DR. OBENAUF'S GUIDE
TO WRITING AND REASONING LIKE A SCHOLAR

It is my great honor to welcome you to scholarly traditions that date back to Aristotle and Plato and that have been refined and developed through the ages. You are entering into debates and conventions that have been in progress for hundreds (and sometimes even thousands) of years. In your time at university you should strive to be every bit as rigorous as those who have come before you. You are joining the company of famous scholars like Peter Abelard and Erasmus of Rotterdam, as well as your devoted faculty and your esteemed classmates. In the presence of such luminaries, both dead and living, humility and careful attention to detail are the keys to your success.

On the surface, many papers in college appear to be about practicing writing skills, mastering argumentation, discovering how to research, and learning about a particular topic. At their core, though, these assignments are also intended to help you strengthen your critical thinking skills and to develop the problem-solving skills needed to manage big projects. These so-called "soft skills" are in many ways more important than the subject matter you learn through your assignments. Your ability to weigh evidence, to form your own opinions, and to identify bullshit are skills that will serve you the rest of your life, and the writing process trains you how to do those things.

The kind of writing scholars prize places intellectual rigor above all else—that is, how you construct a measured argument that makes no claims beyond what the evidence suggests, while giving credit to the sources that support your propositions. This is likely a new skill for you, and it may not come easily at first.

No one enters their first college seminar already knowing how to write at this level—not even the students who seem like they have it all figured out. You don't have to be perfect right away (or ever!). You just have to be willing to try, to revise, and to take feedback seriously. Writing is a skill you build like any other: word by word, draft by draft. If you've gotten this far, you already know how to work hard and stick with something when it's difficult. That's all you need to start. My job is to show you the steps; your job is to take them, one at a time. Think of it as an investment in yourself.

It is my hope that you will write your papers for yourself as your primary audience—to see what you can learn from the process and to see how you can push yourself to develop your critical thinking muscles. Basically, I want you to lean into the challenge. That mindset can help you produce the kind of work that goes beyond checking rubric boxes—it will ensure that your professor's tailored feedback will help you find your authentic voice for articulating your own original ideas. What I am describing is a different process and a different attitude than in middle school or high school. It's true that the expectations are higher in college, but the goals are different now, too. The challenge is real, but it comes with the support and feedback you'll need to rise to it.

Because it takes considerable time and effort to build a solid argument based on clear evidence and rigorous citations, your professors are going to be much less impressed by your intelligence, your flashiness, and your ability to BS than other teachers you have had. In fact, these traits that have served you so well in the past are likely to become a liability for you because they can undermine your ability to develop nuanced ideas while presenting them in a seamless and straightforward way. However, you already possess grit and perseverance, the main traits that set Honors students and other advanced scholars apart from less meticulous writers and thinkers.

In rigorous academic writing, the way you present your ideas is just as important as the ideas themselves: your task is to show your reader how, precisely, you arrived at your interpretation of the data you have gathered. This is your main task.

These are all things that AI can emulate just well enough to fool the untrained eye. As you develop these skills for yourself and begin to appreciate the elegance of a sound argument based on demonstrable evidence, not only will you surpass ChatGPT, but you will also learn to recognize the many shortcomings of LLMs. In the end, there is no substitute for being able to come up with your own ideas and expressing yourself using your own words. University curricula are designed to help you grow in ways that support independence and originality in many areas of your life by creating opportunities for you to practice making judgments about evidence as you become a scholar in your own right. The advice in this guide assumes that you are here to learn in earnest and that you want to get the most out of your education.

In other words, the skills you develop through your classes are as important as the facts you learn. In Honors seminars, you will discover ideas for yourself rather than simply memorizing facts about a subject. That's part of the process. Most scholars at some point realize that the more they learn about their subject, the more they realize they don't know. Your curiosity has already carried you far. The enemy of curiosity is arrogance. Arrogance will undermine the rigor of your research faster than anything else. You should avoid the arrogance of working too quickly. You should avoid the arrogance of thinking you know more than you do. You should avoid the arrogance of certainty. There are few things anyone can know with certainty. (I am certain of this!)

Thus, your default position should be one of agnosticism: until you know something with near certainty, your stance is either that you don't know or that you suspect something to be so. Even asserting that something "is almost certainly XYZ" is safer than simply asserting that something "is XYZ." You should enter any room, and any conversation, whether in-person or through publication, with the assumption that smarter and more knowledgeable people will be reading and responding to your ideas.

By citing your sources rigorously, and by being relatively guarded in your interpretations, you can avoid a great deal of trouble. Focus on asking sincere questions—and earnestly following the clues to see where they lead.

It's always a shock when your first graded work in college doesn't come back with the familiar "A"—but that moment is not the end of the world. In fact, it's often the start of your real growth as a writer. Honors students are often surprised that they can no longer skate by while running on autopilot. Indeed, Honors students find themselves—often for the first time in their lives—among peers in a class full of valedictorians. As you progress as a scholar, you will deal with people more and more like you. You will experience something similar when you begin taking classes in your major, and again when you begin graduate school. I tell you this in the spirit of good will in the hopes that you will enter the semester, and all of your academic work, with an attitude of modesty and grit, traits that will serve you well as a scholar and long after graduation.

Your professors in Honors hold you to very high standards because they know what you are capable of doing when you give something your all. In order to make sure you get the most of our small seminars and innovative assignments, we set a high bar that we hope you will meet—rather than a low bar that you can easily meet with minimal effort and minimal learning. Projects and assessment in the Honors College (and good assignments across campus) emphasize the process of intellectual discovery rather than merely asking you to demonstrate that you completed a task and therefore have a passing familiarity with a concept. This is likely a different approach from all your past experiences, and so you have a special opportunity here. We don't want to see you blow it by rushing through your assignments and falling into your old bad habits, or worse, outsourcing your thinking to a computer model. At times, you may be tempted to do the bare minimum in the hopes of getting a passing grade in your Honors course so that you can focus your attention elsewhere. That is a shortsighted strategy that will torpedo your grade, shortchange your education, and make things more difficult for you later on. Now is the time to practice the skills that will make all your classes easier now and your life easier later.

One of the great thrills is discovering something for yourself. In your papers as in class discussion, developing an original interpretation based on clear evidence is an exercise in humility and curiosity. The papers you write for your Honors seminars demand your full attention, and they may not come as easily as they once did for you. Writing can be hard, lonely, and sometimes demoralizing. It gets easier, and it is more fun and rewarding as you get better at it. The only way to improve is through practice. Do not worry that you are not smart enough: you are competing against only yourself to produce the best work you can create. Faculty in Honors do not tend to grade on a curve because we believe all students are capable of excellence. I want you to believe in yourself as much as I believe in you!

In the end, you will get as much out of your education as you put into it. I have invested considerable time and thought in preparing this manual for you because I want you to do well in my class and in all your other classes where you are expected to write at a high level. I will also spend considerable time responding to each of your papers because I want to help you take your writing to the next level. I trust that your work makes a good faith effort to follow the advice I have collected in this manual. Your grade depends on it—but I hope you will be motivated by your own success.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

I share in my students' frustration that professors expect them to think and write like advanced scholars yet they seldom devote much class time to showing them how to meet those expectations because they must focus most of their energy and class time on teaching the material in their particular areas of expertise. On the one hand, I urge you to write primarily for yourself, using course assignments to find your own voice and to pursue ideas that interest you within the scope of the projects. On the other hand, one of the perks of attending university is getting to work with experts who are invested in introducing you to the norms and conventions of their fields.

In these pages I have aimed to gather in one place the main advice I wish someone might have given me when I was a new scholar. I have striven to make this handbook thorough but not comprehensive. There are many things you already know how to do, and many others you can look up elsewhere. For example, I assume you know English grammar and that you will look up matters of style and formatting widely available in standard reference guides. However, there are many other aspects of serious writing that you may be glad to hear from the person who will be responding to your work.

Therefore, I have developed these proprietary notes to help my pupils succeed in their Honors courses, especially those with an emphasis on the humanities. Students in other courses and disciplines may also find this manual useful, as the advice contained herein explains how to meet the high standards of rigorous academic writing regardless of grading criteria, which may vary from instructor to instructor. I originally developed this guide with incoming Honors freshmen in mind, but students at all levels have found it useful—so now I offer it in all my classes. I hope it serves you well.

I expect that much of the information in this document will be a refresher for some of you, but I'm also glad to provide a total introduction to students who have not yet been shown how to write at a very high level. There will be things in here you may disagree with at first, but if you give my techniques a fair shot, I think you will see why I want you to do things in certain ways. In fact, the way I approach writing and research in the humanities is a little different from what you have likely learned elsewhere, so no matter your background you should read this guide carefully. By following the advice I lay out in this guide, you will learn how to become a true scholar and continue to hold your own with the best students on campus and in life beyond the university.

Few students enter UNM fully prepared to produce essays that demonstrate Honors-level writing in their argumentation, style, rigor, and overall approach—and even the most talented writers find that Honors papers push them to their limits. That's by design, and our A/CR/NC grading in Honors gives you the freedom to take risks at each stage of the process without fear of tanking your grade, so you can focus on growing as a writer and thinker. It is likely that you will struggle to find just the right words, and just the right sequence of thoughts, in order to convey complex ideas coherently, and so you will need to budget extra time to complete the written assignments to the very best of your ability, drawing on the advice in this guide.

In order to develop academic projects ranging from short essays just few pages long to a doctoral dissertation hundreds of pages long, you will draw on the same skills, and your documents will follow the same general shape. In this manual, I will show you how to see your project through from start to finish, whether you are writing your first formal analytical paper in Legacy or writing your senior thesis.

