Ideas
Ideas are the heart of your paper. If you can’t find anything worthwhile to say, your paper will not be a good one. It’s that simple.

But don’t worry. EVERYONE has valuable things to say.

The secret to finding a great idea for your paper is to pick something that interests you. This is easy if you get to pick your own topic, but can also be done (and needs to be done!) if you have a topic assigned by a professor.

When you start to think about that assigned topic, what comes to mind? Why are you in that class? Does anything about the topic relate to something you are passionate about?

Here’s an example:

In college I took a class on Medieval History. At the time, it sounded quite interesting, but as the semester wore on, my interest waned. And then it was time for the final paper—at least ten pages of research related to Medieval History. Ugh.

By that point, I was tired of hearing about all of the misbehaving men and marauding clans. I wasn’t sure I could find anything that interested me. So I started by thinking about why I’d taken the class and remembered how much I like the stories of history, the real people triumphing over circumstances. From that, I knew I wanted to write about either one person or one group of people we’d talked about. But who?

I looked over my notes to see if there were any people that I wanted to hear more about, anyone who had the promise of an interesting life. I found a whole bunch of men with similar stories. But I also noticed something was missing—the lives of women. During Medieval times, few women were leaders, and the lives of women were often undervalued. One of my interests is women’s rights, so I decided to connect that focus to the assignment.

I ended up writing about how medieval queens were able to get and maintain their power. I found the topic quite interesting, and I actually enjoyed doing research about the queens. The paper wasn’t easy, but it was a lot better than writing about something I didn’t care about. And the grade turned out alright, too 😊.

Methods for Starting
Staring at a blank page? Have too many thoughts swirling around your head? Not exactly sure how to approach your topic? Below are methods for breaking through writer’s block and focusing your paper’s topic.

There are a few basic questions you need to answer before you start writing:

- What is my purpose?
- Who is my audience?
At first glance you might say that your purpose is to get an A. But that’s a little wider of a purpose than we need right now. Your purpose is to do something to a topic. That something might be explain, identify, analyze, compare, or argue. You might use a combination of these (or other purposes), but you’ll have one MAIN purpose.

*EX: Let’s say your professor wants you to write about why your favorite football team is your favorite. For this one, your main purpose will be to explain—you might also compare your team to another, or analyze their plays/stats, but the basic idea is to explain WHY.*

Your audience is probably your professor, but might also be your classmates or the professional field. This makes a difference in how you present your ideas (see STYLE section).

When you’ve determined your purpose and audience, you are ready to start generating ideas.

Here are some strategies to get you thinking about different ways to approach your purpose and topic:

1. **Questions**

Start asking them: Why do I have to write this paper? What point do I want to prove? What do I know about football teams? How can I pick a favorite? Why do people like football at all? What’s special about my team? Why can’t I just write about why people like football in general?

You’ll notice a few questions get whiny—that’s okay. This is brainstorming and no one ever has to see it. But you’ll also notice that a few questions are great starting points: *What do I know about football teams? Why do people like football? What’s special about my team?*

These questions should be circled or rewritten and ANSWERED. Those answers will be some of the content for your paper.

2. **Draw a picture**

Here is another unusual approach that works well for people who are really good at visualizing. Draw a picture relating to your topic. Make it simple, like a football for the favorite football team essay. Then start attaching ideas about your paper to it, trying to use the shape as a guide.

*For example, with a football:*

1. The football starts with a point—my paper will also start with a point. (That the Bears are my favorite team).

2. For each of the laces, I will come up with a reason for the Bears being my favorite. (Write your points on your picture!)

3. After that, I’ll just need to end my essay with a strong point (just like the football itself).
3. Listing/ Web-mapping

This is as easy as it sounds - almost. The basic idea is that you set a time for yourself and you write down everything that you can think of about your topic for that time (generally five minutes). You don’t stop to think. You just write. If you end up writing “pink bunny slippers” under the topic of football, that’s okay. Maybe it will actually lead to a great paragraph about how you love your favorite team because you used to watch with your aunt who wore pink bunny slippers. You never know, so let yourself go and write whatever comes to mind.

I had a teacher once who said to write down (list) everything I could think of about a topic for five minutes—then throw that paper away and start over. He said that people will generally come up with the same ideas at first, so you need to push through the common stuff floating around at the top of your brain to find the unique ideas.

After you are done with the timed listing (or web-map), go back over the paper and mark the topics that seem most promising or unique.

4. Outline

Outlining is useful when you already have an idea of your argument/position on your topic (your thesis). If you know your thesis, this is a great tool for getting your possible supporting details on paper and organizing them. Here’s the start of a basic outline for an essay, followed by a sample outline. You will, of course, need to add or subtract lines depending on your information.

I. Introduction
   A. Grabber (Hook)
   B. Thesis

II. First Point- Topic Sentence
   A. Supporting detail
      i. comment about detail/ example
      ii. comment about detail
   B. Supporting detail
      i. comment about detail/ example
      ii. comment about detail

III. Second Point- Topic Sentence
   A. Supporting detail
      i. comment about detail/ example
      ii. comment about detail
   B. Supporting detail
      i. comment about detail/ example
      ii. comment about detail

IV. Third Point- Topic Sentence
   A. Supporting detail
      i. comment about detail/ example
      ii. comment about detail
   B. Supporting detail
      i. comment about detail/ example
      ii. comment about detail

V. Conclusion
   A. Recap of main idea
   B. Closing thoughts
EXAMPLE: Why don’t students read books as much as they used to?

I. Introduction
   A. Grabber- Out of twenty five students in my high school literature class last year, only two read every book assigned.
   
   B. Students don’t read books because they don’t connect to the text, they have weak skills, and they are used to getting information at a faster pace.

