



Center for Writing and Speaking

E NO. 1 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

Writing Effective Conclusions

Decide what type of conclusion is best for your essay.

- Some conclusions **restate or summarize** the essay.
These conclusions are best when you want to remind the reader of the information presented in the body. Perhaps you have an exceptionally long essay or a complex argument. Summarizing your thesis and supporting evidence provides the reader with a brief reminder of your main points. Don't simply quote what you've already written. Instead, succinctly remind the reader how the points of evidence specifically support your thesis.
- Some conclusions **elaborate the thesis**.
You may want to use your conclusion to elaborate your thesis if your supporting arguments not only prove the thesis, but make also it clearer and more specific. Ask yourself how the reader better understands the thesis now that you've presented all the evidence, then include this new perspective in your conclusion. A conclusion of this kind can also apply your argument to a broader context. For example, a conclusion might suggest how your analysis of ancient Greek sculpture would apply to Western art in general.
- Some conclusions **discuss the implications** of the thesis.
Once you've proven your thesis, your conclusion can explore how further research can expand your argument. Implications can also include a discussion of how your thesis fills gaps in an area of academic study, or how your thesis supports or refutes one side of an academic debate.

Write the conclusion following these guidelines:

- **Keep the conclusion consistent.**
Follow the tone and style of the previous paragraphs: avoid contradicting other points you make, and stay on the topic of your essay. Relate the conclusion back to the introduction, if possible. For example, if you started the paper with an anecdote or observation, apply your conclusion to that introductory narrative.
- **Keep the conclusion simple.**
Make your points briefly. This is not the time to elaborate each sentence or go into great detail.
- **Keep the conclusion specific.**
Even when discussing implications or expanding your thesis, stay within the boundaries of your topic, your research, and your argument. Don't over-generalize your argument by using your thesis as proof of a cliché ("Therefore, *Romeo and Juliet* proves that love conquers all").

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Revising Your Draft

Take a break.

Before attempting to revise your essay, take a break. Thinking about something else will give your mind a rest so you can return to the paper refreshed.

Stage One: The Big Picture.

- The first stage of revising should focus on the big picture — addressing the content and organization of your draft as a whole.
 - Look at the **CONTENT** of your draft. Check to be sure that...
 - The language and ideas of your thesis are carried throughout the rest of your essay.
 - Your points are developed using specific examples.
 - Your points are based in analysis, not summary. (See Handout No. 13)
 - Look at the **ORGANIZATION** of your draft. Check to be sure that...
 - Your ideas flow logically from one paragraph to another in an organized manner
 - Your ideas on a specific topic or point are grouped in one section of the essay, not spread throughout.
 - Your points serve as support or proof of your thesis.

Stage Two: The Closer Look.

- The second stage of revising should focus on the smaller picture — refining the content and organization of your individual paragraphs and points.
 - Look at the **CONTENT** and **ORGANIZATION** of your points. Check to be sure that...
 - The points within the paragraphs follow a logical sequence.
 - Each paragraph includes a transition from one point or example to another.
 - Each paragraph includes a main idea or topic sentence.
 - Each paragraph includes specific examples that support the main idea of the paragraph as well as the thesis of the paper.
 - Each paragraph includes a concluding sentence that links the point to the thesis.
 - Look at the **CLARITY** of your points. Check to be sure that...
 - The points within the paragraphs are concise and direct, but substantial.
 - The points within the paragraphs have precise word choice and varied sentence structure.

Read the draft aloud.

- After you have revised, take the time to read your draft aloud. You may hear problems or errors that your eyes do not catch, including awkward transitions or wording and grammar mistakes.

Make an appointment with the CWS for further revision--another set of eyes can sometimes see errors you can't!

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Effective Introductions

A good introduction not only gives your thesis statement and the appropriate background information on your topic, but also grabs your readers' attention and draws them into the rest of your paper. Here is the inverted pyramid method of introductions, where you start general and get more specific until you reveal your thesis statement.

GENERAL STATEMENT

This statement should be relevant to the main idea of your paper and not so broad that it becomes a cliché. For example, instead of writing, *Throughout history, the media has been saturated with a variety of apocalyptic images*, you could write, *As the twentieth century and second millennium draw to a close, popular culture is saturated with a wide variety of apocalyptic visions mass-marketed through film and literature*. The second statement tells the reader what kind of media will be discussed and grounds the topic in a specific historical context, the end of the second millennium.

