**Writing Effective Short Papers**

Writing papers and grading papers can be very frustrating for the professor and the student. In a course such as this where the student is often writing about very personal issues and the professor is reacting both to personal and professional issues, as well as grammar, etc., it is easy for feelings to be hurt. It is also difficult for the professor to give a great deal of critical feedback. While I want to write positive feedback on every paper it is often easier to just "fix" or circle the mistakes and when time is short I often err by focusing on problems. The purpose of this document is to make this process less painful for everyone. In this document you will find suggestions on writing more effectively as well as the correction marks you can expect to see on your papers. These marks are standardized and used on every paper.

**Important**: These papers are your opportunity to engage in personal exploration of memories, experiences, or issues that may arise in this course. As I grade these papers I will be looking for evidence that some level of self-exploration (and maybe even self-discovery!) is occurring. Accordingly, your papers will be kept both confidential and secure. These papers should **not** be literature reviews dryly reorganizing and summarizing the course material – such papers will receive low grades.

Your paper must be 100% your own work. Do not discuss the planning or writing with anyone else. Do not give or receive help. Type and proofread your own paper. Write your paper from your growing knowledge of the psychological way of looking at the world. Please type (double space) with a margin of at least one inch all around. Use an 11 or 12-point font (preferably Times or Arial). Give your paper an appropriate (and interesting!) title as well as the label "Reaction Paper #X" where X is the number of this paper. For example:

**Users Are Just Losers: What I Thought I Knew About Substance Abuse**  
*Reaction Paper #2*

If you are like most students, you will find it a challenge to limit yourself to 400 words. This is an important part of the assignment. Your career after graduate school will involve endless paperwork: reports, correspondence, progress notes, managed care forms, etc. The best way to handle this never-ending demand for documentation is to develop quick, efficient writing skills. So, along with self-exploration, a second objective of these writing assignments is to help you work on your writing skills.

Start the paper with a clear statement of a main point. Don't waste time on peripheral concerns. Do not restate the question. Your main point should be absolutely clear by the end of the first paragraph. Organize your paper into coherent paragraphs. Each paragraph should contain a recognizable topic sentence. Then you can elaborate with examples, evidence, implications, insights, etc. Make each sentence clear to a NAÏVE Counseling Professional reader: a person who knows about the counseling profession but may not understand jargon or your particular issues without explanation. If you wish to summarize an author's main point (from the readings) do so very briefly and in your own words. Avoid quotations and unnecessary jargon. Define unfamiliar terms.
Your paper must not exceed 400 words. (If I suspect the paper is too long I will check and deduct points if it exceeds the word limit.) Remember, getting the essentials into 400 words or less is part of this task. Be concise. Edit and rewrite your paper until it is tight, clear, and grammatically correct. (Most of you will need to edit it more than once – I always have to do so with my writing.)

I prefer to read these papers without initially knowing who the author is, so please put your name on the BACK of the last page of the paper, along with the number and title of this course and the due date. BELOW your name please indicate how long it took you to complete this paper (from start to finish of the final draft), how you are feeling about your work in this course, how I can help you to learn more, or any other comments you would like to make.

Before You Write
Consider these questions:

What is your belief about the subject? What is your opinion?
Is your belief/opinion based on fact (e.g., research or knowledge), experience, or faith?
Has this always been your belief/opinion? If not, when and why did it change?
What sources support your opinion? What sources oppose your opinion?

As You Write

Remember to write a strong topic sentence early on that clearly states your key idea. Then elaborate on your topic to make it clear to a naïve reader. Don't be afraid to take risks and "invite" your reader into the paper. Make it interesting. Make it a paragraph that, if it caught your eye on your roommate's desk, you would start to read the whole paper.

Keep in mind that the standard "5-paragraph" paper that many students think teachers want is actually quite boring to read. The first and last paragraphs should not say what you plan to say and then restate what was said. They should instead "grab" the interest of the reader. They should make the reader want more. They should tease the reader. Feel free to include personal examples or stories told succinctly. Also feel free to use humor…

See the APA Publication Manual for more information on APA style and writing tips. Also see Strunk and White's The Elements of Style for a concise guide to writing effectively.

Note: This handout was adapted from one created by Susan Tobin, Ph.D., who summarized information from the following article: Clanton, G. (1997). A semi-painless way to improve student writing. The NEA Higher Education Journal, 13, 21-30. Washington, DC: NEA.