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How to Format a Final Draft

“Your paper should be around four double-spaced pages,” the professor tells you. “About a thousand words.” You should realize two things immediately. First, the professor is not asking for a very long piece of writing. Second, he or she probably has a fairly specific concept of a “double-spaced page.” If your paper fails to conform to that concept, it (and you) will be at a disadvantage. Maybe the quality of your writing and ideas will overcome that disadvantage. Maybe not. The question is, why even take the chance?

These pages explain and demonstrate how the final drafts of your college papers should look. Of course, individual professors may have special formatting directions for you to follow. If so, follow them! But these directions will help you to produce a manuscript that fits the general concept of “typed, double-spaced pages.”

First, as with any important piece of writing, the final draft of a college paper must be typed. Today, “typed” could still refer to a manuscript produced on a traditional typewriter, but more and more it refers to a manuscript produced with the aid of a personal computer, word-processing software, and a printer. Regardless, the final copy must feature crisp, clear, black letters on plain white paper. So be sure to replace nearly spent printer-cartridges, and save the pale pink or lime green paper for other occasions. This is a time to be sober and conservative—at least on the surface.

Next, the manuscript should be double-spaced, with regular margins. “Double-spaced” simply means that there is one blank line between every line of type. All modern word-processing programs have a double-space mode. In Microsoft Word 2013, you will need to set line spacing to “Double” and also ensure that no additional spaces are added before or after paragraphs. To do this, first select the “Design” tab. Next, open the “Paragraph Spacing” menu and select the “Custom Paragraph Spacing” item (usually at the bottom of the list). A “Manage Styles” window will open with the “Set Defaults” tab selected. At the bottom of this window is a section called “Paragraph Spacing.” In this section, set the “Before” and “After” items to “0 pt” and the “Line Spacing” item to “Double.” Then click “OK” to save your choices and close the “Manage Styles” window. As for margins, they should be about one inch on all four sides. Typically, these are Word 2013’s default margins. You can set the margins in Word 2013 by first selecting the “Page Layout” tab, and then selecting the “Margins” menu. The first choice in the “Margins” menu is “Normal,” which will provide one inch margins on all four sides. Do not “right align” or “justify” the right-hand margin because these functions will result in margins and spacing inappropriate in an academic paper. Make sure the “Align Left” button is selected in Word’s “Home” toolbar.

The conventional way to signal the start of a new paragraph in an academic manuscript is to indent its first line one-half inch from the left margin. To do this (and to achieve a “hanging indent” for a Works Cited page, which indents not the first line but the subsequent lines of the citation one-half inch from the left margin), you will need to learn how to manipulate those little triangles visible on the left hand side of your document’s ruler at the top of the screen (the ruler can be accessed if not already visible by clicking on the View tab). The top triangle indicates where text will start at a hard return. In other words, every time you press the enter key, your

text will automatically start wherever that top triangle is. The bottom triangle indicates where text will start on a soft return. When you just keep typing and text wraps around automatically to the next line, it will start on that next line wherever the bottom triangle is.

If you slide the top triangle of the ruler over to the right past the three mini hash marks to the first long hash mark between the margin and the 1 while leaving the bottom triangle at the far left margin, then you are telling your computer that you want an indent at the start of each new paragraph. If you slide the bottom triangle to the right past the three mini hash marks to the first long hash mark between the margin and the 1 and move the top triangle to or leave it at the far left margin, you will create a hanging indent. You can set the indent or hanging indent before typing your text or apply an indent or hanging indent to selected text by highlighting the portion of text you wish to format and moving the triangles along the ruler accordingly.

To follow MLA format, on the first page of your final copy, type your full name, your instructor's name, the course and section, and the date on four lines in the upper left corner, double-spacing between the lines. (I have demonstrated this on the first page of these directions, pretending that I am writing this essay for a section of English 111 in the spring semester of 1997.) Then return (which should provide one double-space if you have already set the spacing) and center your title. (You do have a title, don't you?) Generally, no special punctuation is needed for a title. Do not put quotation marks around the title unless it is, in fact, a quote. Do not underline the title. Do not put it in all-caps. Do not use a special font. Double-space after the title, and then begin the text. MLA format also requires that you type your last name and the page number in the upper right corner of every page one double space above the text (I have demonstrated this on the pages of these directions). Word processing makes this easy. In Word 2013, choose the Insert menu at the top of the screen, then click "Insert Page Number." Choose

“Top of Page” then “Plain Number 1.” Next you need highlight the page number, then click Align Right on the Formatting tool bar. Use the arrow key to put the cursor to the left of the page number, insert a space, then type your last name. Word will now automatically include your last name and the appropriate page number on every page of your document. It is important that you learn how to automatically insert your name and page number in the Header portion of your document. If you are not using Word, or experience difficulty properly formatting your text, see your instructor for assistance.

Finally, when writing on a computer, pick a common, readable font. I am using the font called “Times New Roman.” I have set the font size to a standard 12 point. The goal is to average around 12-14 words per line, with the margins set as described above.

A full manuscript page will have approximately 22 lines and 250-300 words. Using larger, non-standard fonts, or widening the margins to make an essay look longer will not fool your instructor. It is better that you write your essay to meet to full page length or word count required rather than try to format the essay to look like you did.

This is what most professors mean by a typed, double-spaced page.