

Guidelines for Papers

Papers should be typewritten, double-spaced (12-pt. Times font preferred) with name, date, course number/name, and title (no cover page necessary).

A good paper will have:

- 1 a clearly defined topic AND argument: Your essay should stake out a claim about one or another aspect of media. Your topic should be expressed in a clear thesis sentence, which I would like to see printed at the top of the paper. Your topic should be something that is open to dispute, that is, not a factual statement (i.e. Thomas Edison invented the light bulb) and not a statement of opinion (i.e I hate Thomas Edison), but an interpretive or argumentative proposition (i.e Thomas Edison's Laboratory provided the model for the contemporary think tank; or, Thomas Edison's inventions fit within a larger pattern of technological innovation in the late 19th century; or Thomas Edison promoted his light bulb through images that fit within the larger tradition of "technological utopianism" in American thought.)
- 2 a direct relationship to one or another of the readings or lectures: Ideally, your first paragraph will describe one or another claim made in the readings and then develop your thesis in relation to it. You want to make sure that you clearly understand what the writer is arguing. You want to summarize and quote the argument directly. You want to make sure that you are focusing on a salient point in the argument, not a throwaway detail. You want to make sure that this claim by the writer is relevant to the argument you want to make. You may draw on the author elsewhere in the paper as well, and probably should, but I want to make sure that from the start, your paper is engaging with the course concepts and materials.
- 3 an organizational structure which allows you to develop your ideas in a systematic and logical fashion: Often, MIT students write their papers stream of consciousness style, finding their thesis somewhere near the end of the process, and turning it in. In an age of word processors, you have no real excuse for not shuffling around paragraphs, once you find your thesis, so that it structures and guides your argument throughout. You also don't have an excuse for not rethinking your key propositions if need be once you figure out what your paper is about. In an ideal world, of course, you would think through the essay and outline it before you start writing.
- 4 clear support for each major proposition you make: Think of a simple and basic formula. For every claim, 1-3 concrete bits of evidence (quotes from the reading, facts, relevant stories, etc. which illustrate your main ideas). For every example, some analysis which shows why it is relevant to the case you are trying to make.
- 5 a clear conclusion which puts the whole into perspective and tells us why what you are arguing matters: This is the part students at MIT often miss. They sometimes see the exercise as one of describing some aspect of contemporary media, often in the breathless prose we come to expect from corporate prospectuses or WIRED magazine reports. And, then, they end without putting it into some larger social or cultural context. Remember this is a humanities course even if we are talking a lot about technologies. We still want to know the human consequences of media. So, as you write, imagine that I am sitting over your shoulder and every time you finish a paragraph, I look down at you sneeringly and say, "SO WHAT!" You had better be able to answer that SO WHAT question and if you can't, you haven't thought through your subject enough.