MORE SPECIFIC STATEMENTS

These statements often include background information on your topic and should direct the audience toward your thesis. After reading these statements, your reader should know generally what to expect from your thesis statement.

THESIS STATEMENT

All of the information prior should lead the reader to your thesis statement so it is easily understood.

Things to avoid in an introduction:

- **Including too much detail.** If you tell your audience everything that you have to say in your paper in the introduction, then why should they bother to read the rest of it? Present the thesis that you will discuss further in the paper, but do not try to prove it in the introduction.
- **Straying too far off topic.** It is important for your reader to have some background on your topic, but this information must be appropriate to your thesis. Get to the point as soon as possible, without rambling about irrelevant issues. Present only the most relevant background information in the introduction.
- **Quoting dictionaries.** We all have read papers that begin “According to Webster’s Dictionary...” While it is important for you as a writer to formulate your own definitions within your paper, this trite opening is a sure way to put your reader to sleep.

Remember that this model shows just one way to write introductions. For more suggestions, read sample papers and writing style guides.

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Organizing Your Paper

Almost as important as the information you use to prove your thesis is how you present that information — how you organize your essay. Here are a few words about organization to remember when writing and revising essays.

Thesis

Always keep the thesis in mind. Each paragraph and each example should advance your idea and support your argument. Using the thesis as a thread that runs throughout your paper will unite and organize the ideas.

Outline

It is usually best to create an outline prior to starting the writing process. Outlines will make it easier to isolate the main ideas and determine how to arrange them.

Hierarchy

Determine which ideas are most important, which examples are the strongest, and how everything relates to the thesis. Be sure to emphasize the most important ideas and spend fewer words on less crucial parts.

Relationships

Ideas that are closely related should be near each other, in the same paragraph or adjacent paragraphs. This organization method shows connection between supporting arguments and keeps your reader from feeling like they are reading the same examples over and over.

Consistency

Be consistent in your organization. For example, if the first three points are organized chronologically, organize the rest of the essay similarly.

Redundancy

Once you prove a supporting idea in a paragraph or section, move on to the next point. Refer to earlier ideas in your paper for comparison or continuity, but don't prove the same idea in every paragraph. Each paragraph should add something new to the thesis discussion.

Expectations

The success of a well-organized paper lies in raising and meeting the reader's expectations. If you raise a question in one paragraph, the reader will expect an answer in the following paragraphs. Expectations move the reader through the essay; meeting those expectations develops the thesis.

Grand finale

Craft your essay so that the strongest ideas are near the end. Even if each paragraph contains ideas of equal importance, make sure the final section shows a culmination of all those ideas.

Examples

Think of the most effective pieces of writing you've read, or ask your professor if they have examples of good papers. Observe how these authors organized their writing, then remember those techniques for the next time you write an essay.

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Outlining Your Paper

An outline is designed to indicate the direction of your paper and can be done before you write as an organizational strategy or after you write as a revision technique. Creating an outline before you begin writing a paper is one way to make sure all your thoughts and arguments make sense in the final draft. These steps can help you formulate an outline that should lead to a strong essay.

Organize and prioritize.

Look at what you wrote down while brainstorming or developing your topic, then organize each item based on its importance, its relationship to other pieces of information, or its chronological time within a larger framework. After completing this stage, you should have a good idea of exactly what you will discuss in your paper and how you will prove your argument.

Write a working thesis statement.

Before you can outline your paper, you need to know what you are proving in the essay. Writing a thesis statement, however preliminary or unpolished, will give your outline (and therefore your paper) direction and focus. Go back to your brainstorming notes, and think about what you want to discuss, what you've learned from the research, and why your topic is important.

Order the main points.

With your thesis statement in mind, look at your organized notes and decide how to prioritize your thoughts to prove your thesis most effectively. Your supporting evidence should flow logically and smoothly from one point to the next.

Organize the detailed arguments.

Now that you have the main points in order, go back to your brainstorming and research notes to decide how to prove each point. Write down a sentence or two describing what you will discuss under each main point.

Outlining after you write

Outlining after you write can help you determine whether or not your argument develops logically and effectively. Try this strategy as a way of evaluating the organization and content of your paper. When outlining your paper, make sure you are true to what you wrote, not to what you intended to write.

