



## Writing in the Majors Initiative

### How to Write an Anthropology Paper

- [Preparing an Essay](#)
- [Receiving Credit for Your Answer](#)
- [Terms and Definitions in Grading a Paper](#)

This brief guide offers you a few ways to improve your academic writing skills, especially if this is the first time writing an anthropology paper.

Some ideas in this guide were adapted from a useful book you may wish to consult: Lee Cuba, *A Short Guide to Writing About Social Science* (1993, 2nd edition, Harper Collins College Publishers, NY).

You may also wish to consult with Skidmore's Writing Center's or The Skidmore All-College Writing Board's websites.

#### Preparing an Essay

1. Read through the entire assignment before writing. If you do not understand the assignment, ask your instructor for clarification.
2. Pay attention to each part of the assignment to know how many issues you need to address to receive full credit.
3. Read each assignment carefully, and make sure you understand the key words in the assignment. If the assignment asks you to "analyze," "comment," "reflect," "identify," "describe," etc. you need to provide a clear and specific analysis, commentary, reflection, description, etc.
4. Identify and underline the major subjects of the assignment.
5. Prepare a brief outline of each part of the assignment before writing your essay.
6. Follow directions about the format of the essay.
7. You must provide a bibliography for all the sources that you used to prepare the essay. You must also cite each source that you used in the text of the essay. Failure to cite or adequately quote a source is considered plagiarism and may result in zero credit for the essay. Check out the [How to cite sources in anthropology](#).
8. Many students think quotes are useful, and they can be. Be cautious, however, when you use quotes. Instructors are more interested in how you write an essay in your own words, not in how you collect quotes. They want to know what you think. It is often possible to write a good essay with minimal quotes from the readings or other sources. If you use a quotation, make sure you use it to make a point and explain why you are using the quote. At the end of the quote, simply put in parenthesis the author's last name, year of publication, a colon, and the page number, for example "(Cuba 1993: 86)". You should cite the title of films but you don't need to cite lectures or discussions.
9. To write a good essay, you often have to revise all or part of the paper several times. As The Skidmore All-College Writing Board notes, revision is "an essential stage in the writing process. Revision requires the writer to re-see components of his/her paper as well as to reconceptualize the content and structure of the essay in response to a reader's comments. Revision typically involves adding, deleting, and reorganizing material (global revision) and editing (surface-level revision)." [The Skidmore All-College Writing Board's website, Commenting on Student Papers, "Terms for Responding to Students Writing".]

[back to top](#)

#### Receiving Credit for Your Answer

To receive full credit for answering an essay question, pay attention to the following points:

1. Audience: Would your essay be understandable to another student at this level who is interested in the topic, but not enrolled in the course? Instructors are usually more interested to see how you write an essay that might be

interesting to people outside the course. Don't think you have to write the essay for the professor, and don't assume that the reader will have seen the same films or read the same books as you. Those grading your work are trying to see how you might write about social and cultural issues after you leave the course.

2. Read point 1 again and make sure you understand it!
3. Have you included: A title that reflects your thesis statement? An introduction with a clear thesis statement? A body composed of paragraphs with topic sentences and appropriate transitions? Interesting conclusions? A bibliography?
4. Have you provided a clear, logical, and well-organized discussion of the general issues involved? Are your points clear and precise? Does it have an explicit overall development and direction?
5. Do your arguments in different parts of the essay fit together and seem consistent with each other? Is the essay coherent?
6. Always provide evidence to support your assertions, observations, arguments, ideas, etc. Students tend to lose points for not adequately supporting their assertions with evidence.
7. Have you demonstrated your understanding of the issue's significance for the course subject matter? How well do you understand and appreciate the complexity of the issues you are addressing?
8. Have you addressed each part of the assignment guidelines? You do not necessarily have to answer an essay question in the same order as listed on a handout.
9. Have you used clearly relevant examples, concepts, categories, positions, arguments, evidence, etc. that have been included in course readings and films and that have been brought out in class and come up in discussions?
10. Could another student think of something obvious that you missed?
11. For each concept, have you stated what you mean by the concept (for example, provide your understanding of "culture," "tradition," "indigenous," etc.).
12. Have you avoided unnecessary use of the passive voice? Have you avoided wordiness?

[back to top](#)

### Terms and Definitions used in Grading Assignments

Below are a list of terms and definitions professors use when commenting on your papers. This list is taken from The [Skidmore All-College Writing Board's website](#) (for an expanded list of terms, see their website and the section on [Commenting on Student Papers, Terms for Responding to Students Writing](#)).

#### Main Concerns

- **Thesis Statement:** the controlling idea of an essay which presents the topic and the writer's perspective on that subject. An explicit statement, it focuses and limits the topic and usually occurs at the beginning of the paper. The thesis statement often contains an organizing principle for the paper. The thesis statement is the essential structural component of the academic paper.
- **Topic Sentence:** the sentence that controls the focus and direction for the paragraph.
- **Organization:** the overall map of a paper that governs the logical arrangement of ideas. Some discipline-based writings may have prescribed forms of organization; a clear sense of organization is another defining characteristic of academic writing.
- **Development:** the elaboration of ideas implicit in the thesis statement or topic sentences providing depth and momentum for a paper. It includes the presentation and explication of specific details and supporting evidence such as quotations, statistics, and other pertinent material.
- **Coherence:** the unity and interconnectedness among ideas in a paragraph or a paper that gives meaning to a text.
- **Transition:** overt stylistic devices (words, sentences, and short paragraphs) linking sentences and paragraphs. Effective use of transitions contributes to the overall coherence of a paper.
- **Consistency:** avoiding unnecessary shifts in tone, voice, tense, and style.
- **Conclusions:** the closure of a paper that synthesizes and extends the main point of the paper. More than merely a summary, the conclusion asserts the significance of the paper and brings a sense of completion to the discussion.

#### Stylistic Concerns

- **Active Voice:** a sentence in which the subject does the action described in the verb (for example, Lucy Scribner founded Skidmore College). The use of the active voice is a convention of humanities papers.
- **Passive Voice:** Obscures the actual doer of the action. However, it is not a grammatical error like a sentence fragment. The subject receives the action of the verb (for example, Skidmore College was founded by Lucy Scribner). The actual doer of the action is placed in a prepositional phrase or omitted. Although convention encourages academic writers to avoid the passive voice, it is useful in certain instances.

- **Wordiness:** the use of excessive and often repetitive words. It may obscure meaning.
- **Agreement:** the grammatical match in number between subjects and verbs and subjects and pronouns. Errors in agreement are serious because they confuse meaning and are not accepted in college writing.
- **Parallelism:** maintaining the same grammatical form among items in a list or parts of a sentence.

[back to top](#)

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