

# Paper Writing Standards and Advice

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This document has two sections. The first outlines the basic physical and layout requirements for any paper written for a course I teach, unless I specify otherwise on that assignment. The second section offers some broader-scale writing and revising advice.

## A. Paper Writing Physical and Formal Requirements:

### Basic Physical Paper Format:

- unnumbered title page with a good title, and then your name, course number and title, my name, and date. A good title is interesting, and gives a sense of what is inside
- double-spaced body text, but single spaced block quotes, endnotes, acknowledgments, and works-cited list
- numbered pages. The *title* page should be unnumbered, with the first *text* page thus numbered 1, rather than 2. (By the way, figure out how to insert page breaks, control page numbering, etc., in Microsoft Word or other word-processing programs. When I get files emailed to me, I am surprised how many students generate a new page by the crude method of repeatedly hitting Enter.)
- neatly stapled
- text on the first body page should start 2-3 blank lines down from the top
- one inch margins (not Microsoft's fat default 1.25") right, left, top, and bottom
- twelve-point font everywhere but the main title – even for block quotes, endnotes, and such. I assume your font (TimesRoman is a good choice) gives you 300 or more words per page.
- longer quotes in “block” form. That is, quotes of longer than about 35 words should be single-spaced, indented 0.5” both right and left, and not bounded by quotation marks.
- right margins should be *ragged*. Do not justify right margins – it reads badly, unless you own and use professional typesetting equipment.
- include any endnotes, generous acknowledgments (see below), and the works-cited list at the end of your paper, several blank lines after the end of your text. Conserve resources: do not start a fresh page for any of these three items.
- to conserve resources, print on both sides of the page if possible.
- when quoting from poetry, use the slash / to indicate line breaks if you put the quoted portion in the main text. Here's an example from Langston Hughes's “Afro-American Fragment”: “So long, / So far away / Is Africa. / Not even memories alive / Save those that history books create [...]” A stanza break (i.e. a blank line) would be a double slash: //.

## **Footnotes, Endnotes, Bibliography, and Citation Format:**

### **General framework:**

Anything quoted or learned from an outside source (be it a novel, essay, work of scholarship, website, film, etc.) should be properly cited. My preference is the MLA (Modern Language Association) “parenthetical” style. In this style, footnotes and endnotes are *not* used for simple citations. Instead, author-name and page number is given in parentheses at the end of the relevant passage. Then, all sources cited parenthetically in the paper are listed in the works-cited list at the end of the paper. The author name may be omitted where it is obvious, or where you are citing the same author repeatedly in a short space. Here is an example:

Though a distinguished nineteenth-century commentator once termed the nation the result of “a daily plebiscite” (Renan, 116), in his book *In My Father’s House* Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that sometimes nations “are not the identity we need” (147).

Note (as just above) that when you use parenthetical references, the “quotation marks” nest snugly around the quoted text, with the parenthetical reference beyond. The period or comma comes *last*. Here now are more specifics of MLA style:

### **The Works-Cited List:**

At the end of your paper, give a list of all the works cited in your paper. (If you are working only with assigned course texts, you may omit this step.) Standard format for several types of works follows. If in doubt about what to include (such as, for example, the name of a work’s translator), include more rather than less information. For older texts, include in brackets the original date of that text. The items in your works-cited list should be in alphabetical order. Also, the first word in each works-cited-list entry should be the same as the word you use in your parenthetical citation. This way, the reader can quickly find the works-cited entry for any in-text parenthetical citation that you use.

#### **A. Books and Films:**

Lastname, Firstname. *Title in Italics*. [original date of publication]. Place: Publisher, year of publication.

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. [1989] New York: Grove Press, 1999.

#### **B. Journal Articles:**

Lastname, Firstname. “Title in Quotes.” *Name of Book or Journal in Italics*. Volume.number, Date, year: pages.

Patterson, Orlando. “Ecumenical America: Global Culture and the American Cosmos.” *World Policy Journal* 11.2, Summer 1994: 103-117.

