

**SPNA Student Guide:**

# The Paper Writer's Checklist

<b>content</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Does the paper contain all the information required by your instructor? <input type="checkbox"/> Is your purpose or thesis stated clearly at the beginning? <input type="checkbox"/> Is all information accurate and complete? <input type="checkbox"/> Are your block quotations useful and well integrated into your paper?	<input type="checkbox"/> Do you have a strong conclusion fully supported by the content? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you made your conclusions without needing to introduce new material? <input type="checkbox"/> Is the right amount of detail provided? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you avoided "cheer leading"?
<b>organization</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Is each required section for this type of paper included and easily identified? <input type="checkbox"/> Is there a systematic framework into which you organize material? <input type="checkbox"/> Is an overview of your paper's content provided near the beginning?	<input type="checkbox"/> Does your overview include a rationale for your paper's organizing framework? <input type="checkbox"/> Are enough heading levels used and are they clearly distinguishable? <input type="checkbox"/> Do the headings help the reader follow the paper and keep focus on the main ideas?
<b>reference</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Have you put long direct quotations in a block format with an appropriate in-text reference? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you put short direct quotations in quotation marks with an appropriate in-text reference? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you referenced sources from whom you have paraphrased or obtained ideas?	<input type="checkbox"/> Do you have a reference list consistent with an established style guide (such as APA)? <input type="checkbox"/> Is every reference in the body of the paper in the reference list (and visa versa)? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you repeatedly referenced the same source? <input type="checkbox"/> Is the source for each table and figure referenced correctly?
<b>mechanics</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Does the paper meet all the specific class formatting requirements? <input type="checkbox"/> Is each page numbered? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you avoided "orphaned" and "widowed" lines and headings? <input type="checkbox"/> Does each paragraph include a topic sentence? <input type="checkbox"/> Are many paragraphs longer than six lines? <input type="checkbox"/> Do you use parallel structure in sentences and lists?	<input type="checkbox"/> Are sentences in active voice? <input type="checkbox"/> Are sentences in third person? <input type="checkbox"/> Are many sentences longer than 20 words? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you used more than three prepositional phrases in a row? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you eliminated unnecessary and wordy phrases? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you checked for inappropriately used words? <input type="checkbox"/> Are all acronyms explained when they are first encountered?
<b>visuals</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Does each of the tables and figures serve a useful purpose by making information more understandable? <input type="checkbox"/> Is each chart and graph easily read and interpreted? <input type="checkbox"/> Are each chart and graph labeled correctly?	<input type="checkbox"/> Could a table or figure be added that would make certain information more understandable? <input type="checkbox"/> Is enough white space used to create an attractive appearance? <input type="checkbox"/> Have you appropriately used font types, styles, and sizes?
<b>proof reading</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Have you used your word processor's grammar and spelling checker?	<input type="checkbox"/> Has someone other than yourself read the paper?

# *Explanations*

## **Content**

- Does the paper contain all the information required by the specific class instructions?  
This always has to be the first step. Carefully review instructions provided by your instructor. Points may be deducted for even minor deviations. When in doubt, consult your instructor.
- Is your purpose or thesis stated clearly at the beginning?  
Your introduction should provide a definitive statement on your paper's purpose. Explain your topic. Explain its importance. Summarize your conclusions. After the introductory material is presented, there should be no surprises.
- Is all information accurate and complete?  
This is obvious, important and probably impossible. Still, it is a goal.
- Are your block quotations useful and well integrated into your paper?  
You should use a long block quote when another author has captured an idea in an exceptionally useful and compelling way. You should not use a block quote because an important author has written an incomprehensible paragraph that you feel compelled to incorporate.
- Do you have a strong conclusion fully supported by the content?  
Your conclusion needs to be well crafted. You should write the conclusion before you have completed your paper, and revise it as necessary. This will help you write toward the conclusion.
- Have you made your conclusions without needing to introduce new material?  
New material should not be introduced in the conclusion. The conclusion does not go beyond what is supported in the body paper. If you want to speculate beyond the presented information, make sure these comments are clearly labeled as such.
- Is the right amount of detail provided?  
Do not make important or provocative statements without appropriate explanation and support. However, do not bog down in excessive detail on minor points. Part of your job is to select and summarize. If you feel that very detailed or technical information is important, consider creating an appendix for this information.
- Have you avoided "cheer leading"?  
In most cases, your tone should convey objectivity. Even when you write about a policy or agency that you are personally enthusiastic about, you must avoid using complementary adjectives absent supporting material. The following is suspect: "This outstanding community service agency is located in Grand Haven." The following is acceptable: "This Grand Haven agency enjoys an outstanding reputation for community service, as evidence by several positive articles in the local media (Kang, 1998; Rotondaro, 1999; Wascovich, 1994)"