You will learn how to approach daunting projects the same way your professors tackle theirs. I will walk you through the expectations of writing for a scholarly audience and what we mean by research. I then break the writing process down into ten separate steps: how to choose a topic; how to sketch out a plan for your paper before you actually start writing; how to build the argument in the body of your paper; how to draft a conclusion that will help you formulate your thesis; the importance of a strong thesis at the end of your introduction; how to write a useful introduction that serves your readers' needs as it builds to your thesis statement; some techniques for revising your paper to guide your reader through it and develop your argument more fully; a few ideas for polishing your prose so that the tone of your paper matches the seriousness of your ideas; a refresher on some common errors in formatting; and a stern word about why you should take your bibliography seriously. I conclude with some thoughts on how to absorb criticism and how to expand your work beyond its first major version.

I suggest taking time to review this guide from start to finish before you write each major paper and to consult it as you draft and revise all of your projects this semester. I recommend that you use the 10 steps of writing as a checklist to guide you through each phase of the writing process until you have internalized this approach to scholarly research, writing, and thinking.

GENERAL ADVICE FOR ALL AUTHORS: YOU ARE ALWAYS WRITING FOR AN AUDIENCE

Writing is about communicating. You have two main tasks as a writer. First, you must persuade your reader of your ideas. Second, you must avoid undermining your credibility with your readers. In order to accomplish these goals, you will need to construct measured arguments that make no claims beyond what the evidence suggests, meticulously citing your sources so as to persuade skeptical readers; you will need to articulate your argument in unambiguous prose which is free of grammatical and typographical errors so as to maintain your credibility.

Generally speaking, every piece of writing (or at least every piece of writing intended for someone other than its author to read) must put the reader's needs before the author's needs. This is easier said than done, in large part because most of us figure out our ideas through the writing process and not before we begin writing. Therefore, my overarching advice for all writers is that as you write and revise, you must CONSTANTLY imagine how your document will appear to someone who has not yet read it AND who is unfamiliar with the things you discuss in it. Your task is to optimize your writing to anticipate their questions and their objections.

It should go without saying (although it is definitely worth saying) that your paper will be written in standard grammatical English and will be free of typos, obvious spelling errors, and awkward or self-contradictory phrasing. Your tone should be serious but not pretentious. At the sentence level your essay must be coherent. Your reader must always be able to understand exactly what you mean. Leave ambiguity for the poets.

You should imagine your audience as intelligent readers who may be unfamiliar with the topic you are discussing. You should provide enough context to get them up to speed without bogging them down with needless details that you can mention as necessary as you build your case. This usually means explaining key concepts for a lay reader. Being able to summarize texts and ideas in your own words is a difficult yet important skill for this class and for your life beyond the university. Practicing this skill will help you become a better communicator. Your roommate or parents should be able to understand your paper without having read the text or texts you are analyzing in it or without any other familiarity with your topic.

Beyond that, there are certain conventions of academic writing you will want to follow in order to make sure your document automatically serves your readers' needs. These conventions also help distinguish your work from the formulaic patterns AI can generate, because they show your command of scholarly practice.

In academic writing, for example, you will need to follow published guidelines for formatting your document on the page. Different academic disciplines value different kinds of information (e.g., dates are usually more important in science citations, whereas page numbers are usually more important in the humanities). To account for these demands, different disciplines use different style manuals which stipulate different rules for such things as font size and type, line spacing, margins, headers and footers, cover sheets, pagination, in-text citations, bibliographies, and so on. It is very important that you understand the style guide your professor has asked you to use and that you use it consistently. This is one important way to serve your readers' needs.

In this class, we will use the latest version of the MLA Handbook (9th edition, 2021). It is a required textbook for this course. You are responsible for understanding the information in it, even if we do not go over it during seminar discussion, and you'll be responsible for consulting it as needed.

Regardless of the style manual your professor has instructed you to use (which in your other classes could be APA, Chicago, MLA, or something else), virtually all academic writing follows a predictable shape for the content of the document. In my mind, there are five main parts to every competent scholarly project, whether it is a short essay of five pages or so, a term paper of ten to twenty pages or so, a chapter in a thesis or dissertation of fifty pages or so, or even an entire thesis or dissertation that could run to hundreds of pages in length.

Since your readers' needs and your needs as the writer conflict with one another, for reasons I will explain later in this guide, you should not write them in the order in which they will appear in the final version:

1. The header and a descriptive title, so that your reader knows who wrote the paper, for what class and professor, and when, as well as what it's about in a snapshot;

2. The introduction, which provides context for your topic and ends with a clear thesis statement summing up what you found in your research;

3. The body, which offers richly-cited evidence and thoughtful analysis to build an argument based on what the materials suggest;

4. The conclusion, which explains the significance of the research you have been laying out in the previous pages;

5. A list of references, sometimes called a bibliography or Works Cited section, so that your readers can verify the sources you used to develop the interpretations you forward through your project. **It must be accurate!**

Readers have come to expect these five components, in this order, in academic writing because each of these pieces serves to help scholars develop and circulate new knowledge for other experts to review.

Depending on the required style guide, the scope of the project, the academic discipline, and the venue or mode of publication, there may be additional requirements, such as a cover sheet, an abstract, an appendix with graphs, tables, and other data, endnotes, and so on, but those elements are not expected for the papers you will be writing in this course. For your other classes, you should consult the style guide and ask your professor for explicit guidance if you have any doubts. Proper formatting leaves a good first impression, while erroneous formatting burns up a lot of good will with your reader before you've even offered any analysis. Whether you are preparing your document for publication or merely for a grade, you should strive to consider and meet your readers' needs and expectations.

You must prepare each of these sections meticulously: nothing here is busy-work because each component serves such an important function in academic writing. At the very minimum, your papers for this class need to have all five components (proper formatting, including an accurate header and a descriptive title; a useful introduction with a clear thesis statement; a rigorous body with richly-cited evidence; a meaningful conclusion; and an accurate bibliography) in order to receive a passing grade. These are the things your readers expect when you are writing for a scholarly audience. As with many things in life, you should avoid surprising people—except within the accepted parameters. Your audience will appreciate your efforts—and they will be frustrated and confused if you do not put their needs and expectations first.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RESEARCH?

As a scholarly activity, "research" encompasses several different things. At its most glamorous, primary research in the humanities begins with visiting archives and libraries to inspect rare items firsthand; when time and resources for travel are limited, it can mean downloading high-resolution scans of literary manuscripts and historical documents or viewing microfilm versions locally. However, most frequently, scholars in the humanities rely on printed editions of earlier works for their primary research, which means that you won't need to travel beyond the UNM bookstore and Zimmerman Library to obtain most of the sources you will be examining closely.

The bulk of your research is the analysis you perform on these primary sources, and, in many cases, the argument you build in response to other scholarship. Because literary and historical texts survive in a variety of forms and formats and have been reprinted in so many different versions, you will need to identify whatever exemplars you use in your research with precision so that your readers can double-check your sources.

Research thus often means identifying and sifting through the relevant primary and secondary sources you will quote to build an original argument in a humanities essay. This is the main sense in which we will be thinking of research in this course. This kind of research usually begins before you start writing but most of your analysis will probably unfold as you write your paper. It is rare for scholars in the humanities to have conducted all of their research before they write up their findings because they tease out their findings through the writing process.

Research also refers to original experiments, as is common in the sciences. Scientists generally have completed their experimental research before they write up their findings, although they have had to read a great deal of other studies before they can even begin to propose experiments of their own. For research on human and animal subjects, students and faculty may be required to seek IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval—something that is thankfully not required for most research in the humanities, where our subjects tend to be the primary works left to us by other people.

Even though research in the humanities usually occurs at the same time we are drafting our analysis, we need to be every bit as rigorous as researchers in the sciences. This doesn't mean you have to run experiments on The Great Gatsby before you can write your paper; it means your argument must be built **after** you have examined the evidence, never before.

Beginning with a thesis and then hunting for proof is not just bad research—it is a form of intellectual dishonesty, whether deliberate or accidental. In the humanities, interpretation can be subjective, but it must still be anchored in the factual and textual record; in the sciences, a hypothesis is only as good as the rigor of the data that informs it. In both worlds, the conclusion should emerge from the material, not be imposed on it.

In practice, this means that you should:

1. **Start with a question**, not a thesis, and write the thesis only after drafting the essay;

2. **Follow the evidence** even if it takes you somewhere unexpected or inconvenient;

3. **Acknowledge all relevant facts**—including those that complicate or challenge your position. Ignoring contradictory evidence is not a shortcut. It is a breach of scholarly trust.

Students who have been taught to write their thesis first should unlearn that habit immediately. If you write your thesis first, you will end up cherry-picking evidence to confirm your expected results. That's bad research. If, instead, you simply follow the evidence on your chosen topic to see where it leads you, your argument will be more rigorous, more original, and it will hold up to closer scrutiny. There will be no need for hypothetical "others may say" argumentation about imaginary objections to your claims if your analysis is faithful to an honest survey of the facts. Your overall argument must account for the full view of the facts; ignoring relevant but inconvenient or contradictory evidence is intellectually dishonest. This mindset will help you take a more scientific approach to writing in the humanities and the sciences.

Both in the sciences and in the humanities, you will often be expected to "enter the scholarly debate" surrounding the topic you are exploring; this is shorthand for citing and responding to secondary sources, by which we mean works that also build on primary materials but are not themselves considered primary historical or literary works. In the sciences, this involves tracking down the relevant prior work and writing it up as a "literature review." Scientists must be well-versed in the state of their subfields in order to develop experiments designed to test specific hypotheses.

In the humanities, especially in your first year in Honors, you may be asked to analyze one primary source on its own, or in contrast with another primary source, without drawing on any outside research. It is always a good idea to form your own interpretations independently of outside influence, preferably before you see what others have said. Discovering what you think before engaging with other scholars often makes it easier to spot flaws in their arguments, and it can make their insights more useful in refining your own. This habit also sharpens your ability to recognize when someone else's reasoning is sloppy, selective, or unfounded—and it helps you avoid producing that kind of work yourself.

Advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and professors in all fields are almost always expected to respond in their work to other scholars who have written on related topics. In all academic disciplines, it is considered a major achievement to critique important existing scholarship so as to change the direction of one's field. Rather than

merely quoting other scholars to confirm your own analysis, you may find it useful to show where they were slightly wrong, citing ample evidence for your claims.

If your project calls on you to cite and respond to established scholars on your topic, I implore you to begin your research into the relevant primary and secondary sources as early in the process as you can manage. The librarians at UNM's libraries hold advanced graduate degrees in their fields and can help you if you are not sure where to start. You should use the relevant databases for your field and use actual books whenever possible. Do not simply Google your topic; most websites on most subjects are not scholarly and not reputable enough for our purposes. Likewise, you wouldn't cite the output of an LLM such as ChatGPT, which invents sources and frequently misrepresents established facts, and so you should also avoid using AI.

Instead, you should be citing the work of established scholars in the discipline and topic you are discussing. This means, mostly, professors; you can Google their names to double-check their credentials if you aren't sure. You should rely on articles in peer-reviewed journals (meaning that other professors have determined the articles are worthy of publication) and reputable books, such as are found in academic libraries.

There is a lot to be said for using electronic resources. Many of the sources that were available only in physical copies when I was an undergraduate have now been digitized. Being able to search the full text of millions of books and articles opens up possibilities that were unimaginable a generation ago. And yet this easy access to an unprecedented wealth of information does not necessarily make it easier to find the most relevant materials for your project, and many sources still have not been digitized (or included in the databases you are able to access). Consequently, you run the risk of simply using the first thing you found rather than digging further to find the most appropriate materials. This is especially true when dealing with secondary sources.

Even in this day and age, I recommend using resources available through UNM, whether through the library's online databases or in its physical collections in the stacks. Since many students no longer set foot in Zimmerman, your work will have a serious advantage if you make use of printed books in your research. Do not wait until the last second, when someone else may already have checked out the books you need. By sifting through the secondary materials well ahead of time, you will have a cushion in your schedule to track down other sources you see commonly cited. Especially if you need to obtain materials through ILL (Interlibrary Loan) you will need some lead time to request those books or articles as well as several days for them to arrive before you can read them. As an Honors student you have the same library privileges as graduate students and faculty at UNM, so you can keep most books for the entire semester and you can check out more items at once than other undergrads. Use this perk to your advantage!

Some people call this stage "pre-research." I call it "presearch." (That's because the "due date" shouldn't be the "do date"!) You should get your hands on any relevant materials right away. It is impossible to cite a book or article that you don't have in

your possession. On the other hand, you should not delay writing your draft because you wish to read everything that's ever been written on your topic. Take the time to read the key sources, and then start writing. Once you start writing, you'll know what you still need to read.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE WRITING PROCESS

As I see it, there are ten main stages of writing a scholarly paper such as the ones you will be writing in your Honors courses:

1. Selecting a topic and testing the waters;

2. Sketching out a plan, even if it's little more than a research question and a rudimentary outline;

3. Building your argument by following all relevant evidence to see where it leads you, analyzing direct quotations as much as possible to show what each piece of evidence suggests about your topic;

4. Drafting your conclusion so your reader knows why your ideas matter, **and** to help you figure out what your thesis statement really is;

5. Formulating your thesis statement, which needs to go beyond stating your topic or the problem you are investigating by instead sketching out the main thing you found through your research;

6. Writing an introduction that usefully frames your paper for a reader unfamiliar with your topic, including a strong thesis statement at the end of your introduction;

7. At least one deep revision of your paper, by making a "reverse outline" in the margin to make sure your thesis holds true throughout—and to guide your reader with clear topic sentences that announce each paragraph's main point and echo your thesis;

8. Polishing your paper and proofreading it;

9. Double-checking all of your formatting to make sure your reader can focus on your ideas and your writing rather than wasting time correcting your use of quotation marks, italics, etc.; and

10. Double-checking your Works Cited section for accuracy and completeness (though you should keep a working bibliography as you draft and revise the document).

You can do the first step with a yellow legal pad, a stack of cocktail napkins, a new MS-Word document, or whatever else you might prefer to use for your notetaking. You should do Steps 2-10 within the sample MLA template on the course website.

Nowhere in these steps is "brainstorming." That is because many students have been taught to begin by inventing a thesis or "main idea" before they've read a single source—sometimes even using AI to help them do it—and that's the very definition of bullshitting. That approach sets you up to force the evidence to fit what you already decided to say, rather than letting it guide you. Scholars frequently discover that close inspection reveals the evidence says something different than they remembered—or than AI claimed it did. Skipping the "brainstorming" phase helps you avoid both kinds of error. Brainstorm-first papers tend to recycle clichés, oversimplify, and collapse under scrutiny; evidence-first papers tend to uncover fresh insights that hold up under challenge. When you start with genuine inquiry—reading, observing, asking questions, and citing evidence—you produce arguments that are deeper, more original, and less vulnerable to collapse.

You should clearly label each document and save major revisions as separate files with clear names. (For example, "Obenauf Writing Guide – Draft 8A – 2025-08-04.docx" is much more useful than "Term paper.docx.") (You should also avoid tempting fate by saving anything as "Final.docx" since you will inevitably end up having to call it "Final REVISED 2.docx.") I date stamp all printed drafts and label the version by hand. This helps when I want to consult earlier versions of a project, especially when I get stuck rewriting a sentence and I know there was an earlier version that was clearer. You might even email yourself drafts of important documents each day to make sure you can meet your deadlines even if your computer crashes.

Even if you compose your draft on a computer, I strongly urge you to work with physical paper printouts as you revise. By revising in longhand, you will be able to develop and expand your material for nuance, clarity, and accuracy. New ideas will occur to you when you have a pen or pencil in your hand, and as an added bonus you will be able to experience your document in the same format as the person evaluating it. It is not possible to write a competent first draft that will not need substantial revision. As you study this manual, you will notice why even the most skilled writers need to revise their work before submitting the final version.

Let's now look at each of these ten steps in depth. I hope you will use the rest of this guide as a checklist for writing all your papers this semester and beyond.

STEP 1: CHOOSING YOUR TOPIC

Writing a paper that successfully responds to your professor's instructions hinges on reading the instructions carefully and making sure that the topic you settle on is appropriate for the course and instructions as assigned. This is true whether you are writing a short response paper in a first-year seminar or a thesis as a graduate student.

Ideally, you will stumble upon a topic that you are curious about and that you can pursue out of genuine personal interest. That said, an engaging topic alone isn't enough—even the most interesting projects can fail if they do not follow the instructions. It can be useful to meet your professor during office hours or to exchange emails if you find yourself wanting to write on a topic that does not quite conform to the published instructions; your professor may be willing to work with you or may help you find a related topic that would work more successfully.

If you have a choice among several prompts and latitude in selecting other aspects of your topic, explore several options before committing. For example, you might jot down some tentative notes for different combinations of texts you might compare and contrast, or different questions you might ask about them. The first combination that pops into your head does not necessarily lead to the most fruitful research. Some students test the waters by writing sample paragraphs on three separate topics, then pursue the option that seems to have the most promise. This can be an excellent use of your time, even if you do not write anything you can use in the final version of your project, because you can rule out topics that aren't as promising as they seemed before you commit too much time to them—and because along the way you may uncover something you would rather pursue.

Landing on the right topic for you is worth investing the time, even if it feels like you are stalling. Unlike a blue-book essay midterm or final exam, one major advantage of developing an essay over several weeks is that you do not have to commit to your first impulse. If you get stuck, consider running your ideas past your professor—sometimes simply writing an email describing your thoughts is enough to help you figure out what to do. Or you can always come to office hours!

Academic analysis should not take the form of a manifesto: you need enough emotional and intellectual detachment from your topic that you can write objective analysis and follow the evidence to its logical conclusion, free from your own biases. I respectfully disagree with the notion that students always write better papers on topics they are "passionate" about. While I hope you can be excited about your topic for the few weeks you spend on it, in my experience it is easier to write measured, rigorous papers when you have some distance.

My advice is to pick a topic that interests you but to avoid topics that you have strong feelings about. Your job is to remain neutral and follow the evidence to see where it leads you. You are practically guaranteed to jump to conclusions if you have already made up your mind before you even begin your research.

Even if AI can generate a list of possible topics, those ideas come from patterns in past writing—not from your own engagement with the material. A topic might sound fresh to you because you've never written on it before, but to someone who's read hundreds of similar papers, it can feel instantly generic. The real test is whether your question arises from your own reading, observation, and curiosity. What matters is not whether your idea is "new to the world," but whether your engagement with it is fresh to you

and grounded in evidence you will personally explore. As one of my professors liked to remind me, the topics we study in most classes are hardly virgin territory. AI can hand you a map based on everyone else's well-worn paths, but only you can take that terrain and explore it in a way that makes it distinctly your own.

At this stage you are already practicing skills that matter far beyond college: weighing competing options, matching ambition to available time and resources, and leaving yourself room to pivot if your initial direction proves unworkable. The best topic for you is one that you believe you understand and that you genuinely want to know more about. It helps if you can confirm there's enough evidence to build an argument before you begin, rather than discovering too late that your topic is a dead end. But sometimes even the best-laid plans don't work out, so the key is to remain flexible at each step of the process.

Treat this stage as a low-stakes lab for your thinking: you can sketch ideas, test them, and toss them without penalty. Spending extra time now to explore several viable options isn't a delay—it's like scouting the terrain before you set out. You avoid dead ends, find surprising detours, and give yourself the best chance of turning the journey into something both efficient and rewarding.

STEP 2: SKETCHING OUT A PLAN

You cannot know your thesis statement until after you have drafted the body of your paper. Therefore, after settling on an essay prompt, general topic, and the text or texts you will use in your paper, you should formulate a research question (or, in some cases, a tentative working hypothesis) and put it at the top of your document with a note that it is a placeholder until you return to write your introduction and thesis after you have a solid draft of the body of your paper.