II. Students have a hard time relating to many required readings.
   A. usually novels or essays written long ago by people who lived very different lives.
      i. most required stuff written by males of European descent
      ii. high school courses- British Lit, American Lit
   B. culture and language a problem
      i. Shakespeare and the Odyssey
      ii. barriers to enjoying literature

III. Longer words and complex sentences are hard to deal with
   i. read text-speak more often than not
   ii. vocab changes, so many words in books are unknown

III. Students don’t see a point in reading longer pieces when short essays give same information
   A. internet offers shorter pieces
      i. Sparknotes
         a. example about Carrie writing her essay from Sparknotes and getting an A
   B. We are too busy to read long books!
      i. many pressures on students
         a. classes
         b. social life

IV. Conclusion- world is changing and the traditional ways of reading do not work for today’s students, who are used to getting information they can easily connect with at a fast pace.

Notice how I didn’t have exactly the same number or level of detail for each paragraph. Likewise, this is only a four-paragraph essay. That’s fine—it will all depend on my ideas.

Other ideas: Pre-Writing Strategies

Paragraph Development
One common problem is that people don’t go deeply enough into their examples. Here’s a sample shallow paragraph on the effects of not getting enough sleep:
Without enough sleep, people can't function properly. One problem is that reflexes are slower. A person might not be able to stop their car in time to prevent an accident. Another problem is that lack of sleep makes it harder to remember information. A student who doesn’t get his rest might miss important information in a lecture, and then later fail the test.

This paragraph has some good points. And you’ll notice that I wrote two sentences about each point, so I’ve made a good effort here. But this isn’t a strong paragraph. It's not deep, and quite frankly, it’s boring. Let’s try to jazz it up:

Without enough sleep, people can’t function properly. One problem is that reflexes, such as the ability to hit the brakes before a possible collision, are slower. A sleepy person might see a deer sprint out into the road, but not be able to react quickly enough to prevent the accident. Another problem with a lack of sleep is that memory also starts to fail. Last semester I went to all of my history classes, but I usually went sleep-deprived. I thought I was paying attention and taking good notes, but I failed the final exam. When I compared the notes I took to my friend John’s notes, I realized that I really hadn’t been as aware as I thought I was. More sleep would have made me able to operate better.

This rewrite is much stronger (and longer, too). Why is it stronger? It’s gotten more specific. In the first example, when I wrote about not being able to stop a car in time, you probably didn’t see much of a picture in your head. But for the rewrite, you probably imagined a deer sprinting out in front of a car. Any writing that gets a reaction from the reader by giving him or her sensory details (a detail you can feel with one of your five senses) is strong writing.

Likewise, in the second half of the original paragraph, you probably didn't get much of an image of the failing student. In the rewrite, you were able to imagine a specific student.

The sample was for a factual essay, but I still was able to create images. The main goal with paragraph development is to create specific images and ideas in the reader’s mind.

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**ORGANIZATION**

**Creating a Strong Thesis Statement**

A thesis is your main idea. Every paper has a thesis, whether it is an actual sentence in the paper, or the main idea that a reader gets from the piece as a whole.

A strong thesis is arguable—this means that it is an opinion. There's no point in writing a paper about something that EVERYONE agrees with or knows. Your job is to PROVE something with your paper.

On the other hand, a thesis needs to be supportable. There’s also no point in writing a paper that is merely your opinion and cannot be backed up with facts or examples. Here are some basic rules:

A Thesis is NOT

- A fact
  
  Ex: Dogs are the most popular pets in the U.S. (What is there left for you to prove?)

- A question
Ex: Why are dogs the most popular pets? (Your ANSWER is the thesis, not the question.)

- A broad opinion
  Ex: Dogs are great. (What are they great at? What if I don’t like them?)

- A cliché
  Ex: Dog is man’s best friend. (If you added some reasons to this, you might have a point—as it is, this is just another stale phrase.)

A strong thesis is narrow—it makes one point and often has a few reasons to support that point. Here are some examples:

- Because of their loyalty and ease with humans, dogs make excellent pets.
- Volunteering is essential in developing a strong character.
- While having summers off gives students a relaxing break in the moment, it hurts them in the long run.

The THREE-PRONG thesis
This is a type of thesis often taught with the Five Paragraph Essay. The advantage of this type of thesis is that it sets up three body paragraphs for you. The disadvantage is that it lacks creativity. The format is to identify your topic, state your position, then give three reasons.

Format: TOPIC ARGUMENT because ______________, _____________, and _____________.

Ex: School uniforms should be mandatory in all schools because they reduce bullying, they allow students to focus more on studies, and they promote school unity.

Each of the body paragraphs for this essay would focus on one of the reasons given.

Here are some more examples:

Volunteering benefits the volunteer, the person needing help, and society.

Schedule flexibility, lower cost, and ease of access are reasons more students are choosing to start at a community college.

Even though soda is a popular drink, it is harmful because of the sugar content and the chemicals. (Does it look like this thesis only has two points? Well…my first body paragraph might be about the popularity of soda. My second and third would focus on the harmful parts. Feel free to play with this structure a bit so that your thesis is unique!)

Introductions/ Conclusions

Introduction Types
Introductions: the PowerPoint gives five possible beginnings to your paper. There are many other ways to begin, but look at these examples to see if one will fit your material.

Conclusions:
Ideally, you will have the ending of your paper in sight when you begin writing. This doesn't mean you know the exact wording you’ll use, but that you know where you hope to guide the reader to—what questions you’ll have answered for them.
As with the thesis statement, the conclusion should clearly state your main argument to the reader. There are a number of ways to do this smoothly (without retyping your thesis statement at the end of your essay!).

Here are just a few:

1. Full-circle ending: Bring back the same idea that you used in the introduction. For example, if you used an anecdote to start your essay, revisit that story in the conclusion.
2. Look to the future: This type of ending discusses the possibility of what is to come. If you are writing a paper on the negative effects of global warming, you might end by describing a world without polar ice caps.
3. Call to action: This type of ending is particularly useful for a persuasive essay. It urges the reader to get off their chair and go do something. Perhaps after an article about voting rights, you would encourage your reader to take advantage of their right to vote.
4. Problem/Solution: If you are writing an essay discussing a problem, suggest a solution.

