

This sample paper has been adapted from a paper written by Prof. Michael Gilmour.

How to Write an Awesome Paper: An Illustration  
of a Paper Formatted According to the MCS-Horizon Format Guide

**Little words**, like “of,” “the,” “to,” or “an,” are not capitalized in titles, unless they are the first word.

If you include a **subtitle**, use a colon, not a comma or semicolon.

Notice that the **title** is descriptive of the content of the paper.

In some cases, your professor may ask you to include the assignment title here as well, but usually this is not required.

Student name here

Nemo Fisher

Do not include a page number on the title page. [See here](#) for assistance.

Prof. Tina Smith  
Communication Skills  
October 17, 2022

These opening sentences (the first paragraph) represent an introduction. Notice that there is a thesis statement, the objectives of the paper are stated, and there is some indication of how this will be achieved.

Believe it or not, writing research papers can be an enjoyable and rewarding part of the college experience. Some students will be quick to voice their objections to the idea that paper assignments are in any sense a positive opportunity. Some think papers are difficult and involve too much work. However, the process of writing a paper is not as arduous as often thought. This paper provides some strategies for writing successful research papers and this paper itself is intended to serve as a model. In part, this paper illustrates what a

12 point, Times New Roman font, with 1 inch margins

paper should look like when written according to the *MCS-Horizon Format*

Guide.

Pretend this is your assignment description: "Discuss the original, authorial intent of any New Testament document. Represent differing scholarly views, identifying strengths and weaknesses." How would you go about writing a successful paper for this course (or any course for that matter)? I would suggest that there are five key steps that will

help make the process a little easier.

### 1. *Choosing a Topic*

To begin, perhaps the most important step is choosing a topic. At the

same time, sometimes your professor will choose a topic for you as some

assignments are quite specific (e.g., a book response assignment). But

students often have freedom to choose what they write about. James

Lester observes that when this is the case, students are responsible "to

find a workable topic that fulfills the requirements of the assignment and

that adopts a serious, scholarly perspective."<sup>1</sup> This choice can make all

the difference between viewing the assignment as a chore or as an

Here is the [thesis statement](#). A thesis is *not* simply summary of what you will discuss in the paper. Rather, it is what your paper will demonstrate.

**Headers** are optional. If you use them, be consistent in your formatting, and ensure that your paper would still make sense if you removed them.

Oops! I'm using the grammatical first person ("we" and "I") which generally is not used in formal academic writing. You will find that your instructors have different expectations on this point so it is best to check with them ahead of time.

Phrases like "I think" or "We can see" or "My conclusion" may need to be reworked. For example, I could say instead, "There are at least five key steps to writing a paper."

Regardless, I will use first person (I, we, my, our, etc.) to facilitate more direct communication and, more importantly, because I'm not being marked on this!

<sup>1</sup> Lester, *Essential Guide*, 1.

A footnote includes minimal information. See p. 11 and following in the *MCS-Horizon Format Guide* and the next page of this paper.

The first page of the paper, after the title page, is page 1. [See here](#) for assistance.

Note that I introduced the quotation, the quotation fits into the paragraph grammatically, and the quotation flows well with the following sentence.

Double spaced

No extra spacing between paragraphs.

Indent the first line of each paragraph.

e.g. is an abbreviation for the Latin phrase *exempli gratia*, meaning for example. Only use it in parenthesis.

adventure in learning. For this sample paper, I would like to have a look at one of the shortest writings in the New Testament, a letter titled 3 John. How should *you* proceed when it comes time to make a decision on your subject? Choose something that interests you and something you have an interest in learning more about. This is a good idea because usually many hours will be invested in any quality paper, meaning that you may grow a little weary of the subject over time. It helps to stay motivated, then, if you pick a topic that you are particularly interested in.

## 2. *Formulating a Research Question*

Okay, I've picked a subject area (3 John) but I'm not quite ready to sit down at the computer and begin typing just yet. Kathleen T. McWhorter observes, "Term papers provide the opportunity to look ahead in an academic discipline, to go beyond the basics and explore advanced study in the field."<sup>2</sup> Hence, in order to "go beyond the basics," after picking a subject area, the second thing I need to do is formulate a research question. A research question helps you pick a specific topic within your overall subject area. I've decided to work with 3 John because it's not very familiar to me and there is plenty of academic literature that treats it (cf. point 1 above). But what specifically do I want to study? I need to formulate a question to address or an issue to summarize. How? Consider reading over introductory material on your subject area. Your textbook is a good place to start (you already spent money on it, so you may as well use it!), or you may want to look at dictionary or encyclopedia articles (see section 3 in this paper). Luke Timothy Johnson, reports that 3 John is a letter of recommendation.<sup>3</sup> Hmm, am not entirely clear on what this means so I'm going to look into this. My research question will be "Is 3 John a letter of recommendation and if so, what does it tell us about factions in the

This is a colloquialism; do not use such words in formal writing.

Footnotes go at the end of the sentence, after all the period and quotation mark.

cf. is an abbreviation for the Latin term *confer*, meaning compare. Only use it after parenthesis or in content footnotes.

Never use this in your academic writing.

This is a citation footnote. Notice that only the author's last name is used and that the book title is shortened and in italics and followed by a page number. TIP: You can easily insert a footnote by hitting ALT - CTL - F on your keyboard. This formatting is automatic in MS Word.

I have used a footnote even though I haven't quoted Johnson. You must cite your source even if you are summarizing something.

---

<sup>2</sup> McWhorter, *Study and Critical Thinking*, 387.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament*, 563.

Johannine community?” The thesis statement for my paper will then answer my research question. Of course, I will find my answer (and figure out my thesis statement) as I do my research.