## **Organization**

- Is each required section for this type of paper included and easily identified?  
Quantitative research papers, policy briefs, project proposals, and many other types of papers are expected to conform to certain conventions. Make sure you are aware of those conventions appropriate for your paper. Ask your instructor if you are in doubt.



Check if your instructor requires a specific reference style. Most SPNA instructors favor the reference style presented in the *American Psychological Association Publication Manual*, 4th ed. (APA, ISBN:1557982414, 1994). This reference should be on your shelf. Otherwise, see the *APA Style Guide* at Ohio State: <http://www.newark.ohio-state.edu/~osuwwrite/apa.htm>

- Is every reference in the body of the paper in the reference list (and visa versa)?  
Books and articles that you do not reference in your text should not be in the reference list. If you need to make a "bibliography" of all publications related to your topic, it should be labeled as such and it should be separate from your reference list.
- Have you repeatedly referenced the same source?  
If you find yourself citing the same source after each sentence in one section of your paper, consider adding a footnote to the first sentence of this section. This footnote might read: "The information on immigration found in the next three paragraphs is extracted from Williams (1969), unless otherwise noted."
- Is the source for each table and figure referenced correctly?  
Each table and figure that is taken directly from a publication is referenced as "From ..." Each table and figure that is modeled after one found in a publication is referenced as "Adapted from..." Each original table and figure that is created with data obtained from another source is referenced as "Data from..."

## **Mechanics**

- Does the paper meet all the specific class formatting requirements?  
A true "no brainer."
- Is each page numbered?  
Do not count the cover page, table of contents or other prefatory material as a page. Do count all other pages, including any pages with graphs that printed separately and inserted by hand.
- Have you avoided any "orphaned" or "widowed" lines and headings?  
The first line of a paragraph or a heading of a new section should not be a single line at the bottom of a page (widow). The last line of a paragraph should not be at the top of a page (orphan).
- Does each paragraph include a topic sentence?  
Each paragraph should develop a single idea, which is introduced in a topic sentence. This sentence is often the first sentence of the paragraph.
- Are many paragraphs longer than six lines?  
This is just a general rule of thumb. Look at paragraphs that are longer than six lines and see if they should be split into two paragraphs.
- Do you use parallel structure in sentences and lists?  
Elements linked as compound subjects, objects, verbs, and modifiers should have the same form. Items in a list should have the same form. "The proposed highway extension promises to increase pollution levels, be disturbing to productive farmland and a promoter of urban sprawl" is better stated as "The proposed highway extension will increase pollution levels, disturb productive farmland and promote urban sprawl."
- Are sentences in active voice?

For example, "Action is being considered by the House Ethics Committee" would better be written "The House Ethics Committee is considering action." Passive voice is appropriate in two circumstances. The first is when the focus of the sentence is really the object rather than the subject. For example, "The new policy proposal was quickly denounced by most opposition legislators, leading academics and media pundits" is acceptable in a paragraph built around the release of a new policy proposal. Second, passive voice may be appropriate when the subject is unknown or general. For example, "Surveys were distributed to all participants of the conference" is acceptable if the fact that Mr. Haque and Ms. Van der Velde did the distributing is not relevant.

