

Guidelines for Written Assignments

STEP ZERO: Before doing anything else, make absolutely sure you understand the campus policies on citations and plagiarism. All stages of the paper must be sent in as searchable text files, to facilitate routine plagiarism checks. All significant special information, wording, illustrative examples, etc. must have specific in-text references, not just general bibliographic notes. We are not picky about the exact format, but the style must allow a reader to find the source for any material easily and must specifically identify quotes and paraphrases. It's extremely unpleasant to have to mention these things, but some individuals have, in the past, submitted work that was not their own.

Try to be convincing. Original clear arguments, rather than rehashed class material, are looked upon favorably. A good general procedure for answering our questions (and others) is to start with the strongest and clearest arguments, falling back to weaker or more obscure ones only as necessary. Most of us will agree on something like this ranking:

1. Common experience, and simple logic, including easy mathematics.
2. Easily accessible observation and mathematics.
3. Harder mathematical reasoning and observation, directly available only to specialists.
4. Intuition.
5. Authority.

It is not necessary to cite some prior author for every argument. However, when you employ some possibly unfamiliar observation, you should cite some source accessible to the reader.

- Use a topic paragraph. It's much easier to understand a paper that announces where it's heading at the start. Don't digress from the topic. If you find yourself writing conflicting statements, at least acknowledge the conflicts. Never substitute big words for reason. Never pad the essay with flattery of science.
- Each body paragraph should make a distinct point and, if possible, should build on the previous ones. In a paper of this length, you should usually have 2-5 body paragraphs.
- Your concluding paragraph should summarize your arguments and show how they support your conclusion.
- We are not picky about the detailed format of papers (margins, etc.) However, please use a word processor with 12 point font and 1.5 line spacing, so that it will be easy for us to read and for you to revise.

Written Assignments

Assignments should generally be two to three printed pages long, unless otherwise specified. However, if you find that you can complete your argument in fewer words, do not pad the paper. Brevity is a virtue! Late work will be penalized 5% per day. No homework will be accepted later than a week after it is due.

Grading of Homework:

All homework assignments will be graded out of 20 points. What we will principally look for is logical clarity, the ability to present a coherent argument and avoidance of ‘waffle’. While we strongly discourage lapses in spelling, punctuation and grammar, those will be penalized in the grading only if they are sufficiently serious as to obscure the sense.