Topic Sentences and Transitions
An effective paragraph is often like a miniature essay, with an intro (topic sentence), a few main points supported with great detail, and a concluding sentence. Paragraphs, unlike essays, need to connect with each other and the main idea of the essay. This section will discuss both topic sentences and transition sentences (which often are also topic sentences).

Topic Sentences
Short or confusing paragraphs are often missing a topic sentence, which is the main idea of the paragraph. A good topic sentence, like a good thesis, is a strong statement that needs to be developed or proved. It’s a lot like when you start telling a story to someone. Let’s say you run into a friend who has broken his leg. You might say:

"I remember when I broke my leg."

Next, you would tell your friend the story about how you were sledding and flipped your sled and ricocheted off two trees before the final hit, which snapped your femur.

The "I remember" sentence serves as your topic sentence because it tells the point of the rest of your story. The story itself is the paragraph.

The same idea applies for arguments or non-narrative paragraphs. Ask yourself why you are writing a particular paragraph. What is it about? What’s your point? I like to complete this sentence:

With this paragraph, I want to show my reader that ____________________________.

Often, what you use to fill in the blank will work as a topic sentence and can be placed at the beginning of a paragraph.

Ex: With this paragraph, I want to show my reader that gymnastics is demanding on an athlete’s body.

The rest of your paragraph would give examples of how tough gymnastics is—perhaps you’d explain how many muscles are used during a backflip. Or you might examine how many falls happen during a practice. Every example and comment will relate back to the idea of it being a demanding sport.
Transitions
Transitions are words and sentences that show your reader how your ideas are related. They are the part that helps your writing "flow."

Often you can use transition words to help show the relationship between ideas, but don't let them stand on their own—a good transition is an entire sentence.

Since a transition sentence is supposed to connect two paragraphs, it's important to know what the Topic Sentence of each paragraph is. I like to write them down:

Thesis: Beauty ads are harmful to young girls’ self-esteem.

Topic Sentence 1: The ads give girls impossible standards to live up to.

Topic Sentence 2: The ads push girls to grow up too quickly.

Now I need some way for the reader to know how the “impossible standards” connects to the idea of “grow up too quickly.” It seems that they are both harmful effects of the ads, so I'll use that idea to relate them (I've underlined the transition words):

In addition to asking girls to live up to impossible standards, the ads ask girls to grow up too quickly.

OR

Not only do the ads give girls impossible standards, but they also force girls to grow up too quickly.

OR

Another harmful effect of the ads is that they ask girls to grow up too quickly.

Notice that in each of these examples (and these are just a few of the many options!) I combine the new idea (grow up) with either the main idea of the previous paragraph (standards) or the thesis (harmful effect). This ensures that my reader sees how the new idea goes with older ones.

Place the transition sentence at the BEGINNING of the 2nd paragraph—you don’t want to introduce a new idea at the end of a paragraph.

You won’t always be using transitions to show how topics are similar. Sometimes you will use them to show differences, time changes, effects, etc. Follow this link for a great chart of transitions words divided into categories:

http://www.smart-words.org/transition-words.html

STYLE
Having style in a paper is much like having style in life. Sure, we all wear clothes, and we all write essays. Some people are better than others at knowing how to dress and accessorize, and some know how to add in style to their essays. Luckily, style in writing is something you can learn.
Style is related to the ideas of tone, flow, sentence fluency, and diction (word choice). It is the attitude of the writer and how they convey that attitude to the reader. Let’s take a look at two different paragraphs and see how the authors use the elements of style to convey their voice.

Of my preschool years I have only impressions: the sharp bite of the wind in December as we walked with our parents toward the brightly lit stores downtown; how I felt like a stuffed doll in my heavy coat, boots, and mittens; how good it was to walk into the five-and-dime and sit at the counter drinking hot chocolate. On Saturday our whole family would walk downtown to shop at the big department stores on Broadway.

Judith Ortiz Cofer “Silent Dancing”

It is not altogether clear to me how I reached the ripe old age of twenty-two without being conscious of the lethality nighttime pedestrians attributed to me. Perhaps it was because in Chester, Pennsylvania, the small, angry industrial town where I came of age in the 1960s, I was scarcely noticeable against a backdrop of gang warfare, street knifings, and murder. I grew up one of the good boys, had perhaps a half-dozen fistfights. In retrospect, my shyness of combat has clear sources.

Brent Staples “Black Men and Public Space”


- **Sentence fluency** - Though these two paragraphs are approximately the same length, one has two sentences and the other has four. Longer sentences read more quickly and tie images together better. Shorter sentences create more force, since the reader needs to pause between them. By having the first long sentence, the Cofer paragraph ties together the sensory details and feelings she remembers; it creates a complete picture.

- **Diction** - The Staples paragraph is filled with formal words (“lethality”, “pedestrians”, “shyness of combat”). Choosing words that show his education/more formal mindset serves to highlight the difference between Staples and the other boys. Likewise, the Cofer paragraph uses familiar words: “brightly lit,” “stuffed doll.” Since she is trying to create a sense of ordinary family life, these words fit perfectly. Both authors use specific details to help paint the picture: It is not just a winter wind, but a “December” wind. Staples grew up not just in an “industrial town,” but in “Chester, Pennsylvania.”

- **Voice** - The familiar words and long sentences of the first paragraph create the feeling of home/ideal childhood. The voice is informal and personal—the author wants you to experience the memories with her. The second paragraph is more distant. The language is more formal, and there is more of an analytic feel (he’s examining something). Notice that each author has a distinct purpose for writing the paragraph, and that the voice MATCHES the purpose.

What this means for you is that you will want to try to match your purpose to your voice by looking at your sentences and your word choices. Most of the time for school, you will be asked to write in an academic style.

