

Characteristics of an Excellent Paper

The excellent paper is the standard to which student papers are held, and against which they are compared. Excellent papers are assigned a grade of A, and earn 90% or more of the maximum credit. Papers that do not meet this standard are assigned lower grades and less credit. Excellent papers should be of publishable quality, in that their organization, style, and mechanics would require only minimal editing for acceptance into a publication.

A. Excellent papers are:

- **Accurate and thorough.** This means that facts and ideas are presented accurately, and the subject is covered thoroughly and completely. The paper anticipates a potential reader's questions about the topic and answers them.
- **Well-sourced.** This is arguably the most important characteristics of any paper. An excellent paper recognizes the contributions of others whose work on the topic has been published. To do otherwise is considered poor scholarship. It utilizes multiple sources (the more the better). Citations are provided for all facts and ideas that are not the original work of the paper's author. Direct quotes are used rarely, and are chosen to illustrate another author's ideas in their own words. See below for more about citations and references.
- **Balanced.** This means that the paper gives an objective and fair treatment of the facts, ideas, and viewpoints being discussed, noting the strengths and weaknesses of each. An excellent paper may be critical of previous work, but avoids unsubstantiated criticism and *ad hominem* attacks on other authors.
- **Creative.** "Creative" in the scientific sense means that the paper goes beyond a mere presentation of facts, but does not mean that any of the information is "made up" or non-factual. In an excellent paper the facts are organized, analyzed, synthesized, or used as the basis of conclusions in ways that are innovative, creative, and original.
- **Mechanically correct.** This means that the paper is free of errors in style, grammar, punctuation, word usage, and spelling. All serious word processors come with spelling and grammar checkers - use them.
- **Well-written.** This means that the paper is clear in purpose, and the writing style utilizes precise nouns, strong verbs, active voice, and correct verb tense. In an excellent paper the material is organized logically, with good transitions between sections and appropriate pacing. The normal English sentence construction of subject - verb - object should be followed whenever possible.

B. An excellent paper should consist of 4 major sections.

- The introduction. The introduction should be a clear, interesting, and concise statement of (a) what the paper is about (its "topic"), (b) how the topic relates to anthropology in general and your subfield in particular, and (c) why the topic is important and interesting. In a research paper, the hypotheses to be evaluated are presented in this section.
- The body of the paper. In a formal research paper this section is divided into a "materials and methods" section, a "results" section, and a "discussion" section. For class term papers these sections may be less distinct, but the same material needs to be presented. For a conference paper, the "results" and "discussion" sections are often combined.

- a. In the materials and methods section of the paper the author reveals where and how he or she obtained the data or ideas that are worked with in the paper. The author also describes the methods, procedures, or approaches that will be used to examine the data or ideas.
 - b. In the results section of the paper the author lists the results of their analysis or evaluation of the data or ideas they worked with.
 - c. In the discussion section of the paper the author discusses the implications and meaning of their results. Any factors that may have influenced the results, including the author's own biases, should be discussed.
 - The summary. Excellent papers have a summary at the end. In a formal research paper this is called the "conclusions" section. The summary should briefly restate the goal of the paper, any hypotheses that were tested, the materials and methods used, and the results obtained. Conclusions should then be drawn from the results. In a research paper, the author states whether their hypotheses were supported or rejected. The summary should mention any followup work or other work that remains to be done on the topic, yet end with a note of finality.
 - The bibliography. This section may also be referred to as "references cited". References should be provided for all the works cited in the paper, and only the works cited in the paper. See below for a more detailed discussion of references.
- C. Citations. A pointer to the source of some information referred to in the text of your paper is called a citation. Correct citation format is crucial. In general, the sciences (such as Anthropology) use a different citation format from the humanities (such as English). Therefore, the format you learned in your English composition classes may be inadequate.
- What should be cited? Put simply, every fact or idea should be cited unless it is either (a) general knowledge, or (b) the author's original data, result, conclusion, or idea.
 - a. General knowledge means that you would expect that anyone you walked up to on the street would know the fact or idea. For example, "George Bush was President in 2002", is an item of general knowledge, but "apes brachiate" is not.
 - b. Original data, results, conclusions, or ideas means that were collected, observed, deduced, or thought of by the author of the paper for the first time in the history of the world (so far as it is recorded in the available literature).
 - Citation format. The basic format for a citation is (Author, date) or (Authors, date). For example, (Brackman, 1980) or (Gonick & Wheelis, 1983). Most editors prefer that you use "&" rather than "and". Here are a few refinements and exceptions to this principle.
 - a. In scientific papers, *ibid*, *op. cit.*, and similar constructions should be avoided.
 - b. If there are more than two authors, you should use "*et al.*". For example, (Barkow *et al.*, 1992) instead of (Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby, 1992).
 - c. When citing multiple sources for a fact or idea, put them all within the same set of parentheses and separate them with semicolons. Sort the sources by date (oldest first) and alphabetically if two sources share the

