

Writing a First Draft

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Most of the time, the big hurdle in essay writing is the first draft. You've done the research, you jotted down some things you want to say—but when you sit down at the keyboard, you have to turn your heap of ideas into an orderly sequence with a clear beginning, middle, and end. That's usually the hard part.

Here are some general how-to tips for getting the first draft done, followed by more detailed suggestions for the introduction, body, and conclusion of your essay.

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Don't Seek Perfection. Forget about finding the one best way to approach your topic. An essay is a kind of dramatic performance. Just as there is more than one way to tell a story or a joke, there's more than one way to present an argument or to explain something complicated. If you have an idea for how to treat your topic, you think the idea will work for your audience, and you think you can pull it off—then take a shot at it. Of course, if the approach turns out to be unworkable, you'll have to change it. But don't waste a lot of time trying to figure out the perfect angle. Find *an* angle, and get going.

Don't Get Stuck at the Outlining Stage. An outline is a plan for what you want to say, and of course having a plan is a good idea. On the other hand, writing is a creative process. If you're like most people, you write best after you've built up a little momentum. So go ahead, rough out as much of an outline as you can, but feel free to start writing before the outline is finalized. Let the rest of the plan fall into place after you've hit your stride.

Build First, then Fix. While it is all right to start writing a first draft off an incomplete outline, *it is a bad idea to start revising an incomplete first draft*. Only when the first draft is done will it be clear what material belongs in the essay. Don't spend a lot of time polishing material you don't yet know for sure you're going to keep.

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Now some pointers for drafting the introduction, body, and conclusion of your essay.

It's nice if you can lead off with something that arouses your reader's interest. There's no recipe for this; you have to experiment. But if you can't figure out a good hook, don't fall back on boring generalities. Forget about the hook, or maybe come back to this problem later. For now, at least, get on with the job of preparing your reader to understand what you are going to say. You may want to provide some factual context. If your essay is a film review, you could start by reminding the reader of the director's reputation. Or, for a film inspired by real events, you could start with a quick review of the relevant history.

Whatever else you do in the introduction, normally you will want to give the reader some advance notice of where things are headed. If the essay is argumentative, you should probably state your conclusion up front. You may want to signal how your essay will be organized, perhaps going so far as to give a mini-outline. However, don't pack in too much crucial detail too early. Give your reader a chance to settle in.

These suggestions for the introduction are not strict rules. Occasionally, it may make sense to disregard them. In writing on a controversial topic, for instance, you might choose to start out neutral and reveal your conclusion only at the end. But most of the time, the stock advice is sound: use the introduction to say what you're going to say. Then use the body to say it. (The advice to "say what you've said" in the conclusion is less valid. We'll get to that later.)

Drafting the introduction is one way to try out your approach to the topic and get a feel for whether it's going to work. However, often you will find that the introduction is easier to write after the body of the paper has taken shape. At that stage, you have a clearer sense of what you're introducing.

To organize the body of your paper, try to take your cue from the material itself. The nature of your topic will usually suggest some natural ordering of the main points. Using this order to guide your presentation (and giving periodic cues that this is what you're doing), is like putting up a ready-made row of pegs to hang ideas on. For you, it's a way to jump-start the outlining process. For the reader, it's an aid to both comprehension and memory.

Chronological. A very common natural order of ideas. Suitable for a historical or biographical essay, or a concert review, or any essay about a process that unfolds over time, such as a medical treatment. (Above, the three

tips for getting a first draft done are arranged chronologically.) Your essay need not rotely follow a linear temporal sequence, and sometimes it can't, since often there is more than one thing happening at the same time, and discussion of all the different threads of action may require doubling back. But chronology provides a natural framework to build on.

Spatial/geographic. Some topics suggest a spatial arrangement. An essay on wine and wine-growing might deal with the wines of a particular country and cover the varieties regionally. An essay on animal and plant life in a rain forest might naturally proceed from top to bottom through the different layers of plant growth, in which various plant and animal species are found.

