

Blog this?

Questions that Professor Salamon is Frequently Asked About Papers. With Answer Key.

Q: Professor Salamon, when is the paper due?

A: It is due right before class starts.

Q: Can I email it to you?

A: Nope. I would like it printed on paper, stapled, sitting in a neat stack on my desk before class starts.

Q: Can I have more time?

A: You may turn your paper up to a week after the deadline for any reason. In that case you will be docked a letter grade and will not receive detailed comments on your paper.

Q: Can I talk to you about my paper?

A: Absolutely yes. Come to my office hours and we'll chat.

Q: I have an idea for my paper, but I'm not sure it will work. Can you help me?

A: I'd love to. Come to office hours and we'll figure it out together.

Q: I don't know what I want to write on. No idea. Not one. Can you help me?

A: I'm afraid not. But if you keep thinking and come up with some idea, any idea, or even any direction you might like to explore, I'd be delighted to help you to shape and refine it.

Q: Can I send you a paragraph of my paper to read?

A: Absolutely.

Q: How about a whole page?

A: Sure.

Q: How about the whole paper so you can tell me if I am on the right track?

A: No. But if you want to tell me what your argument is I can give you feedback.

Q: How late can I email you about this?

A: Up to 48 hours before the paper is due.

Q: But can't I check in with you about the idea I came up with while drinking a Red Bull at four in the morning after working on my paper all night long the night before it is due?

A: I so don't want to read that email. See above. If you wait until the very last minute, you're on your own, pal.

Q: Should I turn in my first draft?

A: Sometimes you will. But I can guarantee you that your second draft will be better.

Q: What do you mean, second draft? How am I supposed to do that? One draft is hard enough!

A: Often you will write several pages and only at the end of them, only at the end of that process of writing, figure out that you have been saying P, when what you really wanted to say is X. In that case, throw away those several pages about P that you just wrote and start over, beginning with X.

Q: Margins? Font size? How do you feel about Courier?

A: in matters of formatting I would like you to hew as closely to accepted norms as is possible. Double-spaced, 12 point font, one-inch margins. Courier is like a big Post-It note on the front page of your paper telling me that your paper is not long enough.

Q: MLA or Chicago? Footnotes or endnotes?

A: Whichever delights your soul.

Q: If one of my classmates said something smart in class should I footnote that?

A: Yes, I encourage you to do so. Generosity in citational practice is an excellent habit.

Q: Can I be critical of the author I am talking about?

A: You may. But: tread lightly here, and try to be generous as possible as you do so. I am less interested in reading you "catching" the author in inconsistency or contradiction or factual error, and more interested to see that you can reproduce the argument and think through some of its consequences. Being quarrelsome and critical are not the same thing as advancing an excellent argument. Remember: before you say No to a text you need to first say Yes to it three times. You must

- 1) Read it. In its entirety. More than once.
- 2) Be able to reproduce the argument and
- 3) Attempt to extend the argument somewhere the author herself did not.

Q: You keep saying "make an argument." What exactly do you mean by that?

A: An argument is in essence a claim supported by reasons, where those reasons take their evidence from the text. You will need to understand and be able to convey what the author's argument is *as well as* crafting your own argument about theirs. Yes, this can get all meta pretty quickly. But this is what differentiates the kind of paper I want you to write from a book report or a white paper, where you give me the author's views and leave out your own. Or, say, a blog post, in which you might offer a claim but don't necessarily support it textually.

Q: Make an argument about an argument? This sounds complicated and I'm getting dizzy.

A: It is. You will. I understand. But grab onto this truth as if it were a life preserver: everything you need in order to accomplish this task is already there in the text you are reading.

A: Any other advice you would like to give me as I am writing?

Q: Yes. Give your paper a title. Not the title of the text you are writing on, that title is already taken.

When your paper is written, don't wait to print it out three minutes before class. Printers can sense your fear and will jam or run out of ink and you will be late and I will be unhappy.

Don't start your paper with a huge broad claim: "From the beginning of time..."

You can always use "I" in a paper, but make sure you are using that first person singular to advance an argument, and not just what you feel about a text, a thumbs-up or thumbs-down response.

Do attend as closely and as carefully as you can to the specific language that the author uses. Figuring out what the author is saying is crucial. Thinking about *how* she is saying it is the next step.

Finally: What do *you* want to say about the whole thing? Compare and contrast is not an argument. Summary, even expertly done, is not an argument. Find something that incites or inspires you, and dig in. Didn't find either of those while you were reading? Go back to the text, turn to the first page, and begin again...