#### **C. Book Chapters:**

Lastname, Firstname. “Title in Quotes.” In *Book Title*, edited by Editors. Place: Publisher, year: pages.

Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. “The Repeating Island.” Transl. James Maraniss. In *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* ed. Gustavo Pérez Firmat. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990: pp. 85-106.

Renan, Ernest. "What is a Nation?" [1882]. Transl. Martin Thom. In *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha. NY: Routledge, 1990: 8-22.

#### D. Websites:

Citation protocol is emerging here. You are advised to include as close to a full title for the webpage as possible, and the personal (e.g. John Smith) or corporate (e.g. Amnesty International, CIA World Factbook, etc.) author, as well as the URL and the date you accessed it. Thus, for example, for information about Ghana, or an obituary for the scholar Edward Said,

Ghana. *The CIA World Factbook*. [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/gh.html](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/gh.html) Accessed on March 25, 2019.

Ruthven, Malsie. "Obituary: Edward Said." *The Guardian Unlimited*, September 26, 2003. [www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,2763,1049931,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,2763,1049931,00.html). Accessed on February 8, 2017.

In these cases, your in-text parenthetical citation would read (Ghana) and (Ruthven).

#### E. Citing Audiovisual Media:

Often I am asked how to cite dialogue in a film or television show, given that page numbers do not exist, and time-citations from replays are clumsy. The best way is to handle this in your paper is narratively, with good identifying information. One might write, for example: "About halfway through the 'Bart vs. Australia' episode, shortly before the Simpson family departs for Canberra, Bart charmingly suggests that 'I can handle that: I'm an expert at phony apologies'." Then be sure to include that film, television show, or other audiovisual text in your works-cited list.

#### F. Citing images that you include in your paper:

The wide availability of images on the Internet means that they are more frequently included in student papers. This is excellent to the extent that they help inform and make your arguments. Images can be integrated into one's main text, or put on at the end, depending on how skilled you are at putting images in with text and having it all come out decently. Note that any page-length requirement is really a text-length requirement, so adjust your overall paper-length accordingly.

Images should be cited as rigorously as any other quoted material. In practice, this is much less frequently done.

So, at the end of your paper, in your works-cited list, put in a separate heading for images-cited. There, list the images in the order in which they appear in your paper, giving each a short, clear title (e.g. "Pita fajita image.") After that, give the image's URL, the name of the broader website (or blog or online article etc.) from which it was drawn, and your date of access. (A reminder: don't start works-cited, endnotes, or acknowledgments on separate pages: they can all just run right after the main text, after a short visual break.)

#### G. Special Note on Wikipedia and other "general" sources:

I regularly see unfootnoted passages in student papers with a strong Wikipedia aroma. A student might be analyzing Langston Hughes's poem "I Thought it Was Tangiers I Wanted," and suddenly veer into a full paragraph on the history of the Moroccan city named in its title. Such imported knowledge can be valuable, and Wikipedia is, in general, reliable – though often problematic on controversial topics where edit-wars occur. But Wiki-sourced information stands out as if printed in a bright red font. So, when part of your paper is informed by such "general" sources, do this: add an endnote to the start of that passage saying something like this: "the general description of

Tangiers offered in the next paragraph is drawn from ...” Then be sure to put that Wiki site in your works-cited list as well.

#### H. Citing Quotations that are Inside Another Source:

Let’s say you want to quote a fine sentence from Chinua Achebe, but you found the Achebe quotation inside an essay by Kwame Anthony Appiah. How do you cite this? You use “qtd.” in your in-text citation, like this:

The great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe argues that the label “Africa” contains “a meaning, a penalty, and a responsibility” (qtd. in Appiah, 1992, 173).

Then, you would put Appiah’s essay (but not Achebe) in your works-cited list.