**Academic Style Guidelines:**

1. The focus is on clarity.
2. Sentences: a variety of sentence structures, but nothing too elaborate. Use of proper grammar in sentences to help with clarity (any deviations from Standard Written English are done for a specific purpose. Ex: using a fragment for emphasis).


4. Use your opinions, but don’t be emotional.
   a. (opinions) Reality television doesn’t offer viewers any worthwhile insights into humanity.
   b. (emotions) Reality television is a horrible form of entertainment that deserves to be banned.

5. Fully support all of your statements with details and comments.

This website has more information and examples of academic style:
http://www.uefap.com/writing/feature/intro.htm

Whatever style you use, keep your writing interesting by varying your sentence structure. This page has examples of a variety of sentence structures:

More sentence patterns

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**RESEARCH**

**Paraphrasing and Summary**

**Paraphrasing**
The standard definition is that paraphrasing means to put someone else’s work into your own words. It’s more complicated, though, than just switching a few words around. Think of paraphrasing as how you would convey the same ideas and content as the author.

These four strategies cover the range of what you can do—remember, though, that a good paraphrase will use more than one strategy:

1. Change significant words
2. Change sentence structure
3. Combine sentences (put ideas together)
4. Unpack sentences (turn a complex sentence into multiple sentences)

Here are some examples with a draft and final of the paraphrase:

**Original:** “Whatever your color, whatever your genes, you’re not a criminal until you’ve committed a crime.” Found on page 1.

- **Rough Draft Paraphrase:** No matter what your race or genetic background, you’re a criminal only if you break the law.
- **Final Paraphrase:** Whatever your race or genetic background, you’re a criminal only if you break the law (1).

**Original:** “All behavioral influences, environmental and genetic, are biologically mediated, and thus all behavior tendencies are in principle, subject to chemical intervention.” Found on page 13.
• **Rough Draft Paraphrase:** Everything that influences our behavior, whether arising from the environment or from our genetic make-up, does so biologically: our behavior is biologically determined. Thus, in theory, all behavior can be altered chemically, since chemical intervention can alter the way our bodies respond biologically.

• **Paraphrasing Final:** Everything that influences our behavior, whether arising from our environment or our genes, does so biologically—it influences our behavior by altering our biology. It holds, therefore, that behavior can be altered chemically, since chemicals affect biology, the ultimate source of our behavior (13).

Original: “Non-violent, direct action and peaceful disobedience were the hallmarks of the movement. Truth mattered and science was respected for the knowledge it brought to the debate.” Page 23

• **Draft of Paraphrase:** The movement was characterized by nonviolent actions and disobedience of authority in a peaceful way. One thing that was important was truth. Scientific findings were also valued and utilized.

• **Final:** The movement was characterized by nonviolent actions and disobedience. Both truth and science mattered; the latter was valued and used in discussions (23).


*Notice that sometimes a paraphrase is longer than the original. You want to maintain ALL of the original ideas that the author give, so a paraphrase works best for short sections.*

*Also notice the numbers at the end of the line. Since paraphrasing is using someone else’s ideas, you need to cite your source in the text.*

**Summary**

A summary is pulling the main ideas from the text. Unlike a paraphrase, a summary will always be shorter than the original. You will use a summary when you want to point out the main ideas of a large section of writing (or the entire article).

In order to summarize a text, you first need to extract the main idea. After that, you discuss the main supporting points. Here is an example. The main idea is underlined.

*By watching The Wizard of Oz, viewers learn that people already have what they need inside of them. This is first shown through the character of the scarecrow. Even though he doesn’t have brains, he is the one who finds the oil can for the Tin Man, as well as cleverly fends off the trees. Likewise, the Tin Man shows that he has a heart by crying often, which is a clear demonstration of emotion. Lastly, the Cowardly Lion actually shows courage by trying to defend Dorothy even though he is scared. All three of these characters are able to make use of the traits they seek because they already have them inside.*

Even in this short summary, I explained how the movie supported the main idea—I gave three examples (Scarecrow, Tin Man, Cowardly Lion) AND explained how those examples were supported (oil can, crying, defending Dorothy). A summary is not just a list of the points, but also a look at HOW the author supported his or her points.
Using Quotations
Quotations are a great way to develop your writing— they show you can integrate someone else’s thoughts into your work, which is an important skill. But correctly using quotations can be tricky. Here are some common problems to watch out for:

1. entire sentences dropped into paper
2. poorly chosen information
3. too much of the quotation

How to Properly Quote Material
A quotation should be incorporated into a sentence, and never left standing on its own. It’s your job to both explain how the quotation fits into your thoughts and to properly cite the source (use the author’s name and a page number if available).

The following examples give you options for using your quotations. They all use MLA format. Notice that the author’s name and page number ALWAYS appear somewhere—either in the sentence or at the end.

1. **Introduce with Author- verb**

   Ex: Dr. Brown notes that “twelve children out of every fifteen are overweight” (23).

   Ex: The editors of the Daily Times argue for “a new world view based on equality” (“Jobs” 2).

   Ex: Throughout the article Stephens maintains, “The truth of our existence lies in alien technology” (28).

2. **No Verb right before**

   Ex: According to the authors of “Having a Great Day,” a person’s “attitude reflects their ability to change with a situation” (78).

   Ex: In “Having a Great Day,” the authors argue that adaptation is vital: “An individual’s attitude reflects their ability to change with a situation” (78).

3. **True Integration :-)**

   Ex: While it’s true that some people are born grumpy, others “seem to develop a crustiness to their character over time” (“Having a Great Day” 78).

   Ex: As the author describes, a change in attitude can “redirect a sad day into a joyful one” (Stephens 43).

   Generally, you will not need an entire sentence quoted in your paper. Your own work will flow much better if you just take what you need from quoted material—these small sections of quotation are called “snippets.”

4. **Snippets**

   Ex: Those that “lack significant companionship” often rate themselves as “exceedingly miserable” in surveys (“Having a Great Day” 79).