- Convert paragraph topic sentences into the main points of your outline.
- Transfer the supporting ideas from your paper to subpoints under your main topics.
- Evaluate the outline. Is it logical, effective, and complete?
- Rearrange paragraphs and ideas. Add or delete information.
- Revise your paper based on your outline.

(continued on reverse)

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Outlining Your Paper, Continued

Potential Outline Skeleton- Here is just one way you could begin to structure your paper.

1. Introduction information
 - a. Thesis
2. Topic Sentence
 - a. Supporting evidence and analysis
 - b. More supporting information and analysis
3. Topic Sentence
 - a. Supporting evidence and analysis
 - b. More supporting information and analysis
4. Etc.
5. Conclusion
 - a. How it relates back to thesis



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Summary Versus Analysis

When writing a paper, it is often necessary to summarize plot, historical events, or another author's ideas. Summary can be a very useful tool for furthering your paper's argument; however, summary for its own sake has no place in an analytical paper. The trick is to separate useful summary from unnecessary summary when developing an analysis. Here are some tips to help you increase your analysis.

Don't just repeat what someone else has said better.

Your voice should be present in your paper. Instead of just saying what your sources have already said, you should be making your own points. You should attempt to use the facts everyone knows are true to prove something people may not know is true. The facts everyone knows are *summary*. The point you are proving is *analysis*.

Prove something that needs proving.

When you write an analytical paper, you should not be describing an obvious concept. Analysis goes beyond description into examination and explanation. Making sure your thesis goes beyond the obvious will help you cut down on summary. Ask yourself if someone reasonably could argue the opposite of your thesis. If so, then you probably have an analytical thesis statement.

Relate summary directly to the point you are making.

What is the significance of the event or plot point you are describing? How does the event help prove your thesis? What part does the description play in your argument? If it's not clear how what you've written relates to your thesis, then you should either take the summary out or reevaluate how it fits into your paper.

More than a few sentences of plot summary is usually too much.

Try not to fall into the trap of relating the relevant summary, then feeling you need to explain every detail of the story surrounding it. If you are trying to prove that Jimmy's fear of clowns comes from his traumatic birthday party experience, you only need to mention the relevant birthday party. Why his mom threw the party, how many people were there, and why Sandra didn't come is all irrelevant background information.

Get someone else to read your paper.

Sometimes it's hard to tell whether something you've written is a relevant part of your argument or just unnecessary summary. Getting someone else — a writing center tutor, for example — to read the paper gives you a new perspective with some objective distance. Your reader should be able to understand your argument without feeling like they are reading a book report.

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Avoiding Plagiarism

Plagiarism is presenting another person's ideas or words as your own.

You probably know that plagiarism is a serious academic offense. But do you know when and how to cite sources? Not knowing the proper rules for citing ideas can lead to accidental plagiarism.

Always cite everything that you obtain from an outside source, even if you came up with a similar idea on your own before you consulted other sources.

- When quoting an author directly, use quotation marks to separate the author's words from your own, and follow the quotation with a citation.
- Even if you paraphrase an author by restating his or her ideas in your own words, you must cite the source.

How to Avoid Plagiarism

- Take careful notes while researching. Note the source, the author, and the page number. Paraphrase the author properly, and use quotation marks when you copy the author's words directly.
- Cite classmates and professors just as you would cite texts.
- Use quotation marks when repeating more than three consecutive words from the source.
- Paraphrasing is not just substituting synonyms for the author's words - alter the order of thoughts and change the author's language to suit your writing. Remember to cite the paraphrased information.
- If you're unsure whether to cite, ask someone—a professor, a CWS tutor, a friend, etc.
- To learn the proper citation style, look in style guides such as *The St. Martin's Handbook*, the MLA Guide, the APA Manual, or the guide recommended by your instructor or department. Remember that there are several styles, so check with your professor about which one to use.
- Always remember to **cite as you write!** Citation software such as Zotero or Mendeley can help keep track of sources, especially for large research assignments.

What is Not Plagiarism

- Not citing common knowledge. There are no hard and fast rules governing what is considered common knowledge, so consult your instructor when in doubt.
- Using the same word as the author of your source. Simple words and exact terms should be repeated in your essay for clarity (e.g., don't say "oblong leather sporting equipment" for "football").
- Getting help from a CWS tutor or friend, as long as you remain the author of the paper and the originator of its ideas and your professor hasn't told you not to, such as with a take-home exam.

