

the steps of writing

These are the most important steps in putting your paper together. Some are essential, a few can be skipped. The basic problem is how to go from a mass of unconnected papers to a coherent paper. The solution is to step back and let your mind wander through the ideas and arguments. Mull things over and let yourself react to the research you've done. What ideas come into your head when you think about this topic? Coming up with a thesis is crucial to the writing process. Everything else can be done in whatever way works best for you, so you can skip some of the other steps, but writing without a thesis isn't really writing.

Come up with a thesis, a specific claim your paper will make and support. There's no easy way to come up with a thesis. The basic idea is to look at everything you can find out about a topic and decide for yourself, strictly on the basis of the available evidence and logic of the arguments, what the truth is. Work over your own notes and think about what you want to say. Usually, theses start coming as you master the material, so you should have one pretty soon. If you can't quite get it clear, you could do a THESIS SHEET on which you write a possible thesis, comment on it, and try to improve it. Try various ideas out for size. Take a position and look over your notes for any ideas that contradict it. When you find a contradiction, try to defend your tentative idea against it. When you've found an idea that you can reasonably defend, you've got a thesis. Coming up with a thesis can be hard, but don't start writing without one.

Sort out everything you need to support that thesis.

Arrange the supporting materials so that logically connected ideas are together. Sometimes simply shifting around pieces of paper can help you organize your thoughts. If every idea, concept, definition, argument, example or whatever is on a separate piece of paper you can lay out these pieces of paper in arrangements that reflect the logical relationships between the underlying ideas. Forcing yourself to work out where some piece of paper belongs can force you into figuring out some important logical connections before you ever start writing.

Do a cognitive map centered on your thesis.

Do an argument sheet for your thesis.

Sketch out an outline of the paper. An outline is simply a list of things you will say in the order in which you will say them.

The basic rules are:

- If the reader needs to know A in order to understand or agree with B, then A should come before B.
- If A and B are closely related, The parts of the paper that deal with them should be close together.
- If a premise of one argument needs it's own argument, that argument should be right by that premise.
- Definitions come before explanations.
- Explanations come before arguments.
- Positions should be explained before they are criticized.

The easiest way to do an outline is to do a simple one for your main argument with a lot of space between the points. Then do a little outline for each point in the blank spaces. If all else fails, try writing the sheet headings on another piece of paper in various orders, and pick one to be your outline. Don't limit your outline to a list of topics and/or questions. To get maximum use out of an outline write in briefly what you

will say about each topic. At this point you don't need to connect things or fill in the arguments completely, but the outline should contain your main claims and your main reasons for thinking that those claims are true. Without some content, your outline will not help either you or your professor to detect problems. Remember that the structure of a paper depends on the logical structure of the ideas in it. If the ideas aren't there, there's no way to tell if the structure is the right one.

Order your worksheets according to your basic argument or outline. This is a quick and easy way to create a rough draft. You can base this on a preexisting outline or arrangement, or you can do it from scratch. The basic idea is to organize your notes so that you can write the paper directly from them with as little fuss as possible. To start, you should have every idea, concept, definition, argument, example or whatever, on a separate piece of paper. Pull out your thesis statement and lay it down. Find your arguments sheet for that thesis and pull out the sheets for each of the premises (or supporting examples etc.) and lay those on top of the thesis sheet, putting the argument sheet on the very top. For any premise that needs its own argument, cut the stack just above that premise and repeat the process. Finally, take all the remaining sheets that have become necessary. Once organized, your stack can be turned into a first draft simply by starting at the beginning and turning each sheet into a paragraph or part of a paragraph of text until you get to the end.

Write up your paper from your outline and/or worksheets as clearly as possible. Try to write as though you were verbally explaining this idea to an uninformed but intelligent friend. Write as though you were speaking in the most precise way possible. Avoid long, complicated and flowery sentences. Instead, put the ideas as simply as you can without distorting them. Make up your own examples for the trickier points and make sure you use your own words for everything. Don't worry about style, rather let the transitions take care of themselves. Take the time to read the paper out loud to yourself or even to other people.

Add a brief introduction that says what you want to prove and how you plan to do it. All an introduction really needs is a thesis statement and short list of the main topics in the paper. General remarks, background material and other commentary are unnecessary and can be distracting. Some writers make the introduction the last thing they do.

Show your completed draft to your professor.