Keep your topic as narrow as possible. Attempting to answer a question like “How is 3 John significant for understanding the history of earliest Christianity?” would be far too broad in scope. What we have settled on for a research question is much more manageable given the limited space available in a research paper.

### 3. *Continue Research*

Once you have picked a specific topic, the third step to writing a paper is to continue the research. You have already done some research (in your textbook or elsewhere) to figure out your research question, but there is still more to do! I suggest the following process. First, go to the reference section of the library and look up encyclopedia and dictionary articles on your subject area (3 John). These provide “the big picture,” that is, an overview of the subject area. Second, head toward the book stacks. My dictionary article helped clarify the subject and topic (tensions among John’s readers; 3 John as a letter of recommendation).<sup>4</sup> Having clarified the issue in my head, I can now go to the more detailed studies found in books with more confidence. You should also track down journal articles. By this point you have seen bibliographies in dictionary and encyclopedia entries. Those bibliographies might guide you to helpful books or journal articles. In addition, be sure to use the library’s databases (available from the Library website) to assist with your search. The databases on the DTL (Digital Theological Library) invaluable for finding journal articles.<sup>5</sup> In addition to what I have already

Note that the (shortened) title here is not in italics because this is the title of an essay (part of a book), not the title of the whole book. In the bibliography you will see that the title of the whole book is in italics.

---

<sup>4</sup> Burge, “John, Letters” 587-99.

<sup>5</sup> Specialized indices that represent other academic disciplines are also available in these databases.

This is a content footnote. In addition to providing information about the sources you are using, as in footnote 4 above, footnotes can be used to supply additional information that is not directly related to the argument (though usually providing further support for it). Think of content notes as the second level of dialogue in your paper; the first level is the main body.

mentioned here, you may also want to look for helpful online sources but be careful when discerning which sources are worth using.

As you are reading your sources, you should take notes. Be sure to keep track of where you are getting your information from. You might even want to start your bibliography as you are doing your research.

By now my desk is covered with books and papers. I have a subject (3 John) with a specific question to address (why was a letter of recommendation needed? what was the problem in John's churches?). There is also a deadline looming.

#### 4. *Preparing to Write: Create an Outline*

Some people do some writing as they are doing their research. Others wait to write their paper until after they have completed all (or at least most) of their research. Regardless of which approach you find most helpful, before you do too much writing, I suggest you think about what your paper will look like in overview. The following elements should be included. (a) In your opening sentences provide a clear introductory statement/thesis question. What exactly do you hope to do and how will you go about doing it? (b) Your argument and the evidence used to answer the thesis question should be well organized. Group your main points together in the outline. (c) There should be a conclusion to your paper that explicitly refers back to your introductory/thesis statement.

#### 5. *Formatting Your Paper*

At this point we need to discuss the most annoying part of the paper-writing process: formatting. It is one thing to have ideas, knowledge, and insight but it is also important to be able to communicate them appropriately. Specifically, you are asked to document your research

following the *MCS-Horizon Format Guide*.<sup>6</sup> Here are some general reasons why following a standardized format is necessary for all responsible academic institutions, including at MCS or Horizon. First, formatting your papers appropriately relates to the core competency of being a *skilled communicator* because the guide assists you in learning to communicate effectively in the context of an educational institution. Second, including appropriately formatted citations (i.e., with all the necessary information in the footnotes and bibliography) reflects the core competency of being *spiritually mature* because following a standard formatting procedure allows everybody (students and faculty) to interact with scholarly work in a manner that preserves the integrity and transparency of the student, the professor, and the institution. That is, you make yourself accountable to others by clearly indicating where and when you are using ideas from others in your own research and writing.

Sometimes it can be helpful to explicitly number the different aspects of your argument.

i.e. is the abbreviation of the Latin phrase "id est," meaning "that is." Only use this abbreviation after parenthesis.

### Conclusion

I hope this overview is of some value to you. This paper aimed to provide some strategies for writing papers and to model some things your professors are looking for. Keep in mind that not all professors have the same expectations for every assignment so be sure to check with them about their requirements. It is not an oxymoron to speak of an enjoyable research paper assignment. Writing an excellent paper is never an easy thing but it can be a rewarding experience. I look forward to reading yours!

A good conclusion will reaffirm and restate the thesis statement, as this sentence does.

Notice how the summary statement recalls the introduction to the paper.

---

<sup>6</sup> MCS-Horizon, *MCS-Horizon Format Guide*. You can download a copy of the guide online.

See the bibliography below for the web page information, because I'm not supposed to include full citation information in a footnote.

**Author's LAST name, first name. Book Title: Subtitle. Other info. City of Publisher: Publishing Company, Year.**

List entries in alphabetical order according to the authors' last names.

Include this title

### Bibliography

Burge, Gary M. "John, Letters of." In *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, edited by Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, 587-599. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997.

MCS-Horizon, *MCS-Horizon Format Guide*. Revised May 2024. Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.horizon.edu/students/resources/>.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. Revised edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.

Lester, James D., and James D. Lester, Jr. *The Essential Guide: Research Writing Across the Disciplines*. 2nd edition. New York: Longman, 2002.

Malina, Bruce J. "The Received View and What I Cannot Do: III John and Hospitality." *Semeia* 35 (1986) 171-194.

McWhorter, Kathleen T. *Study and Critical Thinking Skills in College*. 4th edition. New York: Longman, 2000.

This first entry is an example of a bibliographic entry for part of a book, in this case, a dictionary article. Page 13 and following in the *MCS-Horizon Format Guide* includes many examples for how to list different types of sources in your bibliography.

Single space each entry.

Leave one line space between each entry.

Indent the second and subsequent lines of each entry.

This is an example of how to format a journal article entry in a bibliography. However, I should not have included it in this bibliography since I didn't actually cite this source in my paper.