Your research question or working hypothesis is not the same as your thesis statement, because you have not yet gathered all the evidence and analyzed it closely enough to formulate your thesis. It is for you to use, but your reader will not see it because it will be replaced with your actual thesis in the final version of your paper.

To make sure you remain neutral in your judgment as long as possible, I recommend using a research question instead of a working hypothesis. A research question poses your topic in the form of a question, following the formula: "In this paper, I will be asking XYZ." You might be asking what the difference is between love and loyalty in two medieval romances in order to find out how that society understood success. You might be asking who Madison intended as his audience for Federalist No. 10. You might be asking whether tolerance is to be found in one of Shakespeare's plays, and to what degree, and to what ends. The more hypothetical you can be in your question, the better, at this early stage. Until you have written a first draft of your paper, I recommend that you avoid articulating what you expect to find, since even a tentative working hypothesis could color your analysis.

You will end up deleting this placeholder material, which is temporary and intended to help you stay on topic and consistently seek out answers to a single main question; your readers don't need to see your behind-the-scenes process. In fact, any introductory material you write in these early stages should be marked as tentative; you will almost certainly need to replace it after you have become an expert on the topic and you have a better sense of what your readers will need to know about the subject. It's OK to take some notes to get started, and perhaps even to write a placeholder introduction to help eliminate the scary white space on the page, but out of respect for your reader you should plan on writing a new introduction later on.

I find it helpful to write my topic and research question or working hypothesis on a sticky-note and attach it to my computer monitor when I am writing to help keep me focused on the task at hand. This is especially useful for projects that cannot be written or revised in a single sitting, which is the case with most academic writing.

Each paragraph of your paper should cover one major point and should be supported by a number of citations and quotations. For each point you wish to make, you need to provide clear evidence, followed by original analysis explaining the implications for your topic. However, I do not recommend making full outlines that account for every idea and quote because they can make it difficult to adjust your plan when you encounter new information or realize that you need to tweak your interpretations. Tiered multilayer outlines can lock you into a plan that no longer holds when you consider new evidence and your argument begins to take shape. You need to be flexible while staying on topic.

Still, you need some sort of plan. I make skeletal outlines, and that's what I recommend for you. To keep myself on track I open my MLA template and tab over to start a paragraph and write "Paragraph on [whatever]." I hit enter and do it again: "Paragraph on [Something else]." And so forth, even including notes like "Conclusion—don't forget to show what all this suggests about these two societies." Then, when I start writing, I have enough room to expand and condense and change course as I add evidence and analysis, but I can stay on track and better organized so that my reader is never confused by how I've laid things out.

You can write the analysis in your paper in whatever order is intuitive for you, but you will want to make sure that, in its final version, the order is intuitive for your reader. If you are writing about more than one text, your paper should handle the materials in the chronological order in which they were written. Thus, even if you decide to draft your section on a later work first, your skeletal outline should have a flag reminding you to scroll up and insert the new material on the earlier work earlier in your document. It is much easier to discuss change over time if you discuss the earlier work and then the later work, even if you fill out the discussion of change later in the process.

To determine what goes in each paragraph, you will need to gather at least some evidence before you start writing. This means locating the relevant phrases and passages in the sources you will be using and copying them into your document along

with your thoughts about them. You will end up shuffling this material around as you expand it and add to (and tweak and tone down) your analysis of it. It's normal for your ideas to shift as you work. Embracing that uncertainty not only keeps your analysis honest. It also builds the flexibility and problem-solving skills that will serve you well in future projects.

This is the approach I recommend because it works for me and has worked for many past students, but it is not the only way to plan a paper. If you already have a process that helps you stay open to new evidence while keeping your project on track, use it. The important thing is finding a method that gives you enough structure to avoid drifting off-topic, while leaving room for discovery and change. I believe my approach provides such a framework.

STEP 3: BUILDING YOUR ARGUMENT

In academic writing you must develop an argument that runs throughout your paper, so as to make sure your paper is more than a glorified summary of the work you are discussing.

By "argument" we don't mean that you're at fisticuffs with your reader. An "argument" here is the same kind as in debate or law. It is your main proposition in a debate with an imagined audience that is skeptical of your claims.

When you are drafting your paper, you will not yet know what your argument will be because you will develop it as you write each paragraph and as you step back during the revision process. This is why you are better served by beginning with a research question than a set thesis or hypothesis.

It is crucial that you search out relevant evidence not merely to bolster the points you wish to make, but in fact to drive your analysis in the body of your project. When you are working with literary and historical documents as your sources, you should make sure you always let the evidence lead you to draw conclusions about the text, and not vice versa. I expect to see some sort of evidence, whether a quotation or parenthetical citation, for every assertion you make, followed by analysis of that material showing how it supports your argument. Do not simply recast the meaning of the quote or summarize its meaning.

Students often ask how many quotations they should have in each paragraph. It varies. In most cases, you will need at a minimum between three and seven citations per paragraph, but this depends on how you use the materials. For example, you should limit the number of block quotes you have, and you should avoid block quotes longer than six lines of text. You should not repeat the same quote within your paper.

In some cases, a simple parenthetical reference to the relevant page numbers will suffice; however, quotes are much more useful because they give you something

concrete that you can analyze. There are good reasons journalists, lawyers, and scholars all cite direct evidence where possible: not only do direct quotations carry the most credibility with your reader, but typing them out also forces you to examine the precise words you are purporting to analyze.

As you draft your paper, you should take the time to make sure each reference is properly cited, following the conventions precisely as described in the style guide (in our case, the MLA Handbook). You should double-check each quotation for accuracy and for accuracy in your formatting of it (e.g., spacing, including on either side of the slash marks that indicate line breaks in poetry, no extraneous commas in your parenthetical citations, etc.).

As you copy out the quotations and form your analysis of them, you should also make sure they are not cut awkwardly and that they do not omit key elements of the phrase necessary for them to make sense. It is very easy to inadvertently omit crucial subjects, verbs, and objects when you are quoting poetry and drama because phrases are so frequently split over more than one line.

Quotes and block quotes should flow seamlessly into your own prose. They need to be incorporated into your sentences so that they track or "flow" smoothly—but this is not license to trim away necessary information. It must make sense when you read it out loud. (When you read it out loud during revision, if it's preceded by a colon, you say, "Quote," or "And I quote," followed by the quote, then, when it's done, you can say "end quote.") In other cases, though, see if you can't find a more elegant solution that involves using just part of the quote and setting it up with a little context. Readers need context, and so you should not just drop a quote without setting it up, such as describing the scene or relevant information about the source to that it makes sense to someone who is unfamiliar with it. Basically, we need to know what point you are illustrating and its context in the work you are discussing.

After providing the context for the quote and the evidence itself, you must then explain how each piece of evidence supports your thesis (or, at this stage, your research question, working hypothesis, or simply the main point of the paragraph)—that's how you form rigorous analysis. To move from summary with quotes to actual analysis, you simply give some evidence and then explain how it relates to your topic.

As a rule of thumb, you should write analysis in roughly equal proportion to your evidence. While there is not really such a thing as too much evidence, there can be too little analysis, and so you will want to make sure that you connect the dots for your reader at every turn; assume nothing is so obvious that you don't have to explain its significance to your argument. Do not end a paragraph with a quote; you must analyze it and sum up!

For example, rather than simply stating what's going on at a particular moment in a text, you can analyze it by explaining what the author suggests, signals, points to, implies, etc. about the topic. These key verbs will be indispensable to you in

generating true analysis. (As you deploy the verbs suggests, signals, points to, implies, etc. you should avoid "indicates," which is too strong for social, historical, and literary analysis, and even much scientific analysis.) Whether you're writing about literature or analyzing something else, you should focus on the implications of each point you are attempting to illustrate.

By following this formula, you will begin to develop the skeleton of an argument which you can then refine through revision. Without attention to rigor in the draft, it will be impossible to dress up your ideas later beyond "putting lipstick on a pig" or "polishing a turd," to use a couple of colorful clichés.

Moreover, you must avoid giving even the appearance that you are projecting outside knowledge onto your interpretation or using unrelated ideas to guide your analysis. For instance, you should never lead with a well-known historical fact, or even a citation, and then show how your text fits the expected mold or breaks from it. You are much safer (and mindful of your reader's time) if you strictly follow the evidence to see where it leads you, which may or may not confirm your suspicions. For example, if you are writing about Vonnegut's "The Foster Portfolio," instead of noting that men were expected to provide for their nuclear families in the 1950s and then showing that this is what Herbert Foster does, you should analyze what Foster's jobs and community involvement suggest about life in Postwar America. Similarly, you must avoid listing some similar examples and then stating that the case in point is "no exception" to the rule you have just hypothesized. Focus instead on the evidence itself and what it suggests on its own merits.

The evidence and the analysis you offer must be as concrete as possible. Always focus on what the evidence suggests, and not what you wish it said. Do not speculate about any aspect of the text or an author's motivation for handling any aspect of the text in a certain way. Do not argue in the subjunctive; avoid if/then constructions. Do not propose or assert alternatives that an author did not write; focus on the evidence at hand, and what it suggests, rather than scenarios you have only imagined.

However, it is sometimes necessary to present evidence of parallels within the text in order to show how some aspect of the text differs or conforms to the pattern the author has established, so long as you then analyze what the pattern or divergence from it suggests in relation to your topic. Likewise, you should use guarded language when considering more than one possible interpretation: "While ABC may suggest DEF, I believe that it more plausibly points to XYZ."

Though it may seem like an obvious point, it's easy sometimes to forget that fictional characters are not real. When you write about fictional characters (or even literary representations of real people) and their actions, you should consider what they represent metaphorically.