   Ex: The authors of “Jobs” note that people will be dependent on green energy as part of the “new world view” (2).
Additional Considerations

5. Deleting Words: use an ellipsis to show deletion (…)

6. Adding/Replacing Words: use square brackets around your words to clarify
   Ex: “Dr. Seuss [Theodor Giesel] was a great man.”
   Ex: Original: “He made a lot of children happy.”
   Replaced for clarity: “[Dr. Seuss] made a lot of children happy.”

7. Mistakes in original text: insert [sic] after the spelling/grammar error. (Leave the error in the quotation.)

Plagiarism and Citation
In order to prevent plagiarism, it’s important to know what it is:

POLICY ON PLAGIARISM (from Student Handbook)

Shaw University students are expected to know how to recognize and avoid plagiarism.

Plagiarism is presenting other people’s work as your own. Using another person’s words, ideas or work is theft, just as surely as the theft of a car, tape player, or other tangible property. As members of the academic community students must be mindful of other people’s property. Failure to respect such property rights is considered a serious and punishable violation of appropriate conduct a Shaw University.

Plagiarism is:

1. presenting someone else’s idea but not giving credit for it (thereby implying the idea is yours),
2. presenting any work which was done by someone else (including another student), and
3. claiming it as your own work. Examples: Lab reports and computer assignments.

A student who plagiarizes an assignment can expect that he or she will receive a zero for the assignment and that the plagiarism incident will be reported to the Vice President for Student Affairs.

A second incident of plagiarism by the same student in the same class will result in automatic expulsion from the class and a grade of F in the course. The reason for the F will be documented in the grade report to the Registrar. The Registrar will maintain a record of students expelled from classes for plagiarism, and a copy of this record will be forwarded to the Vice President for Academic Affairs at the end of each semester.

Three incidents of plagiarism in a student’s college career will be cause for additional disciplinary action by the Vice President for Academic Affairs up to and including suspension.

It’s pretty easy to avoid obvious plagiarism (like material cut/pasted from a website). Where students run into problems is with improper citation.
FOLLOW THE FORMATTKING REQUIREMENTS FOR YOUR PAPER. If a professor requests MLA format, he or she wants you to include in-text citations and a properly formatted Works Cited Page. It is not enough to merely paste website addresses at the end of your paper.

COMMON KNOWLEDGE. Giving people credit for their words and ideas doesn’t mean that you’ll cite every sentence of your paper (that wouldn’t leave much room for your own thoughts, would it?). You also don’t need to cite something if it is common knowledge. A general rule of thumb is that if you know it, or can EASILY find the information in three different sources (not websites that copy information from one another), it is common knowledge. For example, the date of Pearl Harbor being bombed is common knowledge. How many American soldiers died is not (and so needs to be cited).

For more information about different methods of citation, visit the Shaw University Library page.

TYPES OF ESSAY DEVELOPMENT
These pages define the type of writing and give a basic structure for an essay. Remember that all methods of development can be used at the paragraph level as well. Also remember that these pages just give you the bones of an essay; the good parts, the skin and eyes and heart and lungs, come from you.

Narration
A narrative is a story. The emphasis is on using events to show a lesson learned, or an understanding that the narrator gains. For example, you might write about a family trip to the amusement park in which you learned to appreciate your sister. Most narratives focus on ONE event—the one game that you struck out in the last inning, rather than every game in which this happened.

Organization:
Since a narrative is based on events, the most common method of organization is chronological (time). Don’t play around with this too much; stories are much easier to understand if you start at the beginning and follow the actual order of events. Occasionally, you might use a flashback to give additional information.

For the introduction, you may start right in with the story, or you may explain what you gained from the experience: “playing chess that day with my grandpa taught me about respect.”

Start a new paragraph when you change physical location or if there is a jump in time.

Important actions should start or end a paragraph. Don’t bury vital information inside of a long paragraph—your reader might skim over it.

The conclusion should clearly state the lesson learned (the reason this event was important to you). It may also wrap up the action by explaining what happened after the event occurred.

Other Considerations:
Most of the time, the narrator is involved in the story, so it is fine to use “I.”

Since most stories already happened, past tense is the most common verb tense to use.

Use sensory details (all five senses) to help your reader picture the scenes.
Argumentation/ Persuasion
While all writing has an element of argumentation in it, a persuasive essay's main goal is to convince the reader to believe what the author believes.

In order to convince a reader of your point, you will need to use a variety of methods. Here are a few that you can base your paragraphs on (examples are from a paper arguing for children watching less television):

- Appeals to logic- the time we spend watching television could be used for learning new skills
- Appeals to emotion- imagine children never getting a chance to run and play or make connections with others because they are too busy watching television
- Facts/ Statistics- two-thirds of all children watch more than three hours of television each day
- Examples- when my cousin turned off the television for an entire summer, his kids learned to play new instruments and built a fort in their backyard

Organization:
An argumentative essay often employs the three-prong thesis, though that is definitely not a requirement. That type of thesis asks you to state your argument and then give three reasons, which sets you up for three body paragraphs:

Children should spend less time watching television because it is hurting their relationships with others, reduces their opportunities for learning, and causes obesity.

In this sample, you can see what points I am going to use to convince you that children should watch less television.

Your first body paragraph should be your strongest point.

Your second strongest point should go at the end of your argument (before the Opponent's Viewpoint)

Just before the conclusion, add in a paragraph where you state the main argument of your opponent and then explain why that point is not valid. This shows your reader that you have thoughtfully examined all angles of your argument. Ex: Some people say that television exposes children to new ideas and places that they wouldn't encounter in their ordinary lives. However…

Other Considerations:
Don't use hypothetical situations. If you can't find actual proof for your point, then the point isn't strong enough to use in a paper.

Avoid "you." This is true for most academic writing, but is particularly hard to avoid in persuasive writing. You, the author, want to tell your reader to do something OR you want to make a connection with them. The problem is that you never know who your reader will be. Let's say you start out by saying, "You wouldn't want your kids to watch television all day, would you?" —Well, maybe your reader does. Or maybe they hate children. So you've just alienated your reader by making assumptions. Avoid the problem by avoiding "you."