A properly cited paper includes citations for all dictionaries, paraphrases, and borrowed ideas, and a works cited or references page.

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Thesis Statements

A thesis statement is the sentence stating the essay's argument. Usually located near the end of the introduction, a thesis narrows your general topic to a specific, focused argument which is supported by the evidence presented in the rest of your paper. A good thesis should answer the question, "What does this paper prove?"

Thesis vs. Topic

One of the most common mistakes students make is confusing the thesis with the topic. Here are some examples of each to help make the difference clear.

Topic: school vouchers

Thesis: The implementation of a tax-funded voucher system would significantly harm the public schools and would not achieve the desired outcome of overall educational improvement.

Topic: interpretation of T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men"

Thesis: Eliot's replacement of the formal poetic restrictions of rhyme scheme and meter for the more natural sound of the speaking voice and the rhythm of the breath, along with his unconventional use of punctuation, express the fragmentation of values and the breakdown of coherent society in the aftermath of WWI.

Topic: democratic values in Karl Marx's writing

Thesis: Although many totalitarian regimes in history steeped themselves in Marxist ideology, a careful review of Marx's writing reveals a different understanding of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" and provides an inherently democratic vision of socialism.

Identifying a Good Thesis Statement

How can you evaluate the thesis of your paper? Here are a few important questions to ask yourself:

- **Does the thesis fit the scope of the assignment?** Don't try to prove something too broad or too specific for the length of your paper.
- **Can the thesis be reasonably argued against?** Trying to think of the opposing argument can strengthen your argument and test the importance of your thesis.
- **Does the thesis express one main idea that links together all of the supporting ideas in the paper?** You may have twenty important arguments in your paper, but your thesis should act as an umbrella, uniting the minor points under its shadow and showing how those ideas relate. Avoid simply listing your various points like a laundry list that merely points to each of your body paragraphs' topic sentences.

Remember, even a good thesis may not fit the paper as it is transformed through revisions. Spend a good portion of your revision time making sure your thesis accurately represents what the paper says as a whole.

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Thesis Statements, Continued

Developing a Working Thesis

A working thesis is a rough draft of your thesis statement. It can help you in the prewriting stage to organize your thoughts in an outline. Once you begin writing, the working thesis can make your first draft more focused, allowing you to concentrate on style in later revisions.

- The first step toward writing a working thesis is to formulate a strong argument. Mapping out what you imagine your paper will cover can lead you to a sentence or two that articulates your ideas.
- Answer the question, "What is your paper about?" in one sentence, or try explaining it to a friend who doesn't know much about the assignment. If you feel stuck in the process of writing your thesis, just talking about your argument can help clarify your vision.
- Try writing a sentence that begins with "I intend to show" or "I will prove." This is not a final thesis, but it is a way to get your main ideas into one sentence. Once you can state your ideas, take out the "I intend ..." phrase and work on making the words represent your ideas as clearly as possible.

Revising Your Thesis

Once you construct a working thesis, you have a foundation for revision. Since the thesis is the most fundamental sentence or group of sentences in your essay, its wording is particularly important. This does not mean you should aim for poetry; instead, work on writing a clear statement of your ideas.

- In many college essays, persuading the reader to agree with you lies in convincing them to interpret a book, article, or event a particular way. Does your thesis strongly suggest a compelling argument? Show that your essay topic is controversial or ambiguous; then take a stand.
- Ask yourself how and why. Instead of stating a general claim or opinion, look at the reasons behind an event and the significance of your argument.
- Stick to the most essential part of your argument. Adding in too many details can weaken the thesis by obscuring the main idea, and you have the rest of the paper to flesh out the other components of your argument.
- Make vague words and phrases specific. For example, instead of saying that a character is important, say that she provides the foundation for the narrative even though she is a minor character.
- Let someone else read your introductory paragraph, and ask them to point out your thesis. They should be able to recognize your main argument and have an idea of where your paper leads.

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Getting Past Writer's Block

Writer's block can be a source of great frustration, but these strategies can help get those wheels turning.

Read.

Sometimes you get so involved in a particular assignment that you lose track of your direction. After going over the material again, you will often feel confident and clear enough about your topic to begin writing again.