Are sentences third person?

First person should generally be avoided. First person may be appropriate when you are an important actor in the story you are telling. For example, "In May 1996, I drafted the agency's mission statement and presented it to the board for approval" may be appropriate. First person should not be used in making a conclusion. For example, "I think this policy is good for three reasons" should be "This policy has three advantages."

Are many sentences longer than 20 words?

This is another rule of thumb. Treat the 20 word threshold as a danger sign.

Have you used more than three prepositional phrases in a row?

Danger Will Robinson! Danger!

Have you eliminated unnecessary and wordy phrases?

Look for phrases that use many words to say almost nothing. Common suspects include: "due to the fact that"; "In terms of"; and "at that point in time." A useful web pages on this topic is: [www.pnl.gov/ag/usage/deadwood.html](http://www.pnl.gov/ag/usage/deadwood.html)

Have you checked for inappropriately used words?

A surprising number of common words and phrases are considered improper or are frequently misused. Most people know that "hopefully" should not begin a sentence (but use it anyway). Other common mistakes involve the words "it's" (which means "it is" and not "belongs to it") , "literally" (when "figuratively" is meant), "irregardless" (which is not a word), "imply" (when "infer" is meant), and allot (when "a lot" is meant). It may not be possible to avoid all improper word usage, but a good editing reference like *Line By Line* by Claire Kehrwald Cook (Houghton Mifflin, ISBN: 0395393914, 1985) should help.

Are all acronyms explained when they are first encountered?

Upon first appearance, an organization's name must be written out completely and followed by the acronym in parentheses. For example: "Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)."

## Visuals

Does each of the tables and figures serve a useful purpose by making information more understandable?

Graphics should not be treated as ornamentation. They should make complex ideas more understandable or make supporting data more convincing.

Is each chart and graph easily read and interpreted?

To be readable, it must be clear what each line, bar or slice represents and what relative value is indicated. Consider labeling these elements directly rather than using a legend. To be

interpretable, a viewer must be able to draw the appropriate conclusion with reasonable effort. Graphs with more than six slices, five bars or four lines are suspect.

- Are each chart and graph properly labeled?

Tables are labeled consecutively as Table 1, Table 2, etc. Maps, charts, graphs, and photographs are labeled consecutively as Figure 1, Figure 2, etc.

- Could a table or figure be added that would make certain information more understandable?

A picture is worth a thousand words (except in SWS classes). Adding graphics is highly desirable, but creating good graphics is a challenge. Two reference works that should be on your shelf are: *The Elements of Graph Design* by Stephen Michael Kosslyn (W. H. Freeman Company, ISBN: 071672362X, 1992) and *Information Graphics: A Comprehensive Illustrated Reference* by Robert L. Harris (Oxford University Press, ISBN: 0195135326, 2000)

- Is enough white space used to create an attractive appearance and separate sections.

When single spacing, skip a line between each paragraph and two between sections, but do not indent the beginning of each paragraph. When double spacing, do not skip an extra line between paragraphs or sections, but indent each paragraph. Make sure enough white space borders figures embedded in the text.

- Have you used appropriate fonts?

For the body text, use a serif font (such as times new roman and garamond) at 12 point. For the first and second level headings, use a san serif font (such as arial, lucida sans, or tahoma) at 14-16 point. ALL CAPITALS and fancy fonts should be avoided. Use only two fonts in each paper, one for the body and one for headings. (These fonts should be very different.) Bolding and italicizing can be used for further variation. Words should not be both underlining and italicized.

## **Proof Reading**

- Have you used your word processor's grammar and spelling checker?

All word processors have spell checkers and grammar checkers. They are very customizable. I cannot imagine writing a paper without them. Neither should you.

- Has someone other than yourself read the paper?

Spell checkers and grammar checkers only do so much. You are too close to your own work to spot many problems of organization and clarity. The best thing you can do is have someone else read your paper.