Want more information? Click here and scroll down to "Writing the Persuasive Essay".
Description
The goal of descriptive writing is to place the reader in the scene. This is done by using the five senses to create a dominant impression, which is one main theme about the topic. Jane Aaron, in 40 Model Essays, writes that the dominant impression “may be something you see in the subject, such as the apparent purposefulness of city pedestrians, or the expressiveness of an actor. Or it may derive from your emotional response to the subject” (22).

Organization:
The “argument” to this type of essay is that the place, person, or thing you are describing is valuable and worth reading about, so there usually isn’t an identifiable thesis statement. Rather, the dominant impression serves as your main idea.

Point of View—consistency is the key with description. If you are describing a room, you can’t just pick and choose which items to talk about; the reader will not be able to see the layout of the room, and they will be confused. However, if you start with the left side of the room and describe items in order (using transitions such as “to the right of the bed is the nightstand”), you will create a thorough picture of the place. Likewise, you don’t want to mix character traits and physical traits if you’re describing a person. It doesn’t matter what point you start from, but you must have a logical order to the description.

Other Considerations:
We tend to focus on sights when writing (or talking) descriptively. But there are four other senses that take in aspects of a thing. Use ALL of them in your writing—show what a place smells like, how the sand feels beneath your feet, or how the salty air tastes.

Word choice always matters, but it is especially telling in descriptive essays. Pay attention to the connotation of words—the emotional feeling attached to them. For example, “skinny” and “slender” mean the same thing, but if the kid you’re describing is annoying, you would choose to say he was “skinny” because that has a more negative feel to it.

Example
With example essays, you are illustrating your main points by using examples. You will generally use this strategy in conjunction with others, rather than on its own.

Organization:
A thesis for this type of paper will be a general statement that needs to be supported.
Ex: Sixteen-year-olds are dangerous drivers.

Your paper may be focused on ONE specific example that has smaller parts to it. Ex: The story of your friend, Carl, and all of the driving problems he had as a sixteen-year-old.

OR Your paper may include many smaller examples that all illustrate one central idea. Ex: You might use Carl’s accident, your own near-accident, AND a story from the newspaper about a sixteen-year-old who crashed.

Other Considerations:
As with persuasive essays, hypothetical examples will not work.
Be sure that your examples actually do support your main point. It sounds simple, but is often a problem. Ex: If Carl’s accident wasn’t his fault, then his example will not support your claim.

Develop your examples. Each one should be a small narrative, not a quick sentence.

Process Analysis
An analysis breaks something into its parts, so a process analysis is an essay that examines the various parts of a process. This can be used for any type of process: lab reports, reflections on your writing process, how-to papers, etc.

Organization:
Use the introduction to give an overview of the process—make sure your reader knows what the end goal is, as well as any necessary background information/materials.

Follow the order of the process you are describing.

Be detailed with each step of the process—use descriptive words to make sure the reader knows exactly what to do (or what you did).

Start a new paragraph for each new step in the process.

Other Considerations:
Make good use of transition words. This is a very structured type of essay, but it shouldn’t be dry and boring. Transition words help show the relationship between steps, which makes the paper flow better.

Cause/ Effect (Causal Analysis)
Cause: the reason behind something happening. An effect can have multiple causes.

Effect: the result. A cause can have multiple effects.

Cause/ Effect papers usually focus on EITHER the causes OR the effects. There are different types of causes that you will want to consider when developing your main points:

Necessary: has to exist to create effect

Contributory Causes: less important (cannot create effect on their own)

Causal Chain: one effect can be the cause of another effect, on so on

Your main focus of a Causal Analysis should be on the necessary causes, but don’t forget about other contributory causes, as they provide depth to your paper.

Organization:
This is another type of essay that lends itself to the three-prong thesis as a starting point. Here are some sample thesis statements that set the paper up for different organizations:

Chronological (effects): Eating healthier foods will cause an immediate energy gain, which will lead to a healthier exercise routine and better health overall.

Positive/ Negative (effects): While having a dog is a lot of work, the security and companionship that come with the animal are worth the trouble.
Main cause/ contributory causes (causes): Much of the U.S.’s obesity problem can be traced back to our sedentary lifestyle; however, genetic factors and population growth are also contributing factors.

Other Considerations:
One common problem is confusing chronology with a causal relationship. Two events happening in order doesn’t mean one CAUSED the other. Ex: The king died, and then the queen died—there is no clear connection between these two events.

Another problem is confusing coincidence with a causal relationship. Two things occurring at the same time don’t necessarily have a relationship. Ex: I was eating my French fries, and I stubbed my toe; therefore, eating French fries causes toe injuries—this seems pretty silly.

Acknowledge that the world can’t be shoved into a neat little essay. You will not be able to cover every possible cause and effect in one paper, so don’t say, for example, that obesity is caused ONLY by the three points you focus on.

Classification/ Division
A Classification paper asks you to divide a topic into its parts. You might be asked to do this for a range of classes, including a science class (examining different parts of the human heart) or a literature class (examining different critical theories of the 20th century).

Organization:
Provide a rationale for your division in the introduction—what do you hope to gain from examining your topic this way?

Be consistent with the divisions you make. Divide your topic into similar parts. You don’t want to write an essay about sports in which you divide the topic into basketball, hockey, football, and the Olympics. Though the Olympics have to do with sports, they are not a similar part.

In the conclusion, explain what you learned from dividing your topic. How do all of the parts fit together?

Other Considerations:
To go more deeply into your topic, consider re-classifying some of your points as you make them. For example, if you write that paper on sports, you might divide “sports” into basketball, hockey, football, and curling. You might discuss basketball and football first, as they are ball sports. This will help the flow of your paper.

Compare/ Contrast
This type of paper is useful for examining two subjects that are related in some way. You might be asked to compare two essays on cheating, or perhaps examine two methods of reaching a solution for a math problem.

