

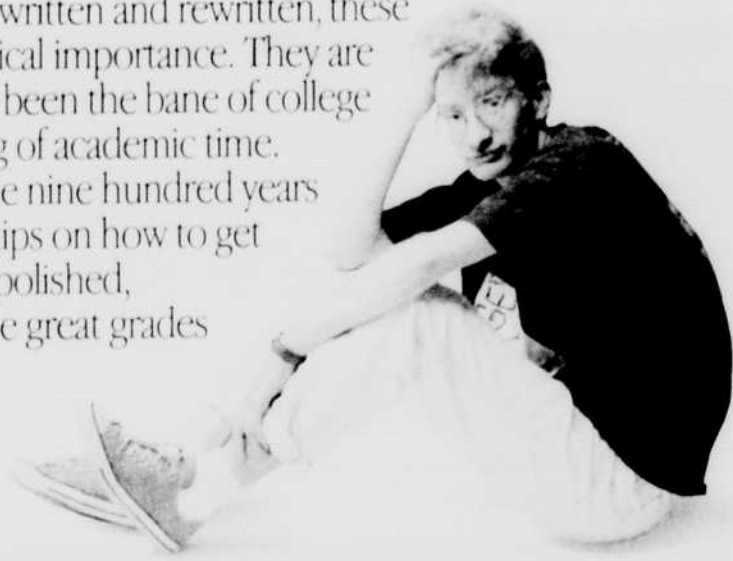
The Paper.

Deep in the archives of the University of Bologna in Italy—the world's oldest university—is a stack of precious documents. Contained within them are the brilliant thoughts and theories of eleventh-century scholars.

In essence, they're papers—about history, mathematics, the sciences, life, and love.

Agonized and labored over, written and rewritten, these documents have profound historical importance. They are proof positive that The Paper has been the bane of college life, practically from the beginning of academic time.

But we've learned a lot in the nine hundred years since. Here are some of the best tips on how to get your ideas down on paper—in a polished, presentable form—and garner the great grades your ideas deserve.



"You don't need very much to get started. All you need is a Macintosh and a word processing program. All Macintosh word processing programs are easy to use. They come with built-in spelling checkers. Most of them even let you create footnotes automatically. And they let you use a variety of fonts, so your papers get noticed."

—Graham Spencer, Sophomore

Getting Started. 1

The most important part of getting started is to get started. Experts agree. Don't procrastinate. At the very least, make sure you read over the topic assignment well in advance—even if you don't get a chance to research or write until much later. Let your mind ponder the topic while you're doing other things.

As soon as you have time, narrow the topic. Though there are endless varieties of papers, they divide into two major types: assignments where the professor chooses the topic for you, and assignments where you get to choose the topic.

In the case of the former, it's vital that you understand the question posed so you can answer it directly. Don't hesitate to go see your professor if you don't understand or need clarification.

Getting to choose your own topic poses the opposite problem. You may understand your topic, but your professor might not. Take time to find an appropriate topic.

Some advice on selecting a topic:

- Choose something that's relevant to your course—this is not a free-for-all. Pick a topic that integrates the material you've heard in lecture with what you've learned outside of class.
- Pick a topic that's "doable." That is, make sure it's not too narrow or too obscure or too broad. You should be able to address the topic in the number of pages you've been assigned.
- Select a topic you're interested in. Passion and enthusiasm are the two most important ingredients for success. They'll lead you to better papers. Pick a topic that will show what you know, what you think about, and what interests you.

how to write a paper

The Research. 2

Know thy subject. If you don't, research it.

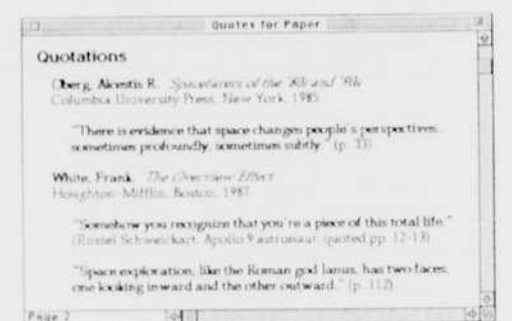
Like a good lawyer trying to build a case, you're trying to assemble the relevant facts, dates, sources, and quotes that will make a compelling argument.

Some advice:

- Give yourself plenty of time to discover great sources. The relevant tip here is to allow enough time to do a thorough job—as much as five or six hours for a short paper, and as much as fifty hours for a major term paper.
- Start by perusing the library. Depending on the topic, you may want to comb through books, academic journals, newspapers, magazines, transcripts of speeches, or video footage and newscasts.

• Don't stop with conventional sources, though. You may choose to interview experts on the topic, take a poll, or look in less obviously related places to find the facts. Original work often comes from doing original research.