Similarly, when you analyze an allegory (such as the morality play Mankind), you must be certain you comment on its secondary and tertiary levels of meaning and not just

the primary level of signification. For instance, you should address what the implicit commentaries about religious life suggest about the pressures in temporal life in the English Middle Ages, and vice versa, in Mankind. It is not sufficient to analyze a work for its surface meaning only.

The process I am describing is the difference between rigor and bullshit. It is the difference between what a scholar can produce and what AI can emulate. In short, your task is to gather evidence, analyze it, and let your argument emerge naturally. Using the verbs "suggests," "signals," "points to," and "implies" will help ensure that the evidence itself drives your analysis because they force you to anchor every claim in the evidence itself, rather than in your preconceptions, and that is the surest way to keep your work both rigorous and persuasive.

While this is the approach I recommend because it works for most writers, it is not the only possible method. If you already have a process that consistently leads you to cite relevant evidence directly, follow where it leads, and keep your project on track, you are welcome to use it; the important thing is that your method leave room for discovery while keeping your argument coherent and based in the evidence.

STEP 4: DRAFTING YOUR CONCLUSION

The conclusion is an important component of any college essay—even professors who say they're not necessarily looking for a substantial conclusion are nevertheless glad when you take your analysis to the next level in the end. What other reason could there really be, when you think about it, to gather evidence and analyze it, unless you're going to draw some conclusions from the exercise?

Once you have formed the body of your paper, you can draft your conclusion—though you should keep in mind that it could change as you continue to revise your project and explore your topic even more deeply.

Do not lead off your conclusion with the trite phrase "In conclusion…" Instead, you might signal that you are wrapping things up by using one of these constructions: "Taken together, this evidence suggests…" or "In this paper I have been asking…" or "We have seen how…" In order to avoid recapping and recycling your material in your conclusion, you will need to show your reader the "So what?" of your project.

A rigorous essay built on meticulously-cited evidence and clear analysis will put you in a strong position to write a robust conclusion. Don't just recap or comment on the texts or authors: by the time they get to your conclusion, your readers will be anxious to hear all about the implications of your findings. In this class you will focus on the social and historical implications, but the same principle applies when you are writing about other topics in other classes, too.

Most importantly, writing your conclusion will also help you identify the main point of your paper. Most writers don't know what their main point is until after they have written a draft of their project, and so writing the body and conclusion of your paper will put you in a much stronger position to write a clear thesis statement that is faithful to the evidence and analysis you have shown through your research. For these reasons, your paper must have a thoughtful conclusion that goes beyond summing up the points you have already made. You must say something new to tie it all together.

Your conclusion can also be a good place to let your own voice come through. If a brief personal anecdote, cultural reference, or observation from outside the immediate scope of your sources helps illuminate the implications of your analysis, you can include it—provided it's relevant and supports your larger argument. Many strong writers do this instinctively, but it's worth saying explicitly: you have permission to make the ending your own. And if your natural process already leads you to tie things together, draw out the "So what?" of your findings, and anchor it all in cited evidence, follow where it leads.

In these ways, the conclusion serves as a vital component for your reader's comprehension of your project as well as a tool for you as part of the writing process.

STEP 5: FORMULATING YOUR THESIS STATEMENT

By the time you have drafted the body and conclusion of your paper, you will be in a strong position to delete your research question or working hypothesis and replace it with a one-sentence statement that sums up the main thing you found in the course of your research, which of course should be a concise answer to your research question.

Although it might be more intellectually honest, even in the final version of your paper, to lead with your research question and hold off on sketching out your findings until after you have laid out your evidence and analysis, readers of academic writing expect a clear thesis statement early in the document. Through the magic of revision, you can figure out what your thesis actually is after you have written a draft of your paper! Out of respect not only for this convention but also for your readers' time, your paper will need to give the thesis, rather than merely the research question or a statement of approach, in your introduction.

I recommend that you write your thesis statement before you write the rest of your introduction. That way, you can be certain that your introduction builds to your thesis. Most writers end up having to replace their initial "placeholder" thesis or hypothesis once they've drafted their paper and have a better understanding of what the evidence really suggests. You will almost certainly end up having to revise your thesis to match your paper, and it usually helps to then go through the paper and make sure everything really does fit with the new thesis (tweaking the thesis, rather than the evidence).

Some writers find it useful to begin with the formula: "In this paper I will argue…" or even "The thesis of this project is…" Out of respect for your reader's time and intelligence, however, if you use this trick, you should delete the formulaic placeholder to leave only the thesis itself. Your reader will know it is your thesis statement because of its position at the end of your introduction; we don't need such an overt flag.

Your thesis will always be the last part of your introduction, whether your introduction is one paragraph (such as in a shorter essay) or several pages (such as in a thesis or dissertation). Professors and scholars reading academic papers expect to see the thesis at the end of the introduction. If you bury your thesis somewhere else in your introduction, or if you omit it entirely, you might not receive credit for the assignment or your article might not be published. It is important that you follow this norm.

A competent thesis statement must go beyond stating that an author has commented on a theme, or that there are differences between two works—you need to explain, however briefly, what those differences are and what they suggest, in a nutshell. I find it's often useful in your thesis to give a nod to the names of the authors or works you're discussing; it's best when you take it a step further and stake out key differences or explain briefly, for example, what these authors suggest about their societies. Your paper should offer a clear thesis that you can then echo throughout the body of your paper as you revise and expand it.

There are other ways to arrive at a thesis—some writers reverse-engineer it from a full draft, others refine a loose claim as they go—but the most important thing is that you end up with a concise, evidence-based thesis at the end of your introduction, directly supported by your analysis. However you get there, the standard remains the same, and it's normal if the path feels uncertain at times—the important thing is that you keep testing your claim against your evidence until they match.

STEP 6: WRITING YOUR INTRODUCTION

Most students start with the introduction because it feels like the "first" thing to write—but here's the paradox: the strongest introductions are almost always written last. So, having now written nearly the entire draft of your project, you can finally write the introduction! Unlike when you started writing your paper, you are now an expert on your topic and you will have some sense of what background information your readers actually need to know in order to make sense of your thesis and the argument you lay out in the body of your paper.

Your readers will pay close attention to your first paragraph, and so it is important that you use the space effectively and efficiently. You should avoid sweeping statements and broad generalizations not just in the body of your paper but especially in your introduction. Unrelated facts, even as a frame for your discussion, waste your readers' time. (If you absolutely insist on artfully framing your paper with something relevant but not fully connected to the text and topic at hand, it is imperative that you come full

circle and return to that material at the very end of your essay.) The safest strategy is to focus like a laser on the topic at hand and to avoid references to anything else.

Your introduction is the first thing your reader will encounter (after a cursory glance at your formatting, header, title, etc.) and it is the part of your essay most professors will read the most carefully. Some professors read only the introduction and thesis statement carefully, then skim the rest of your paper. Others (especially in Honors) will read every word of your paper, in which case your introduction sets the stage for our expectations of your writing and argumentation. In either case, it is crucial that you devote extra attention to your introduction and thesis so as to show your work in the best possible light.

I must repeat my earlier advice that as you write and revise, you must CONSTANTLY imagine how your document will appear to someone who has not yet read it AND who is unfamiliar with the things you discuss in it. Because your task is to optimize your writing to anticipate their questions and their objections, as you craft your introduction your first and main task is to put your readers' needs before yours as the writer because you are writing for them and not for yourself.

Indeed, almost every piece of writing needs an introduction that quickly establishes your topic and provides the context for your project. No matter why you are writing, if you are writing for other people it is important that you put their needs first and imagine what they will need to know in order to understand your ideas. In a way, you always have to read your work as somebody else would when they encounter it for the first time. This holds true throughout the document, but it is most important in your introduction because it is the part of your essay your reader will read the most carefully, and it sets the tone for the rest of the paper.

What do readers need? The answer is simple. They need context.

In a longer project (more than about 15 pages) context might well include an outline of the document; any project divided into distinct sections or chapters should include such a plan to help your readers negotiate a large amount of material. This will be very important for your senior thesis and work you create at the graduate level. Especially in shorter papers, such as you will be writing as an undergraduate, there is a danger in using your introduction only to forecast the main points of your paper. There is other context that readers will find more pressing than a rundown of the content of your project. You should use your good judgment. If you preview the main points of a brief paper, you should do so quickly, and you should do so after providing other context but before wrapping up the introduction with your thesis statement.

If your paper is responding to an ongoing scholarly, legal, or scientific debate, a "literature review" of key relevant sources on your topic can help situate your contribution within that broader conversation. For most of the papers in the classes I teach, where students are writing about literature, the main kind of context readers need in the introduction is background information such as who wrote these works,

and when. Whenever possible, you should give the date of composition or first publication in parentheses after the first reference to a work. Where were these texts written? Is there anything unusual or significant about the works? Give your reader a brief summary (just 1-3 sentences or so) of each text so that we have enough context to understand both your thesis statement and have a framework for making sense of the initial arguments within the body of your paper as you revise it and guide your reader with topic sentences and other guideposts. If you are using some sort of theoretical device for the analysis in your paper, you may need to explain it in your introduction.

Rather than bogging your readers down with lengthy summary paragraphs in the body of your paper, you should skim your document for material you can condense and combine to help form a more targeted introduction. It is useful for readers to know key names, characters, etc., even though you cannot describe the entire plot of a play or novel, nor can you mention every character in your overview in the introduction. If you end up deleting key pieces of context from material that you rework into targeted summaries in your introduction, you will want to make notes of it and replace those holes as efficiently as possible in the body of your paper so that your readers are not left wondering about who a character is or what a reference to a key event they might have missed might have meant.

Being able to summarize texts and ideas in your own words is a demanding task that you should practice carefully as you write all of your college papers. Do not rely on other people's summaries to help you decide what belongs in yours.

