

THE CENTER FOR THEOLOGICAL WRITING
DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL

HOW TO WRITE A PAPER: AN OVERVIEW

GETTING STARTED

Two of the biggest problems for student writers are **procrastination** and **disorganization**. Therefore, careful time management is one of the most important disciplines to develop during your graduate study. 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 your courses; keep up with the assignments and you won't have to devote precious writing time to catching up. Additionally, **take notes**, not only as a means to record and review what you have learned, but as a way of generating ideas. Try to find similarities, differences, or other connections in your material. Look at particular facts and textual details and consider how they are shaped by their context and how they might be linked to form an interpretative theory.

Make sure you give yourself plenty of **time** to generate and refine your ideas. Thinking about your topic well ahead of time, even if subconsciously, often results in unexpected insights, and it is undoubtedly better to put your ideas together over the course of several days than several hours. The only thing worse than starting poorly is not starting at all. 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 may be, start writing. Improvement can only come when you have something to improve.

GENERATING IDEAS

*I must confess that, personally, I have learned many things
I never knew before . . . just by writing. Saint Augustine.*

There are several methods for starting a paper. The most widely known are **brainstorming** and **outlining**.

Brainstorming

When brainstorming, put down anything and everything you can think of about your topic without stopping to edit or revise. The goal is to produce as diverse a mass of raw material as possible and to tap a stream of consciousness that might lead to a good thesis. Next, sort through this mass (or mess) of ideas, looking for common threads, promising insights, surprising connections, and so forth. Now you have something to work with.

However, while this method can often help you overcome writer's block, it can also lead to disorganized papers. Give yourself time to work through the material you have generated and also consider making use of an outline to create some structure.

Outlining

Outlining almost always has mixed results. It works best when you have a hunch about or glimmer of an argument already but don't know where to go from there. If you have a basic idea but are unsure how to support it, the task of creating an outline can help clarify what evidence is needed. An outline can also help you organize your basic claims into a coherent and persuasive sequence. The disadvantage is that outlines can produce rigid or schematic papers that lack stylistic subtlety. At the end of the day, they probably work better at organizing existing ideas than generating new ideas. (See "Reverse Outlining" on our webpage.)

DRAFTING THE PAPER

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: for example, the Reformation in England.
- What you have to say about that topic is your **thesis**. A thesis is not a statement of fact, but rather a statement of your view of that fact; not "Thomas More broke with Henry VIII," but "Thomas More's break with his king was the result of a personal and principled difference of opinion that mirrored contemporary conflicts over national and ecclesial allegiances."
- Then the evidence you bring to support your thesis, together with the way in which you arrange it, is your **argument**.

Coming up with a thesis can be hard, but when all else fails, try turning a statement into a question and then providing a pithy answer to that question (thus "Thomas broke with Henry VIII" becomes "Why did Thomas break with Henry," which in turn can generate a number of answers or theses—Thomas owed more allegiance to the pope than his king

and thus broke with Henry, Thomas attempted to resign his position because he felt both politically and religiously isolated, and so on).

Although authors (especially those outside the academy) sometimes leave their thesis unstated, an academic essay is stronger when its thesis is explicit and up front. The stronger and more interesting 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. Develop an angle.

Here are some templates for promising thesis statements:

- There are several problems with Barth's argument that . . .
- Barth's work is _____ because _____ . . .
- Scholars Flett and Stout claim that Barth's theology of baptism is _____. But I would argue that Barth's fundamental position is _____.
- Although Barth's work might seem to be an example of _____, closer inspection reveals _____.
- In this paper, I am going to do *x*, by examining *y*. Doing this will give us a better understanding of *z*.

Also, make sure your thesis statement is neither too broad nor too narrow. A thesis that is too broad will be unmanageable; you will not be able to adequately support and defend it. A thesis that is too narrow is likely to be facile or uninteresting and will leave you short on what to say.

Finally, you may wonder how a thesis is different from a **statement of purpose**. In many ways, a thesis and a statement of purpose cover the same terrain, except the latter more explicitly states where you are going and how you intend to get there (as in the last bulleted example above).

As you work through your paper, your thesis will act as a thread to weave together the different parts. However, like introductions that often get written last, theses sometimes take time to emerge and can alter as you think through your arguments. Don't be surprised if your thesis doesn't fully appear until after you have written a first draft, or even that you have to change your original ideas.