#### I. Citing a Source in Chinese:

Yale University has a fine web-page on this topic. For the works-cited list, they recommend using roman-alphabet transliteration, Chinese characters, *and* phonetic rendition of the Chinese!  
<https://guides.library.yale.edu/c.php?g=296262&p=1974230> In the *text* of your paper (as opposed to the works-cited list), just go with the roman-alphabet transliteration, like “(Zhou, 154).” I hope this Yale link stays current!

#### **Endnotes and Footnotes:**

In my preferred MLA style, endnotes (at the end of your document) are preferable to footnotes. Most decent word processors switch easily between footnotes and endnotes, even once you have created them. Endnotes should not be used for simple citations: in MLA style, that is handled with simple parentheses and the works-cited list. The use of endnotes should be restricted to lengthier discussions and points that are best not included in the text proper.

#### **When to put the title of a given text in “Quotes” vs. when to put it in *Italics*:**

Titles of big things, like books, films, journals, magazines and newspapers, are rendered in *italics*. In contrast, the titles of smaller things, especially articles, chapters, short stories, essays, songs, and poems, are rendered in “quotes.” No exceptions.

#### **Hanging Indents:**

Hanging indents offer a visually clear way of organizing works-cited lists and other matters. It is an easy automatic paragraph format on most word processors. Learn to do this automatically, rather than with a hard break and space-bar indents.

#### **Use of Underscore:**

Underscore is almost never appropriate for those who are capable of *italic* fonts – see below.

#### **Why you should use *italics* but not underscores – a technical-historical note:**

There is no need in the word-processor world to use underscore, which conveys the same meaning as *italics*. Both are traditionally used for book and film (but not article or poem or song) titles, and for words requiring particular emphasis. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the *italic* font was first introduced in 1501 by the typographer Aldus Manutius of Venice. Here the letters, instead of being erect as in Roman, *slope towards the right*. They were first used in an edition of Virgil, published in 1501 and dedicated to Italy – hence the name. When typewriters were introduced in the mid-19th century (I take it that at least some of my students will have seen one of these ancient writing instruments), they had only one font, because of the physical limitations of typewriters

themselves. To indicate emphasis in the absence of a separate *italic* set of keys, people using typewriters would type a word, then backspace to the beginning of that word, and then type out a series of underscores (which was a separate key) \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ under each word they wished to emphasize. Since none of you use typewriters, you are best advised to use only *italics*, except in special cases such as an outlined document with headings.

### **Generous Acknowledgments:**

I require all students to include, in all papers submitted to me, a list of generous acknowledgements to all contributors at the end of the paper. This includes anyone who read a draft, supplied specific ideas, checked for grammar, or provided any other sort of direct support in the composition of your paper. Some folks go well beyond this in offering thanks – to parents, benefactors, deities, coffee shops, influential books not directly referenced, and more. I welcome that. Acknowledgements to others do *not* diminish one’s achievement on a paper: instead, they enhance it. Look at the early pages of almost any serious book of scholarship: they go on for paragraphs and often pages thanking those who have contributed to the text, often with the caveat that “all errors are my own.” Good scholars, good writers, and good students emerge from supportive intellectual networks.

## **B. Writing Advice**

### **1. Headings within a paper – why they weaken an argument:**

Most of the time, I find that section headings within student papers impede or even damage rather than enhance the arguments presented, especially in shorter assignments. The problem is that apprentice writers typically use headers to simply jump from one topic to the next when they instead should be *transitioning* or *arguing* or *linking* their way through what is supposed to be a sustained, developed essay.

### **2. The importance of narrated *transitions* within a paper. Why they are better than internal headings. How to write transitions using the “double-facing signpost.”**

Writers are tempted to use headings because papers often are written in or divide up into sections – such as when considering three poems one after another, or three case studies one after another. In order to create a *cumulative* rather than *iterative* paper (in other words, a paper whose sections build one on the next, rather than a paper which is merely the sum of its parts), you’ll want to provide readers rich *transitions* from one section to the next.