same date. For example, (Darwin, 1872; Ardrey, 1966; Williams, 1966; Carey, 1982).

- d. When citing two or more works by the same author, only list the author's name once and separate the dates of the works with commas. For example, (Barkow, 1973, 1978, 1989; Leslie, 1987, 1988). If two or more of the works were published in the same year, use letters after the date to distinguish them. For example, (Daly & Wilson, 1984a, 1984b, 1987). Use these same letters when you give the reference for the citation in your bibliography.
 - e. Page numbers are normally not used, except to cite a direct quote. When citing a direct quote, put the page number(s) after the date, and separated from the date by a colon. For example, (Hooton, 1935: 113-114).
 - f. If you mention the author's name in the text of your paper, include only the date in parentheses, following the name. For example, Conroy (1997) discusses *A. ramidus*, but Lewin (1989) doesn't.
- o Other trivial exceptions and principles exist. If in doubt about correct citation or reference format for a particular work, any of your faculty will be happy to help you puzzle it out.

D. References. The entries in your bibliography are called references. References should correspond with the citations in your paper. This means that every citation in the text of your paper must have a corresponding reference in your bibliography. Do not include a reference more than once, even if you cite it many times. Do not include references in your bibliography that were not cited in the text of your paper.

- o The format for references should follow the style found in the most widely distributed journal in the discipline or subdiscipline. For example, physical anthropologists can't go wrong in using the reference style found in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, though paleoanthropologists may choose to use the style found in *Journal of Human Evolution*, primatologists may use the style found in the *American Journal of Primatology*, etc. The format to use for referencing electronic documents (obtained from the internet or similar sources) is similar to that for printed documents, and guidelines for citing this type of material are widely available online.
- o Reference styles vary considerably, and change through time. The most important components of a reference are (1) the name(s) of the author(s), (2) the date of publication, (3) the title of the work, and (4) how and where the work may be found. How and where the work may be found may consist of a journal title with volume and page numbers, a publisher's name and main city of operation, or other information. Here are some examples, from the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* style.

- a. An article in a journal.

Cartmill M, MacPhee RDE, and Simons EL (1981) Anatomy of the temporal bone in early anthropoids with remarks on the problem of anthropoid origins. *Am. J. Phys. Anthropol.* 56:3-21.

Note that the first line of the reference is offset to the left a few characters. This style doesn't allow the use of *et al.* in references (though it is fine in citations) - the names of all authors must be given. Initials are used rather than full names. The date is in parentheses, and follows the authors. The title of the article is not capitalized, except for the first letter. The title of the journal is abbreviated (use standard abbreviations only) and neither underlined nor italicized. The volume number of the journal is italicized. The issue number of the journal is generally not given.

b. A book.

Struhsaker TT (1975) *The Red Colobus Monkey*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Note that most of the rules noted for journal articles also apply here. The first letter of each major word in the title is capitalized, but the title is neither underlined nor italicized. The publisher's main city of location is given.

c. A paper in an edited volume.

Guha BS and Basu PC (1938) Report on the human remains excavated at Mohenjo-Daro in 1928-29. In EJM MacKay (ed.): *Further Excavations at*

Mohenjo-Daro. New Delhi: Government of India Press, pp. 613-638.

d. An online source.

These can be tricky to handle, see the guidelines at <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html> for ways to reference online sources.