Organization

The classic organization of a paper is into an introduction, body, and conclusion, although you may find in drafting your paper that you begin in the middle!

Introductions (Preliminary Advice)

Writers tend to fall into two groups when it comes to introductions: some absolutely must have one before they can proceed; others have no idea how to begin and so start with a body paragraph. However, whichever group you are in, you will inevitably find yourself writing the final version of your introduction *after* you have finished a complete draft of your paper. For how can you introduce something that has not yet come into being?

Therefore, if you are looking for detailed advice on how to write an introduction, scroll down to the end of this section on organization. Otherwise, what you need to know at this point is that it is perfectly acceptable to have a very rough introduction with simply a few signposts in it, and it is also fine to skip the introduction completely. What you should not do is get so hung up on writing a polished piece of prose that you waste time and fail to advance to the body of your paper.

A caveat: Of course, some types of papers (particularly exegesis papers) have a method of construction that outweighs the advice above. Your professors, preceptors, and writing tutors can give you more specific advice for tackling these assignments.

Body Paragraphs

The body of your paper will provide the main points that will support your argument. Each paragraph should center on a single topic, which should be clearly stated 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.

Keep in mind these essential elements:

- **support**
 - evidence (facts, examples, quotations from course material, etc.)
 - argument (the use of reason)
- **focus** (be sure your paragraphs stay on topic and move in a consistent direction; a new direction requires a new paragraph. Also, get rid of anything that—however interesting—is not directly relevant to your argument)

- **coherence/cohesion** (connect your points to each other; order material logically; use transitional words and phrases that show relationships between ideas; for example: first, second, finally, however, nevertheless, in addition, etc.)
- **clarity** (will your reader understand what you are saying? If you are unsure whether you are communicating clearly, try explaining your point to a friend. If s/he doesn't understand, try again using different words)

Conclusions and Introductions

Your **conclusion** should not merely reiterate what you've said, but providing a brief overview or summary, taking care to link what you say explicitly to your thesis, is fine. A conclusion is, after all, your last chance to emphasize what is important and mention the significance of what you have done. What is the pay-off of your approach? What are its implications? What have you shown and why does it matter? End on a strong note; don't just trail off.

Now go back to your **introduction** and rewrite it so that it truly introduces what you have written.

There is no need to make cosmic generalizations at the outset of your introduction (no "ever since humans ruled the earth" or "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

- provide some **background**, but only give what is absolutely necessary to understand your paper ("In 1532 Henry VIII began the legal process of separating the English church from Rome . . .")
- **focus**—what part of the topic will you concentrate on and why ("Henry's ultimate breach with Rome would be the source of Thomas More's breach with the king, and it is the effects of these ruptures that I will explore . . .")
- **importance**—why should we bother reading your essay? What is its significance? What follows from what you say? ("The rupture between Henry and Thomas, king and chancellor, protestant and catholic, can still be felt in England today . . .")

REVISION—"RE-SEEING" YOUR PAPER

Many writers think that revision is simply a matter of fixing small errors—typos, misspellings, mispunctuation, grammatical mistakes, improperly formatted notes—that spoil a paper. But revision should be more than this: it is an opportunity to look over what

you have written with “new eyes.” Of course, this involves time, and time is something that is in short supply, but your paper can never truly be a polished piece of writing if you fail to revise.

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.

Ask yourself, is the overall focus of your paper clear? Have you adequately supported your argument? Is your reasoning logical? Is your organization coherent? Are your points comprehensible or have you obscured the real gist of what you are trying to say by surrounding it with generalizations and needless flowery phrases? Have you eliminated redundant and repetitive material? Is your introduction effective? Is your conclusion thoughtful and thought-provoking?

FINAL DETAILS—EDITING AND DOCUMENTING

When you are completely finished revising your paper, check it for errors. Although word processing programs identify many typos, misspellings, and ungrammatical elements, they also miss a great deal. You may have typed “mien” for “mine,” but “mien” is a word and won’t be identified as incorrect. Similarly, “She decide to go home” won’t be caught (it should be “decided”).

Additionally, it is extremely important that you properly document your sources. If you have used quotations, check that they are correct and their sources are given (in foot- or endnotes or with parenthetical citations), and that you have provided a Works Cited page or Bibliography. Ideas that are not your own should be similarly documented. For further advice, go to “Citing Sources within Your Paper” on our website.