

“Help! I Have a Paper Due!”

GETTING STARTED

One of the most important disciplines to develop during your graduate study is careful time management. . While you may never feel that you have a surplus of time, you can make your life easier (and your work more polished) by starting early. The paper-writing process actually begins with the reading you have to do for the course; keep up with the assignments and you won't have to devote precious writing time to catching up. You should also give yourself plenty of time to generate and refine your ideas. Rather than doing each paper in a concentrated period just before it is due, trying to spread assignments out. You will have better luck returning to and revising ideas over the course of several days than several hours. Exploit small blocks of time to accomplish small tasks in addition to devoting larger blocks to the writing process.

The only thing worse than starting poorly is not starting. If you wait for perfect writing conditions to arrive before beginning your work, you will likely run out of time. No matter what your apprehensions are regarding the assignment, no matter how foolish or simple you think your initial ideas are, start writing. Improvement can only come when you have something to improve.

Some Classic Ways that Students Generate Papers

There are several methods for starting a paper that you may be familiar with. The most widely known are using an outline and brain-storming.

The Outline almost always has mixed results. It works best when the writer has a hunch or glimmer of an argument already but doesn't know where to go from there. If a writer has a basic idea but is not sure how to prove it, the task of creating an outline can help clarify what supporting evidence is necessary for the argument. An outline can also help the student organize his or her basic claims into a coherent and persuasive sequence. The disadvantage is that outlines can produce rigid or schematic papers that lack stylistic subtlety. They also work better at organizing existing ideas than generating new ideas.

Brainstorming

In this method, the writer puts down anything and everything he or she can think of about the topic without stopping to edit or revise. The goal is to produce as diverse a mass of raw material as possible, and to capture a stream of consciousness that might lead to a good thesis. The student should sort through this mass (or mess) of ideas in search of common threads, promising insights, surprising connections, and so forth. While this method can often help overcome writer's block, it can also lead to disorganized papers. You should start early to give yourself ample time to clean up the mess.

The Funnel Method

This method works best when you have too large or general an interest and need to move to a more specific thesis. Take notes on passages relevant to your topic and try to

find similarities, differences or other points of comparison that will hone the topic to a finer point. That is, use textual details to ground your abstract ideas. Your preceptor or professor may be able to suggest key passages you should examine.

The Inverted Funnel Method treats the opposite problem: you have discovered a passage or detail that catches your interest but aren't sure what to do with it. Obviously, the more general reading you have done on the topic, the more connections you will be able to make; you may also find it helpful to talk with a fellow student, or your preceptor, about the passage. Explain what it is about this detail that has caught your attention and how it relates to the material more broadly. How does this passage illuminate the work as a whole? What significance does it (and your examination of it) hold? If your answers are still not substantial enough subjects for a serious paper, you need to do more reading.

CRAFTING AN ARGUMENT

Analyze First, Introduce Later

If you already have some ideas but are having trouble getting started, just skip the beginning! Introductions are often best saved for last, after you know what it is you will be introducing. If you're having trouble coming up with the "big picture," it can help to start filling in those details that you *do* know. Sometimes you will discover your thesis or change your thesis after you have done some point-by-point analysis. Then you can craft an introduction (and conclusion) that reflect the results of this process. Be forewarned though—you *will* have to come up with a thesis, and the final paper needs to be organized by it. Be sure to save time to organize and reword paragraphs so that what you have typed up forms a coherent whole.

Of course, specific types of papers (particularly long exegesis papers and research papers) have a method of construction that outweighs these methods. Your professors and the writing program can give you more specific advice for fulfilling these assignments.

Topics, Theses and Arguments

Though these terms are often used interchangeably, they in fact refer to different things. A topic is merely the subject of your essay—what it is about. What you have to say about that topic is your thesis. Essays can be thought of as groups of arguments in support of your thesis, that one main idea that guides the paper as a whole. Although authors sometimes leave their thesis unstated (especially outside the academy), academic essays are stronger when they make their thesis explicit and up front. The stronger the thesis, the better the essay. If your professor assigns a topic, take care not to merely echo it back to him or her as a thesis statement. One way to avoid this weakness is to come up with more than one way of addressing the assignment. Try different ways of phrasing responses to it. Then choose the thesis that is the most forceful, the most persuasive, the most interesting response.