There are three kinds of transitions: weak, good, and strong. A *weak* transition or non-transition just abruptly changes the subject. A *good* transition “carries” the reader across the divide. A *strong* transition takes the opportunity to do some argumentative work while crossing the bridge. A solid basic template for a good transition is the “double-facing signpost”: the kind of sign that says “entering Minneapolis” on one side and “entering Saint Paul” on the other. Here is a crude example of a double-facing signpost which “bridges” the reader from a discussion of Mira Nair’s film *Mississippi Masala* to a linked consideration of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine*.

Now, having analyzed the production of Mina’s “masala” identity in Nair’s film, and having found it consistent with classic American melting-pot ideology, I will turn to the mirrored question of “exotic” identity in Mukherjee’s novel.

The size of a double-facing signpost varies with the size of the overall document. A transition in a five-page paper might be one rich two-part sentence. A section-to-section transition in a 20-page

paper could be a full paragraph. In a book, several pages at the end of each chapter might be devoted to “handing off” the reader to the next chapter.

### **3. Incorporating material you’ve already written for some other venue, or are currently writing also for some other class:**

I am asked from time to time whether it is right to incorporate material that you have previously written and submitted in some other venue, such as for a previous Macalester course or a course taken abroad. I’m also asked whether it is right to submit passages or pages for two or more courses taken simultaneously. In general, I welcome such synergy. For short “repeats” – such as a few sentences, or a particular fact – you can declare your debt compactly in the “Generous Acknowledgments.” For longer text-sharing from *previous* work, you may do so so long as you explicitly footnote and describe the borrowing you have done.

For submitting the same paragraphs or pages to two courses in the same semester, you may do so subject to three strict conditions. First, you need to notify both me and the other professor(s) in writing and in advance that you will do so. Second, in the case of extensive re-use, you need to extend the length of the final document by half the amount of the re-used material. Thus a 12-page assignment for Postcolonial Theory which borrows 4 pages from a paper you originally wrote for Advanced Human Rights, would need to be a 14-page paper for Postcolonial Theory. Third, you need to write, in a short note at the end of the paper, how you have borrowed the material and what transformations you have made. Students who self-borrow without meeting these three conditions will be charged with academic misconduct.

All productive scholars, myself included, do this often – that is, re-use our own writing already produced for some other venue. Sometimes this is informally and oddly called “self-plagiarism” – and it is a widely accepted practice when it is fully acknowledged. One commonly sees, for example, a book chapter which includes a footnote like this: “the argument presented in this section of my book revises and extends my earlier essay “On Ethnographic Authority,” which originally appeared in *History and Theory*, fall 1983.”

### **4. Use accents:**

My courses regularly assign writing by people like José Limón, Antonio Benítez Rojo, and Léopold Senghor. It is not required, but I’m delighted to see, student writing that uses the accents found in these names, or in any other appropriate names or imported foreign words.

### **5. If you use Microsoft Word, learn to use it better:**

When I get papers emailed to me in Word, I’m often surprised to see the primitive level of Word skills my students have. Here are three basics you should know if you don’t know them already: 1. Use the *page break* at the end of your title page, rather than repeatedly hitting Enter to space out to a full page. If you use *section break*, you can more readily make your title page un-numbered. 2. Learn the “hanging indent” paragraph format for an attractive and visually clear way to make works-cited or bibliography entries. 3. Set your paragraph format to automatically indent every first line 0.3” and to place a 12-point space at the end of each paragraph.

### **6. A tiny note: figure out how to make Microsoft Word number your endnotes with Arabic (1, 2, 3, 4) not lower-case Roman (i, ii, iii, iv) numbers.**

I have no idea why Microsoft Word defaults to lower-case Roman, but Arabic is much more attractive. Certainly “17” looks a lot better than xvii!

