

How to get an ‘A’ on a paper

Jack Santucci

Updated January 2019

Absolute basics

- 1- or 1.5-inch margins.
- Double-spaced text.
- 12-point font.
- Chicago author-date citations.
- Respect the word limit.
- Your name, the date, and a title.

How to get an ‘A’

1. State and defend a succinct thesis. Don’t just “tick boxes” implied by the prompt.
2. Go beyond summarizing someone else’s thoughts. ‘A’ is for argument – one of your own!
3. Clarity matters. You need to walk the reader through your logic. Don’t make them struggle to interpret your meaning.
4. Big words hurt clarity. They force the reader to interpret your meaning, force you to end up defining lots of terms, or both. Use big words sparingly.
5. Avoid passive voice. If you can’t say who did what to whom and why, your thinking isn’t clear, and the paper won’t be.
6. Organize the paper to make it easy on the reader. Paragraphs should open with topic sentences, so that one could make an outline from those alone.¹
7. Cut down on filler. Everything in your paper should support your “takeaway” point.
8. Consider the biggest possible objection to your key point. What would it take to convince the sort of person who is predisposed to reject your key point?
9. Focus on the key points of lectures and/or readings (course or otherwise). Don’t just cite them to pad a reference list.
10. Focus on relevant readings (especially from the course). Paper assignments test your ability figure out what’s relevant, then make the connections.
11. Proofread. I try not to penalize grammar, but I can’t promise it won’t make an impression.

¹For more on paragraphs, see: <https://bit.ly/1AGSKva>.