One way to start is with a somewhat mechanical thesis statement that can be rephrased more gracefully upon revision. Some examples of strong thesis language are

- There are several problems with Bruno's comment that

- Bruno's work is _____ because _____
- In this paper, I am going to do x, by examining y. Doing this will give us a better understanding of z.
- Critics Algernon and Lucky argue that Bruno's work is _____. But I would argue that Bruno actually does _____.
- Although Bruno's work might seem to be an example of _____, closer inspection reveals _____.

Organization

The classic organization of a paper is introduction, body and conclusion. As indicated above, the introduction should always make clear your thesis. There is no need to make cosmic generalizations before launching into your paper. Don't tell us that Luther is a historically significant figure or that the Bible is the greatest work in the history of the world. Just explain what you're writing about and why. Of course, this can be easier said than done in a long essay, but one way to organize your introduction is

1. Background – only give what is absolutely necessary to understand your paper.
2. Focus – what part of the whole will you concentrate on and why.
3. Importance – why should we bother reading your essay? What will you teach us? What consequences does your examination hold? Significance?

The body will provide main points, each of which will support your argument. Each paragraph should take up a different detail, and the topics of each paragraph should be clearly identifiable and sequential. One great way to make sure that the body of your paper flows well is to highlight the topic sentences of each paragraph. (If you have trouble finding them, so will your reader!) Then read these highlighted sentences in order. Do they make sense as a logical sequence? Do they add up to an argument? Do you give your reader a clear sense of where you are headed?

Your conclusion should not merely reiterate what you've said, but do provide a brief overview or summary, linking your support to your thesis. You should also mention the significance of what you have done. What is the pay-off of your approach? What have you shown and why does it matter?

Paragraphs

The focus and organization of your paper as a whole should be reflected on a smaller level in your paragraphs. Each paragraph should center around a single topic, one of your main points in supporting your argument, and you should be able to state this topic clearly in a single sentence. If you are writing a longer paper, several paragraphs will support the same main point, BUT each paragraph should still have its own focus, its own contribution, which clearly sets it apart from the paragraphs around it.

The best way to achieve this sort of clarity is to highlight the topic sentence of each paragraph as you revise your paper. Then read this list of highlighted sentences in sequence. Do they make sense as a series? Do they move consistently towards a conclusion or are you repeating yourself? Are there paragraphs that are perfectly valid but don't contribute to the overall argument? (If so, get rid of them!)

Other hints:

- Don't save your strongest assertions for the end of the paragraph—tell your reader up front what you want to prove and then elaborate or defend your assertion.
- Be sure that the entire paragraph stays on topic or moves in a consistent direction. A new direction requires a new paragraph.
- When you *do* move to a new paragraph, you need a transition. How do the paragraphs relate logically?
- Transitions that begin new paragraphs are less confusing than those tacked on at the end of a preceding paragraph.
- The simple addition of terms like *first*, *second*, *finally*, *furthermore*, *moreover*, and *however* gives your reader a sense of what your important points are and where you are going with them.
- Simplify, simplify, simplify. If anything within your paragraph is off-topic or would better apply to another topic, move or lose it!

Revision

Beginning writers tend to think of revision as "cleaning up" their papers. They check for spelling, replace words with better choices (from the thesaurus) and occasionally reword sentences. But experienced writers know that the hard (and rewarding) work of writing really begins with revision. Many of the points above only make sense once you have a rough draft of your paper to work with.

One way to understand this process is with a metaphor from wood-working. Inexperienced writers give their creation a quick buff with fine-grain sandpaper and think they are through. But you have to work on the larger structure first, working your way from the coarser elements to fine detail. Figure out what the overall focus of your paper will be. Then decide what the best form is for conveying that focus. Finally, turn to matters of style once you have decided on the form.

Be sure to leave plenty of time to revise your paper, paying keen attention to how *someone else* will receive it. Have you left key elements of your argument unstated? Be explicit! Have you obscured the real gist of what you are trying to say by surrounding it with generalizations and needless flowery phrases? Simplify!

ALL THESE THINGS TAKE TIME.
DON'T START YOUR PAPERS AT THE LAST MINUTE!