Often, chronology and geography are used in tandem. An essay on military history may detail the course of a campaign, or of a single battle, by identifying different fronts in the conflict and then, for each front, relating a chronology of events. An article about the course of a disease in the human body must talk about the process over time but also will deal with how the different parts of the body are affected. An architectural review may start with the exterior of a building and then shift to the interior, moving through the different parts of the building in the order in which they would be experienced by a visitor.

Functional. A tribute essay about a favorite motorcycle might focus, by turns, on different aspects of the bike's performance, such as acceleration, braking, cornering, comfort, and ease of maintenance. This is an example based on different functions of one thing. An essay on the social dynamics within a private club might examine the roles played by different members, such as one person's role as leader and another person's role as conflict mediator. This is an example of organization based on different functions performed by different parts of a larger whole.

Logical/causal. Some facts logically or causally imply other facts. An essay on law or politics might begin with certain assumptions about the obligations of a state to its citizens, and from these assumptions draw certain conclusions about constitutional rights, and from these, in turn, draw conclusions about the law applied to one or more specific cases. An essay on economics might begin with factual observations about the economic situation in some area, and from the facts draw conclusions both about what conditions must have been like in the recent past and what developments can be expected for the near future.

Taxonomic. This type of ordering, base on the relation between a general class and its sub-classes, is very common. If an essay on gardening distinguished modern roses from old roses, then divided old roses into European and East Asian varieties, and so on, this would be an organization based quite literally on botanical taxonomy (albeit an informal taxonomy based on gardening practice, not a scientific taxonomy based on genetics). However, taxonomic ordering would also be at work in an essay that divided human personalities into different types. Taxonomic ordering is, in fact, a very broad principle of organization—almost a catch-all scheme. An essay on the different ways Native Americans kept meat from spoiling could be thought of as taxonomically organized. (Such an essay might also use geographical or chronological ordering, if different methods were preferred by tribes living in different locations or different time periods.) Any essay dealing with a class of things or events that naturally group into smaller classes is a candidate for taxonomic ordering.

Other orderings. The above list is just a small sample of the many possible ways to organize a paper. Additional possibilities include order of importance (least to greatest, typically), degree of obviousness (most to least), and degree of abstraction (the order in this very section is concrete-to-abstract, more or less).

Work hard to impose a clear structure for your paper, an ordering scheme that will allow your reader to progress naturally and comfortably through your essay. However, keep in mind that a too-rigid structure can be boring. An essay often benefits from a little looseness around the edges. It is perfectly okay, in other words, to occasionally toss in a thought that doesn't fit, strictly speaking, because it just feels right at that point.

The conclusion is perhaps the hardest place in an essay to say something original and interesting, especially if you follow the standard advice for conclusions, namely to "say what you said." If you did a good job with the body of your essay, and if the essay is short enough to read in one sitting, then the reader shouldn't need—and probably won't appreciate—a tedious recap. However, if you worry the reader might have misunderstood a key point, or missed its significance, here is your chance to stress the point one more time.

Another common piece from writing teachers is to use the conclusion to give the reader something new to think about. This is a good, serviceable device for wrapping up your paper. A slightly more elegant trick, often used by professional writers, is to make a striking or funny observation in the introduction, then return to it in the conclusion. This creates a sense of completion, like that of finishing a museum tour by arriving back where you started.

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Once you're written the first draft, it's time to start revising. As you edit, ask yourself: Is it clear? Is it convincing? Is it memorable? Make sure you have enough definitions, explanations, and illustrations so your reader *understands* what you're saying. Check that you've made the arguments needed to *convince* your reader, by citing evidence or appropriate authorities, or by using logic or analogy. Finally, be sure you are emphasizing your key points, through humor, repetition, or dramatic summary statement, so your reader will *remember* what you say. All of this review and revision is important and worth doing carefully. But it is not hard. If you've followed the advice in this essay, then the hard part—getting the first draft written—is over.