## 7. → Life lesson: put your lastname in any filename you email as an attachment:

Here's a universally helpful tip. If you are uploading or emailing someone an attachment, give it a filename helpful to your *recipient*. For example, you might have a paper you've named "IS-paper.docx," or you might have a file called "resume.pdf." What do you think my hard drive would look like with 23 or (eventually) 2300 files called "IS-paper.docx"? What would an employer would do with files called "resume.pdf"? Answer: confusion. So, for any file you send out, call it something like "Smith-IS-paper1.docx," or "Rodriguez-Julia-resume-2020.pdf."

## 8. Four Strategies for Compressing, thus Sharpening, Wordy and Mushy Prose:

### A. For clearer, more powerful prose, use the active voice: the "Paramedic Method," part 1

Macalester students too often use the verb "to be" (is, are, was, etc.) in passive constructions which often turn a nearby good verb into a less useful noun. Thus "Jack kicked Bill" becomes "Bill was kicked by Jack," "Jack is the person who kicked Bill," or even "Jack was performing a kicking process on Bill." The problem here is that "is" is the weakest verb in the English language. Nearby, an even better word almost always languishes as a noun or some other form of speech.

What to do about this? Borrowing from Richard Lanham's book *Revising Prose*, I suggest this. Go through your paper and circle all "is" forms. Count them up, and then commit to removing at least half of them in revision. How to remove them? Near the "is" verbs you circle, look for another word which embodies the key concept or action of the sentence, and turn that word into the sentence's main verb.

So, instead of "There is a third-person narrator who follows Clarence," try "The third-person narrator follows Clarence." Instead of "One conclusion that can be drawn from the account given is that Chennai is being Americanized," try "The account concludes [or suggests, argues, claims, implies, asserts] that Chennai is being Americanized." Or, to supply two agents to the sentence, add an *agent* for the Americanization, as here: "The account suggests that the outsourcing industry is Americanizing Chennai." Here's a sentence with two "is" verbs: "Moments like these are where questioning the method to the Islamic State's madness is necessary." Here's a rewrite without any: "Such moments force questions about Islamic State's methods and madness."

### B. Verbs: more on how to compress, chisel, shorten, tighten, and focus:

Developing writers often pad verbs into verb phrases. Compress these too, as here:

Smith provides commentary. → Smith comments.

Corruption is a frequent occurrence. → Corruption frequently occurs.

The essay exhibits biting commentary. → The essay bitingly comments.

Anderson makes a distinction between. → Anderson distinguishes between.

Benítez offers a description. → Benítez describes.

Her claim has resonance with. → Her claim resonates with.

This serves as an indication. → This indicates.

Stoler offers an articulation of. → Stoler articulates.

Look at the above examples. In each case, a good, strong verb (comment, occur, comment, distinguish, describe, resonate, indicate, and articulate) was "hiding" inside a mushy noun (commentary, occurrence, distinction, description, resonance, indication, articulation). What's the best way to think about this? It's simple: take the main idea of your sentence, and make it the main verb. Looking for words ending in "ion" can help you identify targets.

### **C. The “Paramedic Method for Revising Prose,” Part 2, prepositions – a simple trick:**

The “circle ‘is’ forms” suggestion just above is the first part of Richard Lanham’s simple, useful, and influential “paramedic method for revising prose.” Here is the second part – helpful especially for wordy writers. When revising, circle all *prepositions* in your paper, especially these: as, at, by, for, in, of, on, to, and with. Then, reduce these by half, by compressing your phrasing. This simple revising trick can markedly increase your prose power and concision. Google “paramedic method for revising prose,” and you’ll find a number of good PDF handouts on Lanham’s method.

### **D. Eliminate almost every emphatic adverb:**

Somehow, many writers think they can strengthen an argument by adverbial inflation. So instead of writing “Anderson’s strong essay suggests that ...”, they will write “Anderson’s extremely strong essay suggests that ...” – as if “strong” were not itself a strong word. For this reason, I advise writers to cut every instance of “very” from your drafts, as well as every instance of words like “extremely,” “highly,” “quite,” and so on. Why? These words add little. Make your arguments with active verbs, nouns, and at times adjectives.