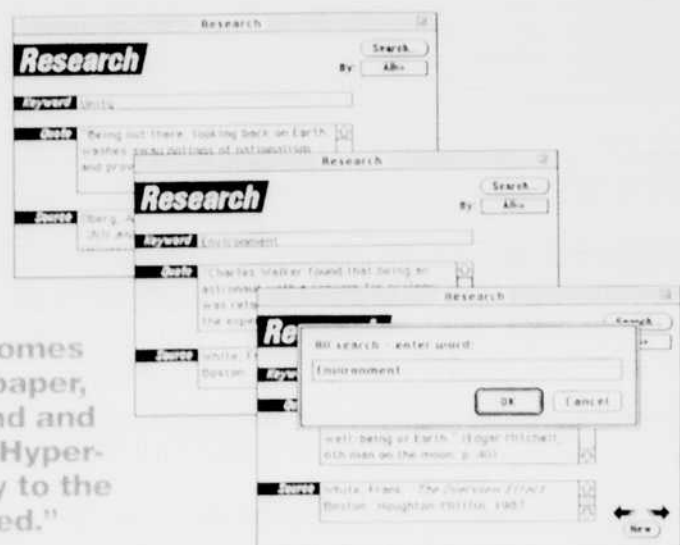
• Be neat and stay organized. You'll want to take notes, and leave a clear "research trail" as you go. Be choosy. Take notes on the most relevant and important information. And keep all of your research in one place: your computer.



"I use my Macintosh to help keep track of all the material I find about a topic. I keep quotes, facts, and opinions in a word processing document—I also include information about the source the material came from. As I'm writing, I can easily find quotes that support my arguments."

"For term papers and other complex assignments, you may want to use a program called HyperCard. It lets you create a set of electronic index cards. They work a lot like traditional 3-by-5 cards; the difference is that they stay in your Macintosh, which means you'll never lose them. You can write and draw on these cards, and even add comments in your own voice.

You can also create electronic links between cards. It's a great way to keep related ideas together. When it comes time to write your paper, you can use the Find and Search features of HyperCard to go instantly to the information you need."



3 The Outline.

An organized mind produces organized writing.

To get your mind organized, outline your paper. Contrary to what you might think, there's no one right way to outline a paper. There are actually many useful outline formats.

What's most important is that you do whatever you need to do to get your thoughts in order. Some students create very detailed outlines, others write down only the skeleton of their paper.

Whether you choose the former method, the latter, or something in between, you should break your outline into three main parts, which reflect the three main parts of a paper: the introduction (where you'll state your thesis, or opinion, about the topic), the body (where you'll explain and build a case for your argument), and the conclusion (where you'll pull everything together and summarize your argument).

Tips:

- Start by formulating your thesis—the main opinion you have, or the position you'll take, about the topic. There will be plenty of time to polish your thesis later, but you should determine the basic argument you'd like to make. What's the point of your paper? And why should anyone care?

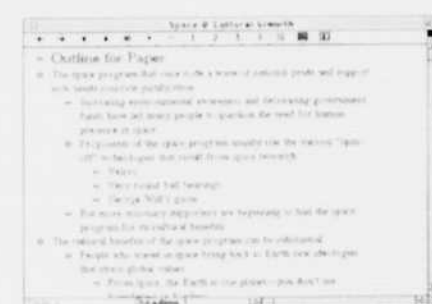
• Then look through all the research you've done. This is the proof for your paper. See how the facts relate, and which quotes and sources help to support your argument. You may want to create a new file on your computer that contains just the quotes and facts you'll use in your final paper.

• Write an outline, being as detailed as you think will be useful. You'll want to break up the body of the paper into several subsections that deal with different aspects of the topic—each subsection can build on the one before, or can introduce a new idea that proves your thesis statement. Either way, you should decide which quotes or facts to use, and where they'll go. In your outline, include the first few lines of the quote, or the name of the source or the person who said it. That way, when you begin writing the paper, you'll know which quotes to paraphrase or place in your final paper.

"I use a word processing program to outline my papers. I rarely complete a full outline for short papers; rather I'm more interested in formulating my main arguments and determining where I'll use quotes.

Some word processing programs—for example, Microsoft Word—have outlining capabilities that make the process really easy."

"If you're up against a particularly long or complicated paper, you may want to use an outlining program. Symantec MORE, for instance, lets you create an outline, effortlessly arrange and rearrange points, and otherwise organize your thinking so you can produce the best writing possible."



Special thanks to Graham Spencer, a sophomore who hails from Columbia, South Carolina. He helped us write this article. If you'd like to learn more about Graham's writing, please see page 15.