Organization:
You have two basic choices for organization with a compare/contrast paper, though both can easily be adapted to fit with your topic and ideas. For the following outlines, the “Topics” refer to the two big ideas being compared and contrasted (say, cats and dogs), while the “Points” refer to the elements of those topics that are being compared and contrasted (perhaps ease of care, companionship, length of life).
**Method 1. Alternating (Point-by-point)**

I. Introduction

II. Point 1
   A. Topic 1
   B. Topic 2

III. Point 2
   A. Topic 1
   B. Topic 2

IV. Point 3
   A. Topic 1
   B. Topic 2

V. Conclusion

**Method 2. Block**

I. Introduction

II. Topic 1
   A. Point 1
   B. Point 2
   C. Point 3

III. Topic 2
   A. Point 1
   B. Point 2
   C. Point 3

IV. Conclusion*

* the conclusion for this method will be more involved than for method 1—since there is no opportunity within the body paragraphs to directly compare/contrast the two, the conclusion is the place to do this.

A third choice for this type of essay involves similarities and differences:

I. Introduction

II. Similarities
III. Differences

IV. Why the similarities and differences matter.

Other Considerations:
Be balanced with your comparisons. If you go into more detail on one of your topics than the other, be sure to explain WHY you are doing that.

Synthesis
To synthesize means to take from separate sources and pull into one. This is an especially important skill for research, where you are expected to draw from multiple sources. A synthesis goes beyond a compare/contrast essay because it examines the RELATIONSHIPS between the texts.

Writers divide synthesis into two types: argumentative and explanatory.

- **Argumentative**: This is what you do when you write a persuasive paper with outside sources. You take the information from your sources and use it as support for your points.

- **Explanatory**: Professors will sometimes ask for a synthesis of two articles—for an assignment like this, give a short summary of each article first, then discuss how the articles are related to one another. Is one an expansion of the other? Do they hold opposite views? EXPLAIN how these differences and similarities fit with the main argument of each.

Organization:
Since this is more of a technique than an actual paper type, there isn’t a set organizational pattern. Do remember to write your own paper and use your sources as support, rather than basing your paper around what the sources say.

Other Considerations:
Remember to document your sources properly.

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CONVENTIONS

Issues with verbs
Verbs cause a lot of problems because they are the parts of speech that change the most from region to region. For example,

I would tell my mom: “I’m gonna go shopping.”

But in an academic paper, I would write: “I’m going to go shopping.”

Or if I was feeling very formal: “I am going to go shopping.”

Notice how in each example, it is the verb that changes. This is why verbs are tricky—the rules for verbs in your home language may be different than what is expected in standard written English. The rules may be much different, or only different in a few cases. Either way, when you’re writing an academic paper, you basically have to switch languages and follow different rules. This page will go over some of the rules for standard written English.
Subject/ Verb Agreement
Simply put, this means that if your subject is one person, you’re using a verb that implies one person. Likewise, if your subject is more than one person/ thing, your verb shows this. In general, a plural word has a different verb form than a singular word.

Regular verbs (most verbs) use an “s” when referring to a “s”ingular person/thing.

**Ex: The dog sits.**  The dogs sit.
In this example, notice how when I change to a plural (dogs), the verb loses the “s.”

Some of the irregular verbs change even more:

**Ex: The dog has a bone.**  The dogs have a bone.
**Ex: The dog is tired.**  The dogs are tired.

With short sentences, this rule is fairly easy to follow. It gets very tricky with complicated sentences—with these, you need to go back and find the subject.

**Ex:** For instance, when students look at a longer sentence that has many parts, they are more easily confused about which noun is the subject and which verb is the main verb.

In this example, “they” is the subject and “are confused” is the verb.

Verb Tense
As a reminder, verb tense refers to the time you are talking about: whether something is happening now, in the past, or in the future.

- **Past:** The dog walked up the stairs and sat down.
- **Present:** The dog walks up the stairs and sits down.
- **Future:** The dog will walk up the stairs and sit down.

Notice how both verbs in the sentence change depending on when the action happens. Writers often will begin a paragraph in one tense, then switch to another. You’ll need to proofread carefully to make sure you are being consistent.

Past is the most common tense to use. The one exception is if you are writing about literature. We always write about literature in present tense, since the story is happening every time you open the book.

Active Verbs
Verbs are an important way to add description to a narrative or story. Think about using active verbs and adjectives to help draw a picture of what was happening. Let’s look at an example:

If I write, “The dog went inside and sat on the floor,” you don’t know much about the dog’s attitude or anything, really.

But if I change the boring “went” to an active verb and add an adverb, the scene becomes clearer: “The dog raced inside and sat patiently on the floor.”

Now we know that he’s excited and waiting for something. While not every sentence has to be active, using more action words is one way to add more description.
Sentence structure

Fragments
A fragment is a phrase that is not a complete sentence. A complete sentence needs to have a subject (someone or something performing an action) and a predicate (a phrase that contains a verb—what the subject is doing). While using a few fragments here and there can be a good stylistic choice, too many make your essay sound choppy.

Here are a few examples of complete sentences: *He sat. The ball bounced away.*

In both of these cases, there is a subject (he, ball) doing something (sat, bounced).

Fragments are often complete sentences that have joining words attached. The problem is that when the joining words don’t join two sentences, they don’t make sense.

Here is an example of two fragments: *When he sat. While the ball bounced away.*

***How to check for fragments***

Put the words “I don’t believe that…” in front of the possible fragment. If it still makes sense, you’ve got a sentence. If it doesn’t, you have a fragment.

Ex: *I don’t believe that the ball bounced away.* (This still makes sense, so “the ball bounced away” is a sentence.

*I don’t believe when he sat.* (This doesn’t sound right, so “when he sat” does NOT make a sentence.)

Comma Splices
When you have two complete sentences that are connected with a comma, but NOT a conjunction, you have a comma splice.

