

# Taking it “Bird by Bird”

## Tips for Writing Academic Papers in Graduate School

By Claire Kathleen Robbins (ckrobbins@ship.edu)

“[T]hirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he’d had three months to write, which was due the next day. ...[H]e was at the kitchen table in tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, ‘*Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.*’” (LaMott, 1994, pp. 18-19)

### #1. Organize your argument.

The best way to shoot yourself in the foot when writing a paper is to organize your argument poorly. It doesn’t matter how brilliant your points are; if your logic isn’t clear, no one can follow them. Not all logic is linear in nature, but it does have to be...well, logical. Good litmus test: let someone outside your field read it. Does it make sense to them?

### #2. Remember the basics of paragraph and sentence structure.

Some writers overuse short, choppy sentences with no “flavor,” while others use long, complex sentences that never seem to end. Both approaches are tiresome for readers. Try to land somewhere in the middle, and vary the construction of adjacent sentences—in other words, have some variety. As for paragraphs, every paragraph should have a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. Sentences and paragraphs are the building blocks of your paper, so when they’re in good shape, the paper will be, too. Good litmus test: for each paragraph, you should be able to identify the topic sentence, supporting sentence, and concluding sentence.

### #3. Consult the experts.

Feeling stuck on content, organization, or structure? Get out a favorite peer-reviewed journal article that you’ve read closely for class or a previous assignment. What drew you to this article? What is the main argument, and how is it organized and presented? What is the author’s writing style? Without plagiarizing, what characteristics of this article might you seek to emulate in your paper? Good litmus test: locate portions of text you’ve highlighted or

underlined. These points probably stood out to you because they were made in a clear and convincing way.

### #4. Read it aloud.

Have you ever reread a completed assignment and been amazed by the errors you missed during proofreading? It is very difficult to catch everything visually, especially on a computer screen, but it’s amazing what you catch when you read your paper aloud. Good litmus test: If you stumble or hesitate while reading, it probably means you’ve made a grammatical error or worded something awkwardly.

### #5. Don’t be redundant; also, don’t repeat yourself, or say the same thing twice.

(Anyone else have a middle school teacher who made redundancy jokes? No? Moving on, then...) We’ve all done it: stretched a point out or said it two or three times, often to take up space. Just don’t do it. It won’t impress anyone and will in fact weaken the point you are trying to make. Say it once, and say it well; then, go on to the next point. Good litmus test: When reading your paper aloud, read for redundancy. If you find yourself thinking, “didn’t I just say that?”, it’s time to revise.

### #6. Never underestimate the power of a good transition.

When a piece of writing has good “flow,” it’s usually because the author has provided strong transitions between sentences, paragraphs, and sections. A new statement or idea should always connect to the previous one. Good litmus test: When reading aloud, if you pause for too long between sentences or paragraphs, chances are you’re having trouble following the “flow” of the writing. Check your transitions.

## #7. Don't be afraid to work on a paper in small chunks.

Have you ever put off writing a paper because you couldn't find a ten-hour block of uninterrupted time in which to start and finish the whole assignment? Let's get real--have you looked at your calendar lately? I bet you don't see any ten-hour blocks of time, but surely there's a free hour or two. Use these small chunks of time. Make a to-do list for your paper (the assignment description does not count) and start checking things off -- you'll be amazed at how the small victories accumulate. Good litmus test: If an assignment is due in a week and you haven't made a to-do list yet, you might be falling prey to the myth of the ten-hour block.

## #8. Save time and energy for citations and references.

Ah, APA. There are really no shortcuts here. As a new APA user, you'll have to consult the manual frequently, which can slow down your writing. Thus, you may not want to incorporate every detail of a proper citation as you write. However, always make a note to yourself in the text to come back and cite properly, and include in your note the page number(s) of any direct quotations. There's nothing worse than being almost done with a paper, only to realize you have no idea of the source for that one pesky

quotation or citation. Another tip: don't try to check APA style at the same time that you proofread your paper for grammar and the like. Do two separate readings; it's much easier to keep track that way. Good litmus test: When you read your paper, you are clear on the source for every single idea or statement that is not your own.

## #9. Use visual cues to keep track of your progress in a document.













Dr. Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas uses font colors to keep track of her progress as she writes. Black is for finished work, while blue is for work that's "almost there"; red is for sections that need a lot of work. There's something very satisfying about turning that last bit of text from red to black! Good litmus test: This one's easy--nothing should be blue or red!

## #10. Never stop at the natural end of a section.

Another tip from Dr. Inkelas: After you finish a section (e.g., the literature review), don't stop. Outline or take some quick notes on the next section while you still have some momentum. Otherwise, it'll be hard to get started on your next work session.

## **"Good Grammar Doesn't Cost a Thing"...and other tips from an expert**

*Dr. Stephen John Quaye is Assistant Professor at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is also an outstanding writer and editor. The following points are adapted from some writing tips he has shared with his students -- who, in turn, gave him a t-shirt featuring the quotation above as a token of their appreciation.*

-  Write an engaging introduction.
-  Use clear examples.
-  Use clear referents. To what does "it," "this," "that," or "their" refer?
-  Avoid phrases like "I think" and "I feel"; they are often redundant.
-  Avoid using "always"; it implies totality and leaves no room for differences.
-  Avoid the use of "thing" or "something"; these words are vague.
-  Avoid the passive voice: "The professor advised students" rather than "Students were advised."
-  Avoid anthropomorphizing: "Researchers suggest," not "Research suggests."
-  Use "he or she"/"his or her" with a singular noun form, or pluralize the noun to avoid this awkward construction.
-  Avoid using the same "major" word in the same sentence; use a thesaurus!
-  Watch for shift in verb tenses. Choose one tense (usually past, as per APA guidelines) and stick with it throughout the paper.
-  End your paper with a strong conclusion.

## **Reference**

Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.