AI models are improving at accurately summarizing materials but their output is still too generic to be a reliable substitute for a human author who can tailor the summaries you provide of historical and literary works to the project at hand, since various details are relevant to some discussions but not others. In your career, you may be asked to summarize meetings or presentations you attended, or articles you read, for your colleagues. This is a good opportunity for you to hone this craft while also doing your readers a favor by providing them with context for your paper.

To repeat: your introduction must end with your thesis statement, and so you should build your introduction towards your thesis. Strike any material that does not provide concrete context for your thesis or for the discussion in the rest of your paper.

<u>If you wrote your introduction before you wrote the rest of your paper, you should seriously consider discarding it and starting again from scratch, with fresh eyes, once you have a substantial draft in hand.</u> Again, most writers don't have a good sense of what their readers will need from an introduction until <u>after</u> they have prepared a solid draft of the project. It is common to write a "placeholder" introduction just to get started, but you should recognize from the start that you will probably have to rework it significantly—or likely even discard it—once you have written the paper and have a better idea of the key arguments in your paper and the main points of context that can help establish those concepts.

STEP 7: MAKING REVERSE OUTLINES FOR DEEP REVISION

Stop what you are doing and save your file as a new document using your computer's "Save As…" function. "Obenauf Writing Guide – Draft 8A – 2025-08-04.docx" might be called "Obenauf Writing Guide – Draft 8B – 2025-08-14.docx," to use a completely hypothetical example. This will allow you to recover material you change during the revision process if you change your mind down the road.

The draft you've produced should be intellectually rigorous even if it is not yet optimized to support your readers' needs. Just as you couldn't know the thesis statement for your paper before you wrote your draft, you will need to circle back and fine-tune each paragraph before you can consider your essay complete.

Though both revision and polishing are aspects of editing, they are distinct activities. Before you can polish your paper, you will need to make sure everything is in just the right place and framed in a way that helps your reader understand your logic. It helps to start early so that you have plenty of time not only to edit your paper but also to allow for new ideas that may occur to you along the way.

With a thesis and introduction in place you are now prepared to undertake a deep revision of your paper. Even if your paragraphs are tightly focused on their own, you should strive to set them up more clearly AND pitch them as building an argument through a clearer progression of ideas. This is because it is your responsibility as the author not to waste your reader's time. You must invest the time to make your paper as intuitive and coherent for your reader to follow as possible. This part of how you learn to communicate well.

At this point, I suggest taking a moment to reread the instructions so that you can make a conscious effort to spin your analysis as responding directly to the prompt.

Although it is time consuming and, I admit, sometimes demoralizing to do, you cannot escape having to make a reverse outline of your paper, and using those notes to reframe each paragraph to reassure your reader that you are always on topic and to guide your reader through a clear progression of ideas.

A reverse outline is where you write the main idea (or ideas) of every paragraph in the margin of your draft. You will need to work with a printed hard copy of your draft. Reverse outlines are great for identifying paragraphs that should be combined, paragraphs that are in the wrong order, portions of paragraphs that could stand on their own or that belong in other paragraphs, and material that you can simply delete.

Beginning with the evidence and filling it out with your interpretations, and then moving paragraphs around into a coherent order during revision is often a good strategy for rigorous argumentation because it means you are letting the evidence drive your analysis, rather than the other way around.

The other great boon of reverse outlines is that they help you write useful topic sentences and see a link back to your thesis that you should have at the end of the paragraph. You should also be careful that your topic sentences usefully forecast the main idea of the paragraph, but they should NOT announce plot points. If you find that your topic sentences are centered more on describing the thing you are discussing than on the main idea you are supposed to be analyzing, that might be a clue that your analysis is not as rigorous as it should be, and so you need to go back to the source material and rework the argument itself before you can then dress it up for your reader.

You may need to make more than one reverse outline and revise your paper more than once. As you revise your paper, you may wish to consult the source materials and add other relevant quotations. It is especially fruitful at this stage to seek out quotations that push the boundaries of your interpretation because you do not want to omit relevant evidence simply because it does not fit your theory. By working in more data, you can force yourself to tweak your thesis to accommodate additional information.

Especially if you started with only a bare-bones outline back in Step 2, reverse outlining is its natural partner. Think of your first outline as a flexible launchpad, not a rigid plan. The reverse outline comes later to check your actual draft against your intentions, helping you see what works, what's missing, and what needs rearranging. This two-step approach means you don't have to lock yourself into the "perfect" structure before you begin, which frees you to get words on the page without the pressure of getting it "right" on the first try.

I can't overstate the usefulness of reverse outlines in my own work. They're one of the most effective ways for writers to revise before bringing in another editor. They are a chore, but there is no substitute. Professional writers, editors, and published scholars use them to test the strength of their structure—so treat this as standard expert practice, not a repair tool for the disorganized.

STEP 8: POLISHING YOUR DRAFT

I have said that you have two main tasks as a writer: persuading your reader of your ideas and avoiding undermining your credibility with your readers. The other steps of the writing process, in which you cite evidence to develop an argument, and then frame that argument to serve your readers' needs, serve both of these goals. But even the most rigorous argument will fail to communicate effectively if it undermines your credibility in other ways. A well-polished paper will appear to be better in most respects than an otherwise excellent paper that has not been sufficiently polished.

By now, you will understand why I think you should not spend significant time polishing your prose until after you have developed your argument and the overall shape of your paper. It is because you may end up deleting or significantly reworking material that you already polished. It is common for scholars of all levels to get hung up on buffing

out the introduction at the expense of thinking deeply about the rest of the project—and they still end up with a slick introduction that doesn't serve readers' needs.

Polishing your paper prematurely feels like a productive activity, but it often turns out to be wasted time. That's why I advocate beginning with a general plan; building the argument by citing evidence and explaining what each quotation suggests, signals, points to, or implies; using that to fill out your conclusion; developing your thesis from the conclusion; writing the introduction last; and then circling back to refine your argument—**all before polishing your prose**. If sharper wording occurs to you at any stage, go ahead and make the change, but don't get sidetracked into polishing material that isn't ready.

Your professors' feedback will be most valuable to you if they are responding to an essay that represents your full abilities. You will not always have time to fully polish everything you write; on important projects you should plan ahead to make sure you have more time for this stage of the process. Sometimes you may have to get by with one round of careful proofreading, which you can do by reading your work out loud.

Your professors should not have to be your editor. You will benefit most from their comments when they can make notes about your argument, rather than copyediting your document. So, if you notice a typo or factual error at any point as you are writing or revising your paper, you should correct it immediately. Use CTRL+F to search your document for other instances of the same mistake, and fix those too.

Especially if you have been working primarily with electronic versions of your document, by this stage you will need to print out drafts so that you can see the words on the page, where typos and ambiguous phrases are more obvious.

This is a good time to pause and use your computer's "Save As…" function to save your file as a new document in case you end up needing to undo changes you made along the way, without undoing all your changes. This will allow you to refer to the earlier version and copy over the prior phrasing.

The best advice I can give for polishing your draft is to <u>read your work out loud</u>—as loudly as you can stand so you can really hear it! Do not be self-conscious about it!

You should listen to make sure everything tracks correctly, and that your writing sounds sophisticated enough (without being pretentious!). Reading your work out loud will also help you catch typos and jarring shifts in tense and places where you could rephrase more efficiently and tautological reasoning (circular logic) and anything that just sounds stupid or is plainly wrong.

The convention is to write about literature in the present tense, and while there are cases where you are justified in using the past tense—such as to describe events that happened in the text prior to the moment you are discussing, or to make a comment about the historical implications of your interpretation—when you hear the jumps in

tense out loud you will know where you need to massage your writing into the same tense.

As you listen to each sentence, ask yourself: "is that true?" and "is there a more accurate way of phrasing that?" and "is there any way someone could misunderstand what I just said?" Professors are a notoriously skeptical bunch; do yourself a favor and rephrase, rethink, or delete anything we might contest.

You may also wish to enlist the aid of a friend who can read it to you. This can further help you detect (and revise) awkward phrasing and places that simply don't make sense. When your friend stumbles on a phrase, that's a sign you need to revise your wording. If you cringe, search out better phrasing. Or, you could even ask a friend simply to read your paper and note anything he or she has to read twice in order to understand. Using your computer's text-to-speech tool can also help, but most people find it less effective than a human for detecting unclear thinking and phrasing.

Most writers are too verbose, especially when they are attempting to describe concepts they are just beginning to understand. You should strive to condense, combine, and rephrase material to make your prose more compact. OMIT NEEDLESS WORDS!

Avoiding the passive voice will help your writing immensely. While the passive voice can be useful (and not just for hiding agency on purpose, like the politicians who admit "mistakes were made" without actually saying "I made a mistake"), avoiding it in your writing will help make your prose more direct. It's a way to "omit needless words." If you know this is something you have struggled with in the past, you may wish to make an appointment or two at the UNM CTL OWL (Online Writing Lab) for help using the active voice instead of the passive voice. As you attempt to work on it on your own, you can try what an old friend calls the "zombie test"—if you can add "by zombies" to the end of a sentence or clause, it's probably in the passive voice and needs to be rewritten. Other times, it is possible to flip things around and reduce the number of words in the sentence. If your word processor has a grammar check function, you may wish to enable the passive voice detector in it and consider its advice carefully.

Should you ask rhetorical questions? Probably not. (Ha, ha!) I mean to say that you should avoid posing rhetorical questions that you can either delete or rephrase as assertions. You should limit yourself to one rhetorical question, at most, per essay. I often write them in my drafts, but through revision I can see that generally they serve my needs as the writer more than they do my readers' needs in efficiently trying to grasp my ideas. You should do the same. You may also wish to avoid rhetorical questions to avoid raising suspicions about using AI, which deploys them frequently in its output.

Names ending with an "s" should be treated just like any other noun to show possession, even if it looks weird. The MLA Handbook does allow for some exceptions, usually for Biblical figures, but in general you should write "Rasselas's."