(Conjunctions are words like the “FANBOYS”—for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so—and others, like while, since, etc.)

Here’s an example: *The dog waited by the door, he was patient.* Can you see that on either side of the comma I have a complete sentence?

The easiest way to correct this is to change out the comma for a period. Two other ways to fix this problem are to replace the comma with a semi-colon OR to add a conjunction.

1. Replace comma with period: *The dog waited by the door. He was patient.*
2. Add a semi-colon if the sentences are closely related: *The dog waited by the door; he was patient.*
3. Add a conjunction to make one sentence: *The dog waited by the door, and he was patient.*

Fused Sentences
A fused sentence is a type of run-on where you take two complete sentences (that means that they have a subject and a verb) and put them next to each other without any punctuation. You might recognize these when you read them out loud; there will be a natural pause between the end of one sentence and the subject of the next.

Here’s an example: *The dog barked for hours I didn’t know what to do.*
Read it out loud. Can you hear the pause between “hours” and “I”? The obvious fix is to separate these into two sentences: The dog barked for hours. I didn’t know what to do.

Another option is to add a comma and a conjunction (a word like “for” or “but”) to make it one complete sentence: The dog barked for hours, and I didn’t know what to do.

This option is nice because it keeps the ideas closely related. Always read your essay out loud. Ninety percent of the time you will catch fused sentences when you hear them.

**Parallel Structure**

When you list two or more items in a sentence, the items need to have the same structure; that’s called parallelism, and you need to have it to make your paper flow. Having the same structure usually means that the verb forms match.

- **PARALLEL:** The children ate, swam, and played.
  NOT PARALLEL: The children eat, swam, and played. (Notice “eat” is present tense, while “swam” and “played” are past.)
- **PARALLEL:** On Saturdays, my mom likes to sleep in, jog, and then cook a large pot of soup.
  NOT PARALLEL: On Saturdays, my mom likes to sleep in, jogs, and then cooks a large pot of soup. (The first part of the sentence is fine—“my mom likes to sleep in.” But how does “my mom likes to jogs” sound? Or “my mom likes to cooks” sound?)

***How to test parallel structure:***

Make sure that every part of the list matches the beginning of the sentence when read all by itself. From the example above, you can see that the elements “jogs” and “cooks” don’t match with the beginning of the sentence “my mom likes to.”

**Commas**

**FANBOYS**

FANBOYS is an acronym for “for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.” These connecting words are the coordinating conjunctions. A lot of comma problems happen around these words.

The basic rule is to use a comma BEFORE the conjunction, never after. (Never write: “But, it was…,” even if you do pause there when you speak.)

Whenever you use a conjunction to join two independent clauses (clauses that are sentences), you need to use a comma. You will also need a comma when the conjunction is between two separate, but equally important, ideas in a sentence.

Here are some examples:

* I wanted to go swimming, but Johnnie said it was too cold.

* Never in my life had I been so upset, and never had I been so wet.

In both of these examples, there is a sentence on either side of the conjunction. The comma is placed just before the conjunction.

*One confusing addition to this rule has to do with the word “and.” You need a comma when the “and” separates two different subjects doing separate actions (this is the same rule as above—you have a
complete sentence on either side of the comma/conjunction). Otherwise, you don’t need the comma. Here are some examples:

I went hunting and fishing.

The dog went with me, and we stopped for ice cream.

In the first example, “I” does both actions (hunting and fishing). In the second example, “The dog” does the action of going, and then a new subject (“we”) does the action of stopping.

**Parenthetical Information**

Parenthetical information is information that is not necessary to the meaning of the sentence. It is great because it adds detail, but the sentence would work fine grammatically if it was just taken out.

Commas are a wonderful way to separate parenthetical information from the core of a sentence. The trouble, though, is deciding when information is essential to the sentence and when it is not.

One guideline that will work most of the time is to look for conjunctions. There are many kinds of these (more than just the coordinating kind discussed above), and they include words such as however, while, when, which, and, nor, although, by, etc. When you see one of these words, you will generally need a comma (this sentence is an example). In the following examples, I’ve underlined the necessary parts of the sentences:

While wandering through the store, Megan found lip gloss.

The cookie, which was homemade, was delicious.

The man that ate the cookie was handsome.

In this last example, you don’t need a comma because the fact that the man ate the cookie is necessary to identify him. He is a specific man being pointed out. In the second example, the use of which (instead of that) shows that being homemade is extra information.

Another problem area is when there is extra descriptive information. This usually is around book titles or names. In this example, the fact that Atwood is an author is an extra detail.

*Margaret Atwood, author of Cat’s Eye, is a Canadian.*

**Commas after Introductory Phrases**

An introductory phrase is a word or group of words that introduces the main idea of a sentence. It isn’t the main idea, but adds extra information. Since the information IS extra, just like with the examples above, it needs to be separated out with a comma.

For example: *As Helen noticed, the birds fly south in the fall.*

The main idea is that the birds fly south. The fact that Helen noticed it is just extra information and needs to be separated by a comma. You can often recognize these phrases by words like “although,” “if,” “while,” and “when.” You will know that the clause is done when you reach a new subject (usually a noun or pronoun). That’s where the comma goes.

Here are a few other examples:

- Although Sarah was tired, she drove home.
• Unless we act now, all is lost.

**Apostrophes**
Apostrophes show ownership. When a singular word needs to show possession, you add an apostrophe and an s. If the word is plural or ends in an s, you can just add an apostrophe.

Ex:

• My friend’s dog ate a bone. (This shows a dog owned by one friend.)
• My friends’ dog ate a bone. (This shows a dog that is owned by many.)

Many believe Jesus’ name is sacred. (Even though Jesus is one person, the name ends in an “s,” so you can just add the apostrophe.

Its and It’s are also a common issue because they are backwards. Remember that if it makes sense to substitute in “it is,” then you use the one with the apostrophe. (It is = it’s)

Ownership is shown without the apostrophe.