



## CHECKLIST FOR SCHOLARLY WRITING\*

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### I. PRE-WRITING AND PLANNING

#### ☐ **Topic/Research Question:**

- ☐ Is the research question focused? Is the topic appropriate for the assignment?<sup>1</sup>
- ☐ Do you have a thesis?<sup>2</sup>

#### ☐ **Purpose:**

- ☐ Is the purpose clear? (e.g., persuasive, informative, analytical)?
- ☐ What is the document trying to do? (e.g., synthesize, critique, or explain)?

#### ☐ **Audience:**

- ☐ Is it geared toward the primary audience, (e.g., the expert, the layperson, or the general public)?
- ☐ How much knowledge of the topic do they have versus how much do they need?
- ☐ Is it "layered" where appropriate, so that the expert can skip basic information, but the layperson will have it?
- ☐ Is it internally consistent so that any reader, at any point, will not misunderstand the writer?

#### ☐ **Research:**<sup>3</sup>

- ☐ Is the research complete and up to date?
- ☐ What is your list of sources? Are they thorough and reliable?
- ☐ Have you accurately synthesized legal authorities?
- ☐ Have you completed a preemption check to ensure that your thesis is novel?<sup>4</sup>

**Tip:** If you can't state your thesis in one to two sentences *with reasons to support your main claim*, your paper isn't ready to draft.

\* Revised by Alexandra Kotter (2026).

<sup>1</sup> For more information on finding a topic *see* EUGENE VOLOKH, ACADEMIC LEGAL WRITING: LAW REVIEW ARTICLES, STUDENT NOTES, AND SEMINAR PAPERS 61 (2003).

<sup>2</sup> For more on writing an effective thesis *see* VOLOKH, *supra* note 1, at 9–13.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on researching for a scholarly paper, *see* Writing Center handout *You Have Your Scholarly Paper Topic, Now...Get the Research Done*; <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/wp-content/uploads/sites/58/2026/10/You-Have-Your-Scholarly-Paper-Topic-Now-Get-the-Research-Done.pdf>; *see also*, VOLOKH, *supra* note 1, at 63–67.

<sup>4</sup> *See* Writing Center handout *You Have Your Scholarly Paper Topic, Now...Get the Research Done*. <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/wp-content/uploads/sites/58/2026/10/You-Have-Your-Scholarly-Paper-Topic-Now-Get-the-Research-Done.pdf>

## II. STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

### ☐ Introduction:

- ☐ Is there a clear hook?
- ☐ Is an explanation of the topic/issue provided?
- ☐ Is there an obvious thesis statement?
  - ☐ Does the thesis statement identify your topic, state your claim, and give several main reasons your claim is true?
- ☐ Is there a comprehensive roadmap of the entire paper?

**Remember:** Don't leave any surprises for your reader! Your introduction should function like a map—your reader should know your conclusion and how you got there *from the beginning*.

### ☐ Body/Analysis:

- ☐ Development of the thesis:
  - ☐ Does the argument consistently advance and refine the thesis?
  - ☐ Are the main reasons given in your thesis for your conclusion fully developed and clearly supported in the body?
- ☐ Connection to the thesis:
  - ☐ Does each section clearly relate back to the thesis?
  - ☐ Does each paragraph make its relevance to the thesis explicit?
- ☐ Competing views:
  - ☐ Are all points of view accurately presented and responded to?<sup>5</sup>
  - ☐ Have you directly addressed counterarguments?<sup>6</sup>
- ☐ Internal Cohesion:
  - ☐ Is each section organized around a clear, focused idea?
  - ☐ Does each section end with a conclusion or provide an explanation of what the section means in regard to the thesis?
  - ☐ Does each paragraph begin with a clear topic sentence?
  - ☐ Do paragraphs transition logically and build on one another?<sup>7</sup>

### ☐ Conclusion:

- ☐ Does the conclusion clearly restate the thesis?
- ☐ Does the conclusion reinforce the significance of the argument?
- ☐ Does the conclusion avoid introducing new information?