- *Review your thesis.* You'll either return to your focus with a good sense of direction or decide to rewrite it. Don't be afraid to alter your thesis; you might be "blocking" yourself by refusing to do so.
- *Look over previous drafts (if you have them).* Remind yourself of your original plan and pursue it or change it.
- *Review class notes or reading notes.* These sources can give you ideas for your assignment.

Rethink.

Try reframing your perspective on your paper.

- *Make an outline.* Looking at the most important points of your paper can help you see how to tie it all together, and you may think of points to add or change.
- *Make a chart or draw a picture.* If you're a visual learner, viewing your paper as an image can seem less daunting than looking over hundreds of words on a page.
- *Start somewhere else.* Work on the part of the paper that comes easiest to you. This might be the conclusion or a paragraph in the middle. Starting with the easy part will help you spark ideas for other sections.
- *Try free-writing.* Just write whatever comes to mind about your topic, even if it's grammatically incorrect or you don't think it sounds good. Fresh perspectives may come to you during this exercise.

Move.

Leaving your workspace for a while can be a good thing.

- *Take a break.* This might sound counterproductive, but pausing to take a walk, make a phone call, or play frisbee gives your mind a chance to relax, allowing you to return to your writing refreshed. If taking a complete break isn't feasible, try working on an assignment for a different class. Then go back to the paper.
- *Describe your topic to someone else.* Go to the CWS or talk to a friend, and have that person take notes on what you say. Talking out your ideas can shed new light on what you think and what you can include.
- *Talk to your instructor.* He or she can give you advice on a focus for your paper and can sometimes help you determine what's really "blocking" your writing.

Back to the paper.

Some debate exists about whether writer's block exists at all; perhaps it's just the way we describe difficult moments in the writing process. In any case, whatever "it" is, it's curable. As with many other problems, admitting you're stuck is the first step to overcoming that block. Then you can get back to work!

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Clarity in Writing

High atop the lists of Important Elements of Writing for writers, instructors, and editors is clarity. The more effort you put into achieving clarity, the less work your reader has to do in order to understand your paper. This handout will deal with the issue of clarity in two forms — clarity of words and clarity of thought or argument.

CLARITY OF ARGUMENT

- **Know why you are writing.** What is the purpose of the paper? Of each paragraph? Of each quotation? You want those purposes to be evident to the reader.
 - ✓ Each paragraph should reinforce the thesis you have set forth in the beginning of your paper.
 - ✓ Each sentence should reinforce the purpose of the paragraph.
 - ✓ Explain your quotations. The connection between them and your argument must be made apparent.
- **Make sure that what is holding your argument together — a thesis, a research question, or an organizing idea— is evident to the reader.** If you cannot state your argument in one or two sentences, a reader who may be unfamiliar with your topic will have difficulty picking it out.
- **Consider repetition of your argument as reinforcement.** Although you want to avoid redundancy, repeating your argument—in different words and with further development — can be helpful in making it clear to your reader.

CLARITY OF WORDS

- **Define key terms.** Do not assume that your reader has the same definition of freedom or masculinity as you do. Make sure to define technical terms, as well as common words that you use in a special way. Set up your definition early so that your paper works from these assumptions.
- **Evaluate long sentences and try to achieve greater conciseness.** Deliver the information as succinctly as possible. Sometimes long sentences are necessary, but avoid sticking on strings of dependent clauses.
 - **Unclear:** Yossarian is a pivotal character in *Catch-22* because, despite his cowardice, which is not the insanity the military claims it is, and despite his bawdiness, which is actually an attempt to hold onto life, he defies the archetypal hero figure to represent the reality of the modern hero
 - **Better:** Yossarian's cowardice and bawdiness defy the archetypal hero figure, yet this conflict makes him a more powerful character in that he represents the reality of the modern hero.
- **Avoid using jargon and big words.** A sophisticated idea does not always require sophisticated language. The strength of your paper lies in your ability to present your argument effectively, not your ability to use big words.
- **Use specific language; avoid generalizations.** Clear, specific language is more powerful than general or abstract language.
 - **Unclear:** The meaning of this assertion of femininity goes back to previous eras.
 - **Better:** This interpretation of femininity dates back to the Victorian era.
- **The pronoun “this” by itself is also an example of vague language.** “This” should be followed by a noun to clarify or iterate its meaning.

Be your audience's guide. Lead them through your points one at a time, and explain everything.