The most flagrant instances of adverbial inflation are when the coupling is redundant. Recent papers submitted to me have offered “violently lynched” and “brutally murdered” – as if lynching and murder weren’t inherently violent and brutal. Intensifiers also sap energy when the words they modify are already strong. “Very complex,” “highly beautiful,” “quite simplistic,” “very personal,” “extremely poignant” etc. mush up clear, strong words like complex, beautiful, simplistic, personal and poignant. The phrase “I truly believe” makes one wonder what the phrase “I believe” is for. Lately I’ve seen an epidemic of the typically useless adverb “actively,” as in “actively fought colonialism” or “actively worked to improve.” Fighting and working are already actions. Lately I’ve also seen terrible overuse of “incredibly” (which means “impossible to believe”). Cut adverbs to add force to your prose.

### **Now back to more focused writing topics:**

#### **9. The difference between “i.e.” and “e.g.”**

These common abbreviations have different meanings. “I.e.” is short for the Latin *id est* and means “that is.” “E.g.” is short for *exempli gratia* and means “for example.” Here’s a sentence using both of them correctly. “I am speaking here of the school at the corner of Snelling and Grand, i.e. Macalester College, and not of any of the other nearby institutions, e.g. Hamline, St. Thomas, or the University of Minnesota.”

#### **10. Never put a hyphen after an adverb:**

I often see developing writers describe something as “beautifully-written” or “persuasively-argued.” This use of a hyphen is a common error which you should not repeat. An adverb is a word that modifies a verb or adjective. They often end in ly. Because adverbs *modify* rather than combine with what comes next, a hyphen is incorrect between. Here are some examples: extremely interesting, medically advanced, artfully drawn, economically depressed, locally defined. In contrast, compound adjectives – two words that combine to form an adjective (which modifies a noun) *do* take hyphens. Here are some examples of that: business-related expense, Minneapolis-based consultant, disease-ridden region, hard-fought victory, ill-gotten gains. Again, hyphens for compound adjectives, but no hyphens between adverbs and what they modify.



### 11. Three basic punctuation rules that native English speakers should have learned in high school:

- a. If you have two sentences that can stand on their own, you can't simply join them with a comma. This error is called a "comma splice."
- b. If you have two sentences connected with any of the words but-or-yet-so-and-for-nor (the seven "coordinating conjunctions"), you must place a comma before the conjunction. This is to avoid reader confusion. Take the sentence "Tom looked for apples and oranges." No comma. Now take the sentence "Tom looked for apples, and Jane looked for oranges." Here, a comma is needed because otherwise the reader momentarily will think that Tom was looking for "apples and Jane." Since "Jane looked for oranges" can stand alone as a sentence, and is not another unit just like apples, a comma is required before the "and."
- c. If you have two sentences that can stand on their own, and connect them with "conjunctive adverbs" (consequently, finally, furthermore, however, in addition, meanwhile, moreover, nevertheless, subsequently, therefore, and whereas), you must put a ; semicolon before, and a , comma after the connecting word.

### 12. Fiction, philosophy, and theory are typically written about in the *present* tense:

When writing papers about works of fiction, works of cultural theory, and most academic matters, we typically use the *present* tense. So, for example, we can readily write this: "Though Dante assigns some miscreants to the third circle of hell, Fanon puts the comprador nationalists well beyond that." Or, for example, "Shakespeare depicts Caliban as a brute, while Césaire portrays the same character as an anticolonial revolutionary." Again, most fiction and most thinkers are in the *present*. The main exception to this is when you are making an expressly historical argument, such as this: "Though in the late 1700s Jefferson had a mixed view of slavery, Harriet Beecher Stowe by 1852 had ceased doubting its evil."

### 13. Can I use the first person – the "I" – in my papers?

Many high school writing instructors counsel against using the first person – the "I" – in academic writing. But in reality, academic writing often uses first-person prose. When used *judiciously*, the first person can be fine.

