Academic Essay Skills Checklist

This checklist includes all the skills it takes to write a strong academic paper. Think of it as your composition passport: once you feel confident in a specific area, check off the box as a mastered skill. When you feel familiar and comfortable with most of the checklist, you can also use it to assess individual papers—on your own or with an editing partner.

Tips

– Focus on a two or three new skills at a time
– Use A&L’s other handouts to clarify things you are less confident in.
– If you’re still not sure about something, make an appointment with an A&L tutor.
– Be honest with yourself. This is a tool for becoming a stronger writer, so pay attention to how confidently you say “yes.”

1. Assignment Requirements

Every assignment is different. Read through the whole thing looking for specific instructions—from content to format. Then put those items into a list format that’s easier to see and check off. For example:

Assignment Excerpt

Your paper should have an introduction that names the work you will be discussing and indicates the principal points you want to make about it. Your paper should have well-organized paragraphs, a sense of development, and a conclusion. General claims you make about your chosen piece should be backed up with specific visual evidence. You should make claims about the artwork based on your viewing experience, but you should not, in general, narrate that experience.

Resulting Checklist

introduction
  names the work I’m discussing
  indicates my principal points

well-organized paragraphs
  a sense of development
  make claims about the artwork
    specific visual evidence for each claim

a conclusion

NOT narrate my experience

The assignment checklist is most important: it will include requirements a general checklist can’t anticipate—and may even ask you to do something different. Always defer to your professor’s instructions and ask them for clarification if needed.

☐ Make your assignment-specific checklist on the back of this page.
2. Structure & Organization

- Make a reverse outline of your draft in order to get a better sense of its structure: what is each paragraph saying (content) and doing (how is it serving your purpose or argument)?

  □ Introduction
  Grabs the reader’s attention and creates interest
  Briefly describes the topic and includes my thesis statement
  Provides a guide for the ideas being covered—a map of support

  □ Thesis Statement
  Is neither too broad nor too narrow
  Could be argued against
  Is specific to the content of the essay
  Is an original argument
  Is significant to my readers/the field/the world

  □ Body Paragraphs
  Each focuses on a different point of my argument
  Each has a topic sentence
  Support points with examples
  Introduce and explain new terms and ideas
  Each links to the next with a transition
  Move from general to specific, creating a logical progression

  □ Conclusion
  Refers back to the thesis
  Summarizes my important points
  Offers a sense of closure
  Hints at the larger implications of my argument

3. References

- Create your bibliography and citations as you collect sources, not as a last step.

  □ Quotes, Paraphrases, and Summaries of Sources
  Are framed with context
  Include citations in a consistent style (Chicago, MLA, APA, etc.)
  Are correctly formatted, including punctuation
  Are explained, including their significance to my argument

(Continues on back)
4. Formatting

- Check the assignment sheet and syllabus for professor’s guidelines first.

**If No Given Guidelines**
- Consistent and readable
- Leaves space for notes and feedback
- Includes my name and the name of the course/section

5. Tone & Style

- Consider readers beyond your professor and classmates.
- Look to writing you enjoy and admire as models.

**Vocabulary**
- Is clear and precise
- Uses key words consistently
- Is otherwise varied to avoid repetition

**Voice**
- Relates to my audience appropriately
- Represents my voice (instead of the voice of my sources)
- Creates rhythm and “flow” by varying sentence length

6. Grammar

- Always run spell check on a final draft.
- Read your paper out loud to gauge the flow of the paper and to catch errors.
- Read your paper backwards, one sentence at a time, so you don’t get caught up in the ideas.

**Word Choice/Form**
- Chooses the correct homophones (ex. too, two, to)
- Includes vocabulary you’re familiar with—both meaning and grammatical use
- Gives singular and plural nouns the correct endings

**Sentence Structure**
- Is free of run-ons and fragments
- Uses punctuation purposefully (commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, etc.)

**Agreement/Consistency**
- Includes subject-verb agreement
- Keeps tense consistent and appropriate to the content
- Puts the correct definite or indefinite articles before nouns