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Narrowing Scope

Most work with scope comes in the earlier stages of the writing process, often before you begin putting words on the page. Finding a suitable scope for your topic allows you to delve deeply into your argument, and that depth will give you the opportunity to contribute something original to a critical discussion. If your scope is too broad, you will not be able to fully engage with your issue. The key is narrowing your focus.

Scope refers to the breadth and complexity of the central concern of your paper, including all of the points that you must establish for your readers to understand your central concern, as well as all of the significant issues that you must address in order to present a fair, well-considered argument.

Flexibility is the key to determining scope.

- Be willing to set aside or throw out ideas that don't fit your developing topic.
- Be prepared to develop your paper around one sub-point rather than around the main points you originally conceived of.

Narrowing your scope helps you to write more. If your scope is too wide, the paper will be filled with sweeping generalizations; and if you only glaze the surface of your points, you will fall short of the page limit.

Tips for narrowing your focus

Make yourself define key terms in your topic, even if they seem simple.

- Original Topic: The reactions of the Indian people to colonialism during the Victorian Era
 - ✓ Ask yourself: What do I mean by “reactions?”—emotional reactions of the colonized. What do I mean by “colonialism?”—the spread of a foreign culture by force. Who do I mean by “the Indian people?”—academics within Indian society
- New Topic: The effects of English educational practices on Indian universities in the Victorian Era

Avoid writing about abstract categories such as “society,” “life,” “death,” “love,” “time,” etc. If you use the term “society,” defining what you mean will automatically narrow your focus. For example, don't write about how society harms women. Write about how the values of a particular religious sect in a particular time and place (a branch of society) lead women to feel ashamed if they do not want children (a way in which society harms women).

Examples of scope too big for any project:

- Women in society
- Love, death, beauty, and time in the novels of Virginia Woolf

Talk to your instructors and CWS tutors. Instructors want you to narrow your scope. They will be glad to help you.

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How to Read Critically

Reading effectively is one of the most important things you can do to succeed in your courses and your written work. Critical reading requires actively thinking about and engaging with the text. Following these strategies will ensure that you not only read but also understand your sources. For clarity, the text of this handout refers to reading an article, but the strategies apply to any written source.

Before you read...

- **Get ready to mark!** Make sure you have a pen handy and any other tools that can help you mark up the page as you read: different colored markers or highlighters, post-it notes, etc. Always have a pen on hand so that you can write down your comments and questions as you go—you won't remember them later, and you'll be especially glad you did it if you have an assignment based on the text.
- **Consider any questions or topics** your instructor identified either on the assignment sheet or course syllabus. What kinds of information should you look out for as you read?

As you read...

- **Identify and define** any key terms that come up repeatedly in the article. Keep in mind that the author may have adopted specific definitions for these terms in the context of their argument!
- **Identify the article's main argument (or thesis)** and all major points presented to support that argument. (Hint: subheadings and topic sentences of paragraphs are good places to look!)
- **Write down** any questions or comments you have as you read.
- **Don't get stuck** on any one paragraph or point. If something confuses you, mark it and keep reading. Often the author will provide more detailed explanations in subsequent paragraphs.
- **Look out for any sentences** that say, "In other words..." "I have just stated..." or "I will argue" These are great checkpoints to make sure you are following the author's argument.
- **Try to find a repeated version** of the author's thesis statement in the article's conclusion. Are there more detailed or better explanations here?

After you read...

- **Go back and review** the thesis and main points you identified in the article. This will help you quickly review what the author argued and how they set up her argument.
- **Revisit the questions and problem areas you identified** as you read. What makes sense now? What questions do you still have?
- **Answer the questions** and reconsider the topics your instructor outlined for the assignment.

Write down in a sentence or two the author's main argument and any questions that you still have and bring them to class. Remember that questions make great discussion topics during class time!

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Transitioning to College Writing

While many enter college intensely prepared for the workload and style of writing that college requires of them, plenty of students feel less prepared and disoriented by the idea of college writing. Particularly for first year students, this transition can be a challenge that is both frustrating and rewarding. Regardless of your background and how you feel about writing, here are tips to help ease the transition into college writing. Above all, keep one thing on your mind as you make the plunge—nothing else matters except how you improve from this point on.

Note Taking and Class Participation

Taking good notes and participating in class are the building blocks to good college writing. They prepare you to approach writing papers and generate material for you to draw on in your writing. Here are a few guidelines for note taking and active class participation.

