

245W: What to expect – Term papersⁱ

Now that you know that you will be turning in a 15 page term paper at the end of the semester, do you have a good idea, especially if this is the first long paper you are writing in college, what instructors expect in a good term paper? Pechenik (2004) summarizes this expectation nicely by stating that a term paper “must interpret thoughtfully what you have read and come up with something that goes beyond what is presented in any single [journal] article or book consulted”. The verbs she uses for the process of preparing a term paper include: synthesize, explore, analyze, compare, contrast, evaluate, organize, and argue. In the end, your term paper will make you teach yourself through reading primary literature about a topic related to your course in depth. You will explore, then critically evaluate the literature, and finally synthesize your newfound knowledge of this topic and present your assessments and conclusions about it in a rather long essay.

The first step to getting there is to pick a good topic. The topic should be something that interests you, otherwise you will end up spending a lot of time reading and writing about something that you do not really care for. That would make no practical sense, especially if you have a full course load and extra time is a rare commodity. It is generally a good idea to start with a fairly broad topic, then to narrow it down to something that grabs you intellectually. For instance, say that you are interested in the mating behavior of birds. However, there are many species of birds and several types of mating systems or mating signals. It would be very difficult to write a meaningful paper about the broad topic of mating behavior in birds because the scope is too large. You will need to narrow down your topic to something that is manageable, maybe by reading about different species of birds in library books or journal review articles, or perhaps by watching nature documentaries on birds. The opposite can happen as well. If you pick a very specific topic, such as song mimicry in the Crested Oropendola (because you happened to see a segment about them in a nature documentary on birds), you may not be able to come up with enough material to fill your page requirement. In this case, you may want to broaden your topic to include all oropendolas, or investigate song mimicry in a few different species of birds. And if that does not work, it may be a good idea for you to think about an entirely different topic. It may initially seem like you wasted a lot of effort to go and change topics at this point, but it is much easier to do it now than after having already written large portions of your paper.

The last point I'd like to make about your topic is that it needs to be related to your course content. You can have the most interesting topic you can imagine, but if you cannot relate it to what you are learning in your course then it will be inappropriate for your term paper. If you are not sure, ask your instructor. This can save you a lot of future anguish and frustration.

References

Pechenik, J. A. 2004. *A Short Guide to Writing about Biology*, 5th ed. Pearson Longman

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