due to a power outage, low battery, crash, or other sudden issue. Especially when you are working on large documents, you should use some method of backing up your data. Some people use a flash drive or portable hard drive, some use cloud storage, and others set auto-save on to automatically save copies.