It's important to note that in the *sciences* and related quantized fields such as economics and psychology, the first person is discouraged. Thus, in these fields one says things like "a survey was conducted of 77 subjects" or "a solution of 0.02% NaCl was titrated," even though the writer clearly did that. But in the humanities and most other social sciences, this prohibition is much less rigid. Check your own assigned course readings to confirm this.

The key is to deploy the first person strategically and sparingly. Though you could begin every sentence with "I think that ...", your reader already assumes that you think everything you write – so this is needless. If you write, for example, "I believe Walcott portrays Harry as a racist because ..." I am likely to respond that I'm less concerned with what you *believe* about Walcott than with what you can demonstrate about him through keen argument.

Better uses of "I" might be, for example, if a personal anecdote makes sense, or when you are signaling where your argument is going ("I will now turn to the question of ..."). Lastly, I'll note that different faculty have different views as to the use of the "I."

#### **14. A key point – make an argument in your paper. (“Nutshell” and “retrospective outline”)**

Too often I see papers written by Macalester students which say a great deal about the texts or subject at hand, but which fail to make an argument: that is, they do not advance and sustain a central claim in their paper. Before you turn in a paper, you should be able to complete the following exercise: take a deep breath, and speak aloud a single sentence, in a single breath, that begins as follows – “In my paper, I argue that \_\_\_\_\_.” What you say after the “that” should be, indeed, an argument or claim that is your paper’s central contribution to the debates that it engages. You should not finish the sentence with something general or vague, such as “I argue that globalization is an interesting and complex phenomenon,” or “I argue that Anderson and Scott offer rich insights into these questions.”

If you cannot complete the sentence clearly – which is a process called “*nutshelling*” – you’ll need to work on your paper until you can. If you *can* complete the sentence, then you now need to go back and check on two things. First, you need to be sure that your paper in fact offers that clear sentence, or something close to it, either towards the beginning or towards the end of your paper. Some papers state their claim up front, and then go on to sustain it. Other papers only state the argument at the end, after working through all of the evidence or debate. Both approaches are good, though the second approach requires that early on in the paper, the reader be given a clear statement of the question the paper will pursue, plus a compact outline of how that pursuit will be organized. Doing this helps the readers know where they are in your argument as it develops.

The second thing you need to check is whether the paragraphs in your paper in fact make and sustain the claim central to your paper. To check on this, do something called “*retrospective outlining*.” Let’s say your paper is 12 paragraphs long. Write out 12 lines, each of which is under ten words, and each of which distills the main point of each of your 12 paragraphs. That “retrospective outline” of your paper should flow towards the argument you make.

#### **15. A word of caution to high school (or college) debaters:**

Many Mac students find value in college debate, or found value in high-school debate prior to Mac. The debate tradition often asks participants to adopt one side of an argument and advocate hard for it. This approach has some merits, but among its shortcomings is that it often ignores or dismisses counter-evidence, or inflates a weak aspect of a claim to make it stick. And while a key goal of debate is, put crudely, to win, the goal of the best college writing is the truth: a truth often messier and more complex than the debate tradition produces. So, if you have a background in debate, be wary of bringing all of debate’s habits to your college writing.

#### **16. How long should my paragraphs be?**

High school writing often features a “standard” paragraph with an introductory sentence, three supports, and a concluding sentence. Also common in high school writing is the five-paragraph essay, with a similar structure. This is a good learning-stage approach, but the best college writing unfolds along less structured lines. Think of a paragraph as a cognitive unit: it “chunks” information into manageable pieces, and provides readers a “break” or a “breath” every so often: a chance to consolidate and move on. Occasionally, a very short paragraph – even one sentence in length – can add impact. More typically, in standard double-spaced format, paragraphs are between about eight and twenty lines long. Any longer, and the reader gets weary or perhaps lost. As a rough guide, be sure there’s at least one paragraph break on each printed page. If your draft has a huge paragraph all on one topic, just find a good spot near the middle to cut it in half. Perhaps add a phrase at the new break to help the reader bridge.