## III. ANALYSIS

- ☐ Is the writing analytical and creative, offering new insights, rather than providing a description?<sup>8</sup>
- ☐ Have you analyzed and not merely summarized your sources?

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<sup>5</sup> See VOLOKH, *supra* note 1, at 71. Volokh suggests asking “why not?” after every sentence in order to identify different points of view.

<sup>6</sup> See *id.*, at 79–80.

<sup>7</sup> See *id.*, at 75–79.

<sup>8</sup> See *id.*, at 13–15.

**Tip:** Ask yourself: “So what?” after every paragraph. If you can’t answer, you’re likely summarizing, not analyzing.

#### IV. FLOW

- ☐ Is the overall progression of ideas easy to follow from beginning to end?
- ☐ Is the paper divided into sections by main topics and clearly designated with headings and sub-headings?<sup>9</sup>
- ☐ Are transitions between paragraphs and sections natural and purposeful?
- ☐ Do paragraphs and sections logically build on each other?<sup>10</sup>
- ☐ Is each paragraph logically structured? Deductively? Inductively? Other?
- ☐ Are sentences organized logically, (e.g., subordinate ideas are subordinated, main ideas appear in main clauses, and parallel structure is used to present like ideas)?

**Tip:** If a paragraph takes up most of a page it can be hard for the reader to follow and likely contains more than one idea. Split it so each paragraph makes a single clear point.

#### V. FOOTNOTES AND USE OF AUTHORITY

- ☐ Have you utilized your sources?
  - ☐ Are your claims supported by reliable sources?
  - ☐ Are you referencing the original source?<sup>11</sup>
- ☐ Do footnotes function properly?
  - ☐ Do they provide accurate citations to authority?
  - ☐ Do they give detail that is necessary but would disrupt creative and analytical flow if placed in the text?
  - ☐ Do they collect authorities that support your claims?
  - ☐ Do they adequately explain the authority so that it is useful to the reader?

#### VI. STYLE

- ☐ Are the terms of art presented in the introduction echoed throughout the document?
- ☐ Are precise terms used rather than vague ones?<sup>12</sup>
- ☐ Is the writing concise:
  - ☐ Does it avoid unnecessary repetition?<sup>13</sup>
  - ☐ Was plain English used more than legalese?<sup>14</sup>
- ☐ Is there no more than one point per sentence?
- ☐ Are rhetorical devices used effectively for persuasion?
- ☐ Are subjects and verbs generally concrete?<sup>15</sup> Close together?
- ☐ Did you use active and passive voice appropriately and intentionally?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See *id.*, at 73–75.

<sup>10</sup> See *id.* at 79–80.

<sup>11</sup> See *id.* at 95.

<sup>12</sup> See *id.* at 107–08.

<sup>13</sup> See *id.* at 81.

<sup>14</sup> See *id.* at 83–85.

<sup>15</sup> See *id.* at 85.

<sup>16</sup> See *id.* at 86–87.

- ☐ Are nominalizations minimized?<sup>17</sup>

VII. MECHANICS

- ☐ Is the grammar correct? (subject/verb agreement, etc.)?<sup>18</sup>
- ☐ Is the punctuation correct? (no run-ons, comma splices, fragments, etc.)?<sup>19</sup>
- ☐ Are the citations correct? (do they follow bluebook format)?
- ☐ Are all typos eliminated? (no misspelled or missing words, etc.)?

**Editing Tips:** 1) Take a break before proofreading. 2) Read aloud. 3) Read your paper sentence by sentence starting at the end and work your way to the front.

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<sup>17</sup> See *id.* at 83–84.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/grammar.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> *Tips for Effective Punctuation in Legal Writing*, [HTTPS://WWW.LAW.GEORGETOWN.EDU/ACADEMICS/WP-CONTENT/UPLOADS/SITES/58/2026/08/TIPS-FOR-EFFECTIVE-PUNCTUATION.2026.PDF](https://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/wp-content/uploads/sites/58/2026/08/TIPS-FOR-EFFECTIVE-PUNCTUATION.2026.PDF)