"Frederick Douglass's." "Anita Loos's." "Faustus's soul." It may look wrong to you, but it is actually right.

There's somebody in every class who needs a refresher on how centuries work; it might be you, so take a minute to read this note. Since there's no year zero, the first century was from 1-100, the second century from 101-200, etc., meaning the twelfth century spanned the period from 1101-1200. "Lanval" (ca. 1170) is from the twelfth century; Rasselas (1759) is from the eighteenth century, etc.

Avoid clichés and colloquialisms in your serious analytical college essays: when you read your paper out loud, it should NOT sound like you initially dictated it! As you proofread your paper, you should listen to make sure it takes an appropriate tone for the genre. Even if you are not confident about the ideas or the overall approach, you should always present your work as competently as possible, giving it (at the least) the appearance of rigor. Papers that read like a chatty conversation or even stream of consciousness undermine your ethos and your credibility as a writer.

You should also AVOID the following common words and phrases:

- "the fact that" (it takes up too much space, and it's followed all too often by an assertion that is hardly a fact)

- "multiple" (instead of stating that something happens "multiple times," which shows you noticed that something appears more than once but signals that you were too lazy to find every instance, you should state precisely how many times; taking the time to count things is a sign of rigorous scholarship)

- "if you ask me" (nobody asked you, and it's too familiar, but the occasional "in my view," "it seems to me," "I wish to argue," etc. is OK)

- "the story" and "the tale" ("the poem," "the novel," "the play," or "the narrative" would be better, but describing the moment you have in mind would be better still—try to be as precise as possible)

- "us" and "we" ("readers" would be better, but your best bet is to explain what the quote suggests, implies, signals, points to, etc. about the topic at hand—put the emphasis on the text itself rather than someone's reaction to it)

- "you" and "your" ("one" or "one's" would be slightly better, but "medieval people" or "knights" or something similarly specific would be an improvement)

- "feels" (both because fictional characters are metaphors without actual feelings and because your analysis is stronger when it is analytical rather than emotional—this is why you are safer explaining what the action or moment or word suggests, points to, signals, implies, etc. about your topic)

- “utilize” (“use” is a perfectly fine English word)

- “very” (Mark Twain purportedly said to substitute “damn” every time you’re inclined to write “very,” since your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be)

- “damn” (your professor shouldn’t be your editor, so you shouldn’t use Mark Twain’s trick in your college classes!) (exception: you are writing about actual damnation)

Here are some constructions you can use both to help propel your writing when you are stuck and to help guide your reader through your argument as you revise it:

- Additionally/In addition

- Furthermore/Further

- Moreover/What’s more

- First, Second, Third… (this can work well within paragraphs or within broader sections; sometimes it helps to preview what the points will be)

- On the one hand…/On the other hand… (I like this one because it neatly sets up a contrast: once you’ve used the flag “on the one hand” your reader knows you’ll soon have an “on the other hand”)

- Likewise/Similarly

- In contrast

- Not only…but also…

- …as well as…

- Hence/Thus/Therefore

- However

Don’t let this stage intimidate you. The more you write and revise, the more these points will become second nature—after all, they’re guidelines, not laws. The long-term goal is to cultivate clarity in your own writing and to identify opacity in others’. At the same time, be careful with last-minute “improvements”—in shifting a clause or rephrasing for style, it’s easy to distort your original meaning or accidentally leave in fragments of the old version. Slow down, check each change for accuracy, and make sure nothing you meant to delete survives in the final draft.

STEP 9: DOUBLE-CHECKING YOUR FORMATTING

You should strive to follow the conventions of the stipulated style manual as you draft your document. Before you turn it in for your professor to grade, you should double-check that you have followed these rules precisely.

I have ordered the MLA Handbook (9th edition, 2021) as a required textbook because you will need to consult it whenever you have a question about conventions of layout, citations, and style. To help you get started on your papers without having to change every setting in your word processor, I have prepared an MLA template, available on my website as a Microsoft Word file. There are instructions in the syllabus for installing a copy of MS-Word to your computer for free through your UNM webmail page.

You should download my MLA template, open it in MS-Word, and then immediately use the "Save As…" function to create the file you will use as the basis for your paper. This will ensure that your document will be in 12pt. Times New Roman, precisely double spaced throughout, with 24 lines per page (except where the widow/orphan control has forced one line onto the next page, in which case 23 lines on a single page is acceptable). **The only way to make sure your formatting is correct is to use the sample MLA template on the course website and to write your paper in a copy of Microsoft Word installed on your computer. Other word processors, including online versions of MS-Word, Google Documents, Apple Pages, etc. will cause errors in your formatting.** I'm glad to meet during office hours with your laptop or to set up a Zoom session for you to share your screen if you need support in loading the template.

In my classes, formatting matters because it's the easiest part of the assignment to get right—and it frees me to spend my time on your ideas instead of your margins. Many professors have learned that if there is no real consequence for incorrect formatting, a surprising number of students will skip it entirely. Strict penalties aren't meant to be mean; they're a way of signaling that this is part of the work. Given the tools you have—a free copy of Microsoft Word, a ready-to-use template, and clear instructions—there's no reason not to get it right. Following the template takes only a few clicks, but it conveys professionalism and respect for the standards of the field. Besides, formatting is one of the few parts of a paper where you can earn full credit before you've written a single word.

The rest of this section highlights a few of the most common issues past students in my classes have struggled with. You can find most of this stuff spelled out in greater detail in your MLA Handbook and explained in my sample template.

- You should use quotation marks for titles of short works, like short stories, newspaper articles, journal articles, chapters, and most poems (e.g., "The Foster Portfolio"). You should italicize (or underline if you are working at a typewriter, writing in longhand, or using a typeface like the Helvetica I'm using here that looks awkward in italics) titles of longer works like novels, plays, newspapers, journals, and collections of smaller works (e.g., Welcome to the Monkey House).

In virtually every style guide, you should put the titles of articles in quotation marks, but italicize the titles of the journals in which they appear. It is important that you do this without fail, at each reference to the title of a work. Also, you should only italicize the title of works and not the author's name (i.e., Horace's Satires and Marie de France's Lanval—NOT Horace's Satires). Here's a fancy example: Horace's Satire 1.1, "Don't Go Overboard."

- No commas should be used in most MLA-style parenthetical citations. You should give the minimum amount of information needed to identify the exact location of the source of the quotation. If it is clear which text you are citing, you give only a numerical citation. For page 68, the citation would look like this (68). If the text or author is not clear from context, you should revise the sentence, but you should first give the author's name, followed by the page number, separated by one space but with no other punctuation, as (Vonnegut 68). Use only Arabic numerals: Act I, Scene III, lines 64-98 of Hamlet would be cited as (1.3.64-98).

- When you are quoting poetry you should indicate line breaks with a slash, with a space on either side of the slash: "To be or not to be—that is the question: / Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (1.3.64-66). For block quotes longer than four lines, you should simply reproduce the line breaks, indenting if the line runs long; do not use slashes for block quotes of poetry. I model how to do this in my sample MLA template.

- In U.S. style, commas and other punctuation generally, though not always, go inside the close-quotation marks, like this." The Brits do it backwards from us, like that", which syntactically may make more sense, but isn't as beautiful or compact on the page. When you sit for blue-book exams, you could fudge it and put the comma or period right under the quote marks. A typed document must be consistent (at the very least) with itself, and (preferably) with the generally accepted style (in this case MLA, though all major US guides agree on this point). However, you should generally omit punctuation from the quote and insert your own after the parenthetical citation:

Correct:	Incorrect:
…your quote" (24).	…your quote." (24)
…your quote!" (24).	…your quote. (24)"
…your quote'" (24).	….your quote. (24).

This means that you should drop most punctuation at the end of quotations, give the closequote, then the citation, followed by your own punctuation (usually a period). The exception is for exclamation points and question marks, which you do keep, close the quote, give your citation, and then your own punctuation.

- You should place your in-text citations in parentheses after providing the evidence. You should NOT describe the location of the evidence as part of your written context, such as by saying that a quote appears "on page thirty-nine." That is because every edition is different. The parenthetical citation directs your reader to your specific edition, which is described in your bibliography. (The only time you should use "on page 39" or whatever is when it's followed by "in the first printing" or some other comment that signals you are making a point about the printing itself, such as to note a printing error or some other trait of a specific exemplar.) So dispense with any comments about a page number in your own writing, and relegate all of that to the parenthetical citations.

You should follow all other rules outlined in your style guide precisely. If you are ever in doubt about any aspect of formatting, and especially for how to handle citations, you should consult the required MLA Handbook, the MLA template I provide on my website, or a reputable website such as Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL). AI summaries when you Google your question or ask an LLM such as ChatGPT may not be accurate. Don't just guess. Check a reliable source.

Formatting may feel like busy-work at first, but in professional and academic writing it's one of the most visible signs of preparation and care. Meeting these basic expectations also builds goodwill with your reader, which can make them more receptive to your ideas—and in a graded setting, that can help your final mark.

STEP 10: VERIFYING THE ACCURACY OF YOUR WORKS CITED SECTION

Whether you are using the parenthetical references for MLA or footnotes or endnotes for other style guides, the in-text citations throughout a scholarly document point your reader to specific books, articles, websites, and other sources where you found the content you are using to convince your reader that your ideas are true. The bibliography must therefore, in turn, direct your readers to the actual items you used.

In some ways the list of references at the end of your project is the most important element of your entire document. It is imperative that you spell everything correctly and that you list the actual editions you used in your paper. **Because online bibliography generators including EasyBib, Zotero, ChatGPT, etc. invariably make errors, you are advised to create your Works Cited page manually, referring to your copy of the MLA Handbook and the edition you used in your paper.** This is not a difficult task, but it is a skill you must master. It is crucial that you devote the same care and attention at the end of your project as at the beginning. You should strive for perfection, even when you think nobody will check your work.