Doctoral Level Writing

Critical Analysis, and Writing Original Material

You have no doubt been told that scholarly writing requires you to back up your words and ideas with evidence. This is true, in that good scholarly writing cannot just consist of your opinions. You need to 'make a case' for what you say, whether it is through the work of other scholars, or through evidence based on real events/history. However, whatever method you choose to back up your work, doctoral level writing must be more than a book report. Your essay needs to have a purpose. A doctoral level essay should not be a regurgitation of others' work. Otherwise, your reader might as well read the original theorists than read your paper. Therefore, it is important to define the purpose of your essay before you begin to write your outline or your paper. Are you trying to persuade your readers of a new idea? Are you taking a side in a controversial argument? (If so, what is your new twist?) Are you giving your readers a brand new perspective on historical events that are well known? Whatever the purpose, your essay should include something that is new. This original part of your work will not always be profound, but an essay that simply repeats ideas that have already been written by others, no matter how well documented or well written, is not doctoral level work.

The fundamental question then, is how you write anything original, especially given the rules imposed on scholarly writers. This is often easier said than done. You may have heard that comparing and contrasting various theorists is critical analysis, and is an example of doctoral level writing. While partially true, this is incomplete. It is fine to start by comparing and contrasting two theorists, say Maslow and Skinner. However, don't stop there. Instead of simply comparing and contrasting and leaving it there, narrow your focus on the theories of the great theorists, and ask how their theories explain an experimental result, a piece of history, or some other meaningful issue or fact. Alternatively, explain why these theories fall apart in the face of one of these things. You can also use secondary sources to provide evidence for your arguments, particularly when you have a brand new idea. You don't have to agree with Maslow just because he was a great theorist. Perhaps his theories can be expanded, or are only valid when certain assumptions are made. This is the stuff of true critical analysis. Your work should "weave" the work of others into a new "garment" that is all your own.

To "weave" the work of others into a brand new piece of writing that is original, you usually need to begin by presenting something that is known or well established. This may be a theory from a master scholar, a historical event, or even a statistic or set of statistics. Alternatively, you can begin by stating your conclusion, and then go back to the theory of a master scholar. Either way, you will eventually need to introduce known theories, historical facts, or other unoriginal information. Make your initial presentation of this material, but remember that the analysis does not belong only at the end of your essay. You should begin your analysis/synthesis right away. This means that you should start inserting original logic, work from another scholar, and historical or other evidence to make your point as soon as you come to an appropriate place in the presentation of your original "facts." Go as far as you can with this new argument, and then present the next piece of original material. When you get to an appropriate point in your work, insert more analysis, and so on. Do not think of synthesis, analysis, or argument as a separate section of your essay that can only be presented after all known material has been written. Your paper will be far more convincing, readable, and scholarly if you weave your arguments and evidence into the body of the entire paper.

For example, suppose you have a theory about human development that is unique. To present your theory in a scholarly manner, you decide to critically analyze opposing theories on evolution. After your introduction, you might begin by introducing one of the leading theories on human development that you are planning to analyze. Once you have introduced the topic, analyze it for strengths and weaknesses, always backing up your analysis with

credible scholarly evidence. Next, introduce the next theory. Compare and contrast it with the first theory, and “weave” in analysis on that theory as well. Then you might synthesize the theories; that is, merge them in a way that brings out your main point, which is your own theory, possibly a hybrid of the two. This requires that you bring out the strengths and weaknesses of each of the originals, and weave it together to make something new. In this way, you can actually introduce something completely new, and totally your own, all without deviating from the rules of scholarly writing. Everything you say must be backed up with evidence, but that doesn’t mean you can’t say something new. Evidence is often a citation from another scholarly source, but that isn’t the only way to back up your work. Find historical facts (properly cited), well known information that will illustrate or provide evidence for your point, use logic, find statistical data from a credible source, or do your own original research. You should always address any problem areas and limitations with your own theory too. In fact, you should look for weaknesses, and open your work up to criticism by other scholars in your field. That is part of good scholarly work. Your willingness to admit that your theories have holes and are not perfect will also give your arguments even more credibility. Finally, draw the essay to a conclusion by summarizing the key points of your theory and perhaps suggesting areas for further research.,

You may have been told that you are not allowed to have an opinion. Your professors have probably seen too many papers where students have simply stated opinions or made statements without any credible backup. However, you will find that expressing your views is quite possible if you do it by backing them up with solid evidence. Following these few simple suggestions will help you organize and get started on your essay. Once you are past this initial hurdle, scholarly writing becomes easier with time, and it can even be fun. All good scholars started by following these basic rules.