Formatting Your Paper

There are nearly as many different possible formats for writing a paper as there are instructors. The only way to know that your papers are going to conform exactly to what your instructors are looking for is to ask what they want. Ask to look at a sample paper. If all instructors could agree on one simple format, that would be nice, and that style would probably be something easy to remember, like the style recommended by the Modern Language Association. Check out the MLA handouts on our Web site (http://www.write.armstrong.edu/) or stop by The Writing Center in Gamble 109 to review the MLA handbook.

Here are some generic suggestions for formatting your paper, attempted answers to the inevitable question: “What’s this paper supposed to look like?” But remember, if you have any doubts or questions, ask your instructor.

📝 Word-processing is not just a good thing, a clever technological device to make your writing look good; it makes the composing and editing processes much easier and (some people claim) even fun; it is technology that you ignore to your peril.

📝 Double space all typing in all documents. A serif font should be used, something like Times or Times New Roman in a 12-point font. Don’t use anything fancy and avoid the non-serif fonts—such as Century Gothic, the one used here—as they can become difficult to read after a while; cursive scripts are forbidden. Never mix font styles.

📝 Use one-inch margins all the way around the edge of your text. Justify the left margin only, never the right, even though your word-processing program makes full justification look really nifty. Justified margins tend to create some spacing and word divisions that are not appropriate.

📝 Use plain black printing off a good laser, ink-jet, or bubble-jet printer. If you don’t have a printer that produces letter-quality work, bring your floppy disk into a computer lab where you can print your paper using a better printer. Use plain, white, 20-lb., 8½ by 11-inch paper.

📝 With modern word-processing programs, it is a good idea to get into the habit of using only one space after a period, question mark, semicolon, or colon. Word-processing programs will allow for the appropriate settings. If you have any question about spacing, ask your instructor, who may have learned to space his or her typing on ancient typewriters and may still use double-spacing after periods.

The material presented in this handout has been adapted from “The Guide to Grammar and Writing,” located at http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm.

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Writing Center
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Spacing around quotation marks and parentheses can raise questions. See our sheet on Quotation Marks at [http://www.write.armstrong.edu/QuotationMarks.pdf](http://www.write.armstrong.edu/QuotationMarks.pdf) and our Parentheses sheet at [http://www.write.armstrong.edu/Parentheses.pdf](http://www.write.armstrong.edu/Parentheses.pdf). The most important rule you must remember about quotation marks is that in the United States, periods and commas go inside quotation marks, regardless of logic.

Titles can be important. If you can’t think of a good title, it might mean that your paper has no real focus. Capitalize the first, last, and important words of your title. A title can end in a question mark or exclamation point, but it cannot end in a period. This rule is different from usage in other languages. You might use quotation marks in a title if a portion of your title refers to someone else’s title—of a poem, say—but do not put quotation marks around your own title.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples:</th>
<th>Acceptable</th>
<th>Robert Frost’s “Design”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unacceptable</td>
<td>“Robert Frost’s ‘Design’”</td>
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A title page is probably unnecessary, but you should ask about your instructor’s preference. If you do use one, avoid fancy graphics or bold or italic printing on the title page.

Place your name, your instructor’s name, the course number, and the date at the top of the first page, aligned left. Your instructor may ask you to put your name on each sheet of paper.

Never use the back of a sheet of paper; staple additional sheets in the upper left-hand corner. Some professors may not want their students to use plastic binders. These professors may consider them cumbersome and/or a waste of money. Most instructors usually want a nice, flat stack of papers they can easily place into an attaché case, briefcase, or backpack. The plastic binders can also get in the way when it’s time to grade papers.

Depending on your instructor and the level at which you are writing, evidence of careful re-reading and editing here and there is permissible, such as a last minute correction done neatly with a pen; sloppiness is not. Your paper ought to be nearly perfect when you hand it in to your professor.

Do not wait until the very last minute to print your paper. Evil, fun-loving gremlins reside in every printer ever made, just waiting to detect a last-minute paper so they can jam up, eat paper, create havoc, and make your life miserable. Your instructor is just as tired of the excuse of the demonic printer as the excuse of the plague that strikes down millions of grandmothers near the end of every semester.

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