- *Do all of your assigned reading before the class period.* You might have had classes in high school where you could skip or just skim the reading and still be fine. This thinking will become detrimental once you hit higher level classes!
- *Find the method of class participation that works best for you.* Many professors build ways for quiet types to participate—some have the class turn in discussion questions every period, some allow for weekly reflective writing, and some require course journals that are periodically graded throughout the semester. If you feel uncomfortable talking in class, put a great deal of effort into these reflective practices. If your professor is not offering any of these ways to participate, either try asking them to reconsider, or come to class prepared with a question or two about the reading that you can participate with in the discussion.
- *Try a few different note taking styles.* Believe it or not, there are many different note taking styles developed by professors and students to aid organization of material. Some popular types include the Cornell note taking method, visual graphing of information, or outlining the structure of the lecture or discussion. Search around on the internet or talk to Academic Advising in order to find the one that's right for you.
- *Review your notes with a friend from class.* As Keith Hjortshoj reveals in *The Transition to College Writing*, students catch only about 35% of the important information revealed in a class lecture (27). Sharing what you learned with a classmate can help you fill in each other's gaps.

Moving Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay

Many students enter college extremely skilled in writing one type of essay—the five-paragraph or “keyhole” essay that consists of an introduction, three paragraphs with points that support the main idea, and a conclusion that restates the introduction. While this is a good initial structure, moving away from this model of writing can help you grow as a writer.

- *Consider your audience.* American students are often trained to write a five-paragraph essay in preparation for standardized testing—a blank audience who knows nothing about who you are and grades your writing based on a concrete rubric. In college, your professors get to know you in class, are interested in your ideas, and want you to grow. You can take risks in your writing, and you should adopt a voice that speaks to your professor and classmates rather than a grading robot.

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Transitioning to College Writing, Continued

- *Rather than sticking exclusively to this structure, consider the elements that make all types of writing clear, concise, and elegant.* As the five-paragraph essay suggests, essays should have a discernible beginning, middle, and end. Rather than a stick-straight structure that constantly refers back to a roadmap presented with the introduction, allow your essays to grow and flow, with starting and stopping.
- *Your writing should center on a clear and concrete argument.* Readers are expecting you to develop an argument that is articulated in a thesis statement, supported both in your introduction and through the paragraphs in your essay, and wrapped up in your conclusion. Your argument should be sound, based in evidence, and readers are expecting you to address opposition to your argument as well throughout your paper.

The Interchangeable Stages of Writing

In American high schools, students are often taught to believe that writing is a linear process. This is simply untrue—in the writing of this handout, for instance, the writer went through several drafts, asked for the input from fellow tutors and from Dr. Cozzens, and tinkered with the text for a long time. It is a good idea to have a frame with which to approach writing, but consider the listed steps below to be switchable rather than a linear process. These steps are explored in The Transition to College Writing by Keith Hjortshoj.

- *Planning.* Planning what and how you will write is an essential step, one that writers often start with first but can integrate into the writing process at any point. Exercises like brainstorming and mapping can help generate ideas and provide direction for your writing. Gathering research, taking notes, and rereading sources texts are also great ways to start planning your essay. Once you have gathered material, try to create an outline that gives a rundown of your argument.
- *Composing.* This is the actual act of writing, where you are writing new material for your essay.
- *Revising.* Revising is different from editing. Instead of a cursory polish of grammar and spelling mistakes, revising gives you the chance to really see what's working in your paper and what isn't. Some people revise extensively as they write, presenting a mostly intact draft when they are finished. Others go through several drafts, cutting and pasting paragraphs, ideas, and sources constantly as they write.
- *Editing.* This stage is where you pick apart the grammar issues, double-check that your spell check didn't make any mistakes, and clean up any other surface-level things. Reading out your essay loud or asking someone else to do it is a good way of catching small mistakes.

What now?

As you start writing your first paper, take a deep breath and find something about the text or subject you're exploring that excites, confuses, or angers you. Try out many different types of writing styles as you get more comfortable with academic writing. Talk to your professor, and send them a draft ahead of time if you can. When the due date comes, make sure you titled your document as required and release your first college paper into the world!

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Getting Started

Try some or all of these tips for next time you are working on a writing assignment and get stuck in the brainstorming process.