In MLA style, the bibliography for your paper is a list of "Works Cited"—that is, a list of the works you actually cited in your paper. If you consulted other works you should find a way to credit the source of the ideas you borrowed somewhere in the body of your paper so that you can list those entries in your bibliography. However, if an

assignment asks you to work with specific sources (such as only class materials) then you should resist the temptation to Google your topic or asking ChatGPT about it. By following the instructions, you can ensure that the analysis you produce is truly original.

Bibliographies and citations matter because every edition of a literary work differs slightly from every other. Works rendered in different translations are in a sense different works entirely, but texts written in English can vary significantly, as well. In addition to differences such as introductions, editorial commentary, footnotes, pagination, and other obvious elements that can shape a reader's perception of a work, each edition is subject to almost imperceptible differences, including typos and minor differences in spelling. When scholars cite medieval manuscripts, which survive in unique versions, no two of which are identical, they often stipulate what city the particular manuscript is in, what library or archive holds it, its call number, and a description of where the specific line or passage is found within the book. Even texts that first appeared in print are seldom identical. Any time you read one of Shakespeare's plays, for example, you rely on the work of textual scholars who have reviewed early editions of Shakespeare and weighed the differences among them to produce a coherent text. They might rely on the famous First Folio of 1623, which collects many of his plays, as well as smaller quarto editions that were printed around the time of the play's first performance; in addition to the many striking differences between the Folio and various quartos of his plays, each unique copy of the First Folio contains different spellings and other editorial choices as the proofs were read (literally proofread) as they came off the press, then used in the books (because paper was too expensive to waste). Every editor makes different decisions, and every publisher then prints the prepared text differently. As a result, editions of Shakespeare are not interchangeable, and you must stipulate which version you used.

Even for something as canonical as <u>The Great Gatsby</u>, which has had the same publisher for a century, there can be significant differences among editions. Here are the first three paragraphs as they appear in the 1995 edition and the 2004 edition, side by side:

(1995)	(2004)
In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.	IN MY YOUNGER and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.
"Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."	"Whenever you feel like criticizing any one," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."
He didn't say any more but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence I'm inclined to reserve all judgements, a habit that has opened up	He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up

many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon—for the intimate revelations of young men or at least the terms in which they express them are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth. (5-6)

many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth. (1-2)

Even though we recognize both of these as being the opening to The Great Gatsby, they are strikingly different. In this brief passage, you can see that the 2004 edition has different spellings and numerous commas inserted by later editors and even a semicolon where Fitzgerald deliberately had used a dash! There are many other differences throughout the two editions, some of them even more drastic. They don't even fall on the same page numbers. This example vividly illustrates why you must provide accurate in-text citations and an accurate bibliography: your reader must be able to locate the passage you have quoted and double-check your work. Regardless of the field, without such a commitment to rigor and accuracy, nothing else matters.

If your bibliography lists the wrong edition, that also means that every single in-text citation is wrong. If you prepare the entries yourself, using the actual sources you relied on in your paper, you'll avoid that risk entirely, even if your entries are idiosyncratic. What matters most is that you create the entry yourself from the actual book; I care far less about perfect punctuation than about citing the correct edition.

And I haven't even touched on citations invented by AI, since LLMs such as ChatGPT make no attempt to quote sources faithfully or to provide accurate citations, no matter how convincing their output appears at first glance. In this new climate, readers who check your citations will now assume that misquotes and erroneous citations aren't just typos. They will assume that you did not produce any of your analysis yourself.

I hope it is now clear to you that professors do not assign bibliographies simply to make extra work for students. To the contrary, bibliographies serve an important function in scholarly writing: they show your reader how to double-check your work. Understood in that way, a bibliography is more than the last page of your document, a mere formality in order to get the grade. Rather, it is one key way that you signal that you are part of a community of scholars, willing to participate in their conventions not just of formatting but in fact of approach. In other words, a meticulous bibliography is part of a gestalt of rigor and intellectual honesty expected in Honors, or, indeed, in a remedial writing course at any community college.

Any student who lists an edition other than the exact version cited in their paper risks earning an F on the assignment and being reported for academic dishonesty. I have enforced this policy for years—long before AI tools made up citations—because accurate citations and bibliographies are foundational to scholarly work. They are not busy-work; they are part of the method I've been teaching throughout this guide. Properly done, they undergird the rigor, accuracy, and intellectual honesty expected in any academic or professional setting.

NEXT STEPS: ON ABSORBING AND INCORPORATING CRITICISM

Congratulations! After following these ten steps you will have produced a document that is finally ready for your professor to read.

Unlike in high school, where you were graded on how well you could regurgitate your teachers' talking points, your college professors are usually much more interested in seeing your ideas and your thought process. Sometimes, that makes it seem like they are judging you and your ideas when, in fact, they are responding to the way you have presented your interpretations. Ideally, they will be able to read your paper from start to finish without stopping (except, perhaps, to mark things you've done exceptionally well). In all likelihood, though, they will have many questions and comments about things that aren't working yet. And yes, sometimes a professor will scrawl something like, "Do you read your own writing?" in the margin—not to be cruel, but because if you don't know what you mean, they can't know what you mean.

In most cases, your professor will read your project and return it with a grade and some comments, and you will then move on to the next project. In these cases, you should examine the feedback carefully. Pay close attention to rubric markings, handwritten notes on the paper itself, and any other comments you receive. You should strive to avoid making the same mistakes in all your future assignments.

Other times, you will receive more thorough feedback on your project intended to help you revise your project further. Although your professors may offer some stylistic suggestions, in general they will be more interested in helping you expand and sharpen your ideas. They may point you towards sources and evidence you had not considered or possibly didn't even know about. They may quibble with your

interpretations and challenge you with counterexamples. They want to push you to make your paper even better.

While it's always nice to be praised for having done a good job, your professors are busy and want to spend their time showing you how you can improve, not lavishing you with compliments for doing the things they asked you to do. You should not expect to be praised for meeting expectations in your college work. The feedback they give is not meant to hurt you; it is meant to help you grow as a scholar. Believe it or not, even harsh criticism is usually intended in a spirit of good will to help you improve.

Whether you are revising your paper for publication for other scholars to evaluate, or for something within the university such as a portfolio or thesis which will be evaluated only by your faculty, your professors want to help you produce the very best work you can muster.

Although we all tend to take criticism personally, I want to emphasize that the feedback you receive on your work is not a reflection of who you are as a human being. Your professors call attention to things you misunderstood—and sometimes that they misunderstood—not to make you feel stupid but to help you make your work even better. I know how hard it can be to absorb criticism, but I assure you that your work will be stronger when you can find a way to fold it into the next version of your project.

Even if you disagree with a comment, my advice is to work to repair the offending passage. You should not blindly accept your professors' suggestions, but neither should you blindly ignore them, either. Oftentimes it will turn out that the critique was merited for the reasons stated, even if you disagree at first. Other times it will turn out that the critique was merited but for reasons that your professor didn't know. Whatever the case, you should always find a way to fix your project so as to address the offending material.

Treat every comment as a clue, not just a correction. If your phrasing was unclear in one place, check whether the same problem exists elsewhere. And when you see a comment, don't just fix it—figure out why it matters. That way, you're not only improving this paper, but also improving every paper you'll write after it.

The best writers you'll ever read have gone through this same cycle: write, get feedback, revise, repeat. Once you've been through it a few times, you'll start to see criticism less as a verdict and more as the raw material for making something great.

As you move from absorbing feedback to actually doing the revision, you'll need a way to keep it manageable. One technique I often use in revising my own work is to make a list of all the things I know I will need to work on for the next version of my document. I find that it's often best to work on a few things at a time—but not so many as to become overwhelming—and so I'll then prioritize five or so "revision targets" that I can work on separately and then scratch off my list. It's a satisfying approach that gets results.

I see these revision targets as separate tasks from simply expanding the paper according to the instructions, and they are distinct from simply making the "corrections" your editor marked on your draft. In other words, revision is more than just fixing typos—it often involves retooling parts of your approach, argument, analysis, etc. I urge you to make a list of five or so revision targets based on my feedback and your own ideas for expansion.

As you've seen in earlier steps, writing well is often about breaking big jobs into smaller, more manageable ones—whether that's drafting sections separately, reverse outlining, or focusing on sentence-level polish. The same principle applies to revision targets: once you've gotten your professor's feedback, it helps to break the revision into a few clear priorities rather than trying to fix everything all at once. For bigger projects, you may have to work through several waves of revision targets.

If time allows, after undertaking a deep revision of your project based on the feedback you received, you may need to make another reverse outline and revisit Steps 7-10 of this guide. Depending on how much things change, you may even need to write a new introduction—and maybe even a new thesis! As your finalizing step, you will also need to proofread your document by reading it out loud one last time before you declare the job done.

Just as you could not know what your overall thesis would be when you set out to write your paper, you cannot know with certainty the shape of a big project when you first set out to write it. When they are intellectually honest, scholarly projects evolve over time. That's a good thing. The method I've described in this guide should give you enough structure to stay on track, but enough flexibility to adapt when you need to change course. The most important thing is to keep following the evidence and see where it leads you.

As I said at the start, it is my great honor to welcome you to scholarly traditions that date back to Aristotle and Plato and that have been refined and developed through the ages. If the work you've turned in is truly yours—your own words, your own thinking, your own shaping of the argument—then you learned something from the process nobody can ever take back from you, regardless of your professor's evaluation. But it also means that every comment you get is about something real you made—it means your professor is responding to **you**, not to something you copied, clicked, or generated in a few keystrokes. In an era when it's easy to hand the work off to a machine, there's real satisfaction in knowing you wrestled the thing into existence yourself. The feedback you get on that kind of work isn't just "criticism"—it's the raw material for making it better, and the proof that you're actually doing the hard, worthwhile part of learning, and joining in the ranks of many who came before you. You've got this.

GOOD LUCK AND HAVE FUN!!