**17. Don't waste your conclusion restating what we've just finished reading:**

Many high school students are often advised to structure a paper as “tell them what you’re going to say, say it, and then tell them what you just said.” I see papers like this at Macalester too – papers where the final paragraph or few paragraphs mainly rehash things your reader encountered only minutes before and remembers well. While you might want to compactly re-state (or freshly state) your main claim, and ultra-compactly review the support for that claim, you can do much more in a final section than that. You might bridge to wider questions, offer a fresh insight of your own, reflect on the importance (or unimportance) of the debates, link to other central questions featured in your class, point to still-unanswered questions – or any of a variety of interesting, useful things beyond a laborious rehash of the already well-remembered.

**18. Don't use the word “issues” when you mean “problems”**

Over the past decade or so, the vague word “issues” has grown in meaning to encompass what used to be “problems.” But “issues” is a vague and indirect term. So if you mean “problems,” say “problems,” not “issues.”

**19. Use commas properly around restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses:**

Students often incorrectly surround the title of a given author’s book or article with commas. They may write, for example, “Hughes’s short story, ‘Home,’ tells the tale of a musician who has returned to the U.S. South.” But such commas are only appropriate if that story is Hughes’s *only* one. Put another way, surround something with commas if what is inside the commas does not fundamentally change the meaning of the sentence. If the information is *essential* to the meaning of the sentence, then it should appear without commas. Here are some examples.

These sentences use commas, since what’s inside is “extra” information:

James Scott’s third book, *Seeing Like a State*, argues that ...

Hughes’s sole work of traditional history, *Fight for Freedom*, tells the story of the NAACP.

Hughes’s last poem, “Undertow,” is set in the suburbs of New York.

These sentences do not use commas, since the clause is essential to the sentence’s meaning:

James Scott’s book *Seeing Like a State* argues that ...

Hughes’s short story “Home” tells of a musician returning to the South.

Hughes’s poem “Christ in Alabama” opens with a shocking image.

→ if you put commas around the titles in the three sentences just above, that would imply that Scott has written only one book, and that Hughes wrote only one short story and one poem.

**20. Work with, and don't simply dump on the page, your quotations from sources:**

College writers often mistakenly just “dump on the page” a rich, suggestive quotation from an author, but then do no analysis of the quotation. Such student writers often preface the quote with a brief announcement of what the quote is supposed to demonstrate, and then hope or assume that the quote transparently displays those properties. It’s in general advisable not to assume that your quotation “does the work” on its own. Instead, work with the quotes you use – especially the extended ones – to bring out their richness and highlight their key attributes.

**21. For people, use “who” rather than “that”:**

When writing about people, use “who” rather than “that.” In each of the following cases, the *that* should be *who*: “The athletes that organized their time best succeeded in school.” “When thinking

about migrants that leave their home countries for economic reasons ...” “The students that protested against the college administrators that developed the policy ...” Again: for people, use *who* rather than *that*.

**22. A next-to-final note – this document gives mostly *revising* advice, not *composing* advice:**

Writing has many phases, often done in multiple cycles for the same paper: pre-writing, outlining or brainstorming, drafting, revising, more drafting and revising, and final polish. Most of what I have offered here is good for *revising*. If you compose naturally in the passive voice and with tons of heavy adverbs, by all means continue to do so. Trying to do what I describe here when you begin writing your paper may block you up and leave you unable to get your ideas out. So compose however you are comfortable composing, and then use the bulk of this document in the critical and multiple *revising* segments of your prose production.

**23. Finally, here are my own generous acknowledgements for support in this document:**

This document has been assembled piece by piece over many years. Much of it flows from specific questions that insightful Macalester students have posed to me over time, or from writing challenges that I have repeatedly encountered in student prose. Professionally, I have been especially influenced by Tori Haring-Smith (my most influential writing instructor at Brown), George Gopen (my instructor in the pedagogy of composition at Duke) and Richard A. Lanham (author of the indispensable book *Revising Prose*).