Collect quotations, images, actions, patterns.

Find quotations, images, actions, patterns, etc. from the text or material under study, the theory pertaining to your topic, or your area of interest that raise questions in your mind and make you want to think and write. Note citation details, including page number, so you can properly attribute these quotations and ideas later on.

Write questions about your topic.

Not just one, but a lot. Free write in response to them. Where do your responses intersect? Is there a topic there? Which questions can't easily be answered? Is there a topic there?

Figure out what you need to know to answer the question(s) you choose to pursue.

Theory? What Kind of Theory? History? Politics? Biography? Language? Technique? Other works? Details that will feed your creativity? Now go out and find more primary and secondary sources.

Let the primary sources guide you.

Don't lose sight of the primary sources you are focusing on as you carry out other kinds of research. Primary sources generate important questions and hold ideas and answers for you to discover.

Create, borrow, modify, refine key terms.

You need terms with which to set up and make your arguments. Get them from primary and secondary sources, but make them your own through definitions or new creations. Some analyses lend themselves to the creation of new terms or phrases.

Look for a new way of thinking, reading, or writing.

Others have done certain things, covered certain ground. Where does your work fit in? What space can you carve out for you to fill? Use quotations from other thinkers on this topic to show where your ideas fit in.

Determine the sections or steps or parts of the project.

This strategy will help you get the writing started and an organized approach will help you guide and meet readers' expectations. If you actually build in subtitles in the draft, you always have the option of taking them out once you've accomplished your writing goals.

(continued on reverse)

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Getting Started, Continued

Let your introduction establish common ground and destabilize the reader.

Tell us what we need to know to enter the world of your essay. Make us see that there are problems that need solving. Raise for us the questions that made you choose this direction. Then tell us how you plan to solve these problems! Use “however’s” to set the stage for your theories and ideas. You will supply from your own thinking and analysis whatever is to be on the far side of the “however.”

Contextualize!

Everything must be explained, illustrated with examples, put into context for the reader.

Consider the title of your paper as an opportunity.

Your title can accentuate, surprise, or it can emphasize your thesis—there are lots of possibilities.

Follow through on the promises you make to the reader.

We call this “developing your point.” It’s where the bulk of the writing comes from. Rise expectations and meet them—this is the rhythm of good, clear, forward-moving writing.

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Time Management

What should you do if you find that the day just isn't long enough for you to get everything done that you need to? Often the key to being more productive lies in time management, which basically means using your time effectively.

Distractions

Phones are a constant source of distraction for most people. You may not realize how much time social media apps and the games on your phone actually syphon off from your day. If you cannot tear yourself away from your phone, try deleting your most distracting apps or turning off your phone. Not having Snapchat on your phone for 3 hours may give you all the mental space you need to complete important tasks. If you find yourself on distracting websites on your computer, try opening a new browser or window just for the specific assignment.

Planner/Prioritize

Writing down everything that you need to do with the due dates can help you visualize what you need to get done. You can't get everything done every day, so you need to prioritize what needs to be done first. If you have a lot of things due on one day, rank each assignment in terms of its importance (1, 2, 3 with 1 being most important). It is also often helpful to start the hardest thing first.

Calendar

You should put every class, every time you have to work, every event, and appointment in your calendar. Putting all of this into your phone calendar, google calendars, or a physical calendar can allow you to understand visually how much time you have. It can be useful to schedule chunks of time for yourself to study and hangouts with friends. If your calendar shows you that you only have a couple free hours a week, and you are feeling overwhelmed, you may need to consider the next point.

Saying No

Sometimes you need to realize that you are overcommitted. If this becomes an issue figure out what is least important to you. Do you need to attend every club meeting for an organization that you only attend because it looks good on your resume? It may be more useful to focus on your other commitments.

Take Breaks

Almost no one can work for hours straight and that's ok. By taking purposeful breaks you won't get burned out and start zoning out. Going on your phone can be a great way to take a break, but make sure to time yourself. You may need a 5-minute break for every 15 minutes of work. Or maybe you only need every 10 minutes for every hour. In either case figure out what works best for you and switch it up if you get bored.

Self-Care

You also need to consider time for eating, sleeping and other self-care activities, like going to the gym or playing video games. You will probably be more productive if you are well rested than if you are running on 5 hours of sleep. Your body allows you to get everything else done so you need to take care of it!

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