**What is a handbook?**

When your professor recommends or requires that you buy a handbook for a course you might wonder why you need it, or even what it is.

A handbook helps you answer questions about writing—questions like these:

What makes a strong thesis?

What is the best kind of evidence for what I’m writing?

How can I include visuals in my paper?

Can I use the first person in a college paper?

How do I format a paper in APA style?

Do I have to cite sources like Facebook and Twitter?

What are some revision tips for longer papers?

I wasn’t surprised to see that a handbook was a required text in my composition course, but I was surprised to see it on the recommended list for criminal justice. Regardless of your major, you’ll be assigned writing in almost every course you take throughout your college career.

If you’re thinking to yourself, well I can just do a quick Web search for what I need, you might be missing the boat. A “quick Web search” for organizing an essay gives me over 7 million results not really organized in any clear way. How do I know if I can trust what I find? And where can I get clear examples within this bunch of information? And will my teacher think what I’ve found is reliable?

In the long run, turning to a handbook is actually a faster way to answer these kinds of questions.

And if you’re thinking the book is expensive, try doing the math. Let’s say you bought your handbook for $60. You’ll be writing for at least one course every semester, though, so hanging on to it makes the price go down—and the value go up—each semester you use it. By the fourth semester, the price is just $15. Use it for a full four years, and your handbook is… well, you get the picture. Ask your instructor if there’s an option to buy the e-book version of the handbook—and the price is even lower.

There’s no doubt you’ll have questions as you write in all of your college courses. Having a handbook close by won’t slow you down.