A Quick Guide to Academic Writing

There are many ways to write an excellent paper. However, your professors at SFCM will have expectations about your papers, especially how they are organized. If you haven’t written many formal academic papers, it could help to follow some general rules and use a template when you write. These rules can really help if you haven’t gone to school in the US.

In general, all academic essays should:
1. Introduce a specific, analytical thesis
2. Support that thesis with evidence
3. Flow logically, so that each paragraph supports the thesis with a single idea

What if I’m not writing a research paper? Do I still need a thesis? Yes! You can think of the thesis as a claim, argument, or opinion that you support with information. The way you write the thesis, and the information you use to support it, will change depending on what you’re writing.

For example, if you’re writing about a poem, you need to interpret the poem (thesis) and support your ideas with text from the poem (evidence). If you’re writing a personal essay, you need to tell the reader a story that is significant to you (thesis) and explain why (evidence). And everything you write should be organized so that it is easy for the reader to follow (flow).

The standard essay template we use in the U.S. looks something like this:
1. Introduction
2. Supporting paragraph 1
3. Supporting paragraph 2
4. Supporting paragraph 3
5. (...)
6. Conclusion

How to start writing an essay:
- Prepare by participating in class and doing the reading.
- Understand the entire assignment before you start.
- Brainstorm ideas about a topic before you start to outline or write.
- Plan your essay with an outline.
- If you are writing a research paper, use your research to update your outline.
Here is a more detailed explanation of the information you might need to include in each section of your standard essay.

**Introduction:**
At the beginning of the essay, introduce the general topic you’re going to write about, then lead the reader to the more specific topic you’re interested in. Going from broad information to specific information will lead you directly into stating your thesis—your particular argument about this general topic that you will support with evidence. Because the introduction summarizes your essay, it is often easiest to write your introduction last. You will certainly at least need to revise it after you’ve finished the rest of your essay.

**Supporting paragraphs:**
The supporting paragraphs together are sometimes called the body of the essay. In the body of the essay, support your thesis with evidence from what you’ve read and analyzed. You will need to convince the reader of your thesis by using multiple pieces of evidence, so give each piece its own paragraph. Paragraphs can be too confusing when they contain too many ideas.

As you write the body of the essay, think about the order of your paragraphs. Which piece of evidence should you tell the reader first? Which piece of evidence builds off the first, and should be second? Put your support for the thesis in a specific order that will make it easy for the reader to follow your logic and understand your opinion. You will probably have three or more supporting ideas, so at least three body paragraphs.

**Conclusion:**
When you have explained all of your ideas that support your thesis, you are ready to write your conclusion. This is the last paragraph of your essay. By this time, your reader should understand how all of your supporting ideas contribute to your thesis. You should feel that you have “convinced” them of your argument as best as you can. The conclusion is probably the most open-ended section on an essay: you can summarize your thesis and evidence again, propose questions for a future essay, and most importantly, explain why you think what you’ve discovered is interesting and important.

**Should I always use a template?** The more comfortable you get with academic writing, the more confident you will feel to build on and break away from a template. Some of the best academic writing is structured in a very formulaic way—and some of it breaks plenty of rules. You want your essay to represent your unique ideas and perspective, but still be easy to understand.