

Planning Your Paper:

A Juggling Act

There are many things to think about before beginning a paper. These include, but are not limited to:

- Your subject
- Your research
- Your purpose
- Your audience
- Your formatting
- Your notes
- Your deadline

This is what makes writing such a daunting task; there are, pardon the cliché, a lot of balls to juggle. It is important to remember that you are *not* alone.

Everyone who has to put ideas on the page, from the published writer to the writing center tutor, faces this same initial anxiety. Try to relax, breathe, and simplify your juggling act by asking a few questions to take things out of the abstract and into the concrete:

- Subject – Ask the question, What is my paper supposed to be about? Do I understand the assignment? What is my professor really looking for when he/she says X? One way to be sure is to look at the verbs in an assignment. If your teacher tells you to “compare and contrast,” this will produce an entirely different paper than if he/she wants you to “persuade an audience of your position.”
- Research – Ask the question, What does this all add up to? If you’ve got a dozen pages worth of notes on apples but not on oranges, your comparison paper may end up one-sided. It could be time to go back to the well, or at least the library, but it also might be a sign of the direction your paper is headed. For instance, why might there be more notes readily available about the apple? What does this say about the apple?
- Purpose – This is similar to subject, but not entirely the same. Ask yourself the question, What do I want my audience to gain after reading my paper? Do I want to change their minds about an issue or reaffirm what they may already believe using concrete evidence? What am I trying to prove? Remember that *you* have the power to affect an audience, even

- one as small as your professor, just by what you write. This may sound overwhelming, but it is also a thrilling part of the writing process.
- Audience – Of course, you can't persuade someone if you lose them in the first paragraph. Ask yourself, Who will be reading this paper? What kind of language might appeal to them? What sort of flaws might they find in my argument, and can I address those?
 - Formatting – This may be the easiest ball to juggle, because so much of it will be laid out for you by a teacher. Make sure, though, before you begin writing, that you know the required length of your paper. Ask: What size margins should it have? Does my teacher want MLA, APA, or another form of citation?
 - Notes – What might you apply from class to your writing? Can you add this information in a professional, productive way?
 - Deadline – Ask yourself an easy question and a hard question. The easy question is, When is this paper due? Chances are, you know this from the assignment sheet itself. The hard question is, How will I get this paper done in x amount of time?

Believe it or not, just asking these questions mentally can be the first step, and a very necessary one, of your writing process.

First Impressions Aren't Everything

Of course, eventually you have to jump right in to the physical writing. However, you do not have to begin just once. You could try writing the paper one way, then switch directions and write it another way. For instance, this could include beginning with apples, then trying to begin with oranges instead, or it could be opening your paper with a quote, then trying to open it with an anecdote instead. Only *you* can ultimately decide what the most effective way to begin your paper is.

Talk it Out

Even though the physical paper is yours alone, sometimes it helps to try your ideas out on other people. Talk to your classmates, talk to your professors, sometimes even, crazy as it sounds, talk to your self. Reading a few lines aloud of what you've begun might allow you to hear contradictions in your paper or even might help you to understand sentence and paragraph boundaries.

This can be another intimidating task if you're shy, so remember that all of these sections are suggestions, not rules written in stone. To borrow from the commercial, there's no wrong way to eat a Reese's.

Play Professor

When you go through your research, ask questions of it the way your professor might ask questions of your paper. If you own books, it's *okay* to write in them! You can mark areas where you're confused, or areas where you think the argument is particularly compelling. The confusing areas might require more research on your part, and the compelling areas might end up as the cornerstones of evidence for your own argument!

Number the Stars

In other words, make lists. It's called brainstorming, and it doesn't work for everyone. But if you've tried other angles and none appeal to you, this is considered a tried-and-true method. You might think of something you hadn't thought of before, just by listing all the possible arguments you could make or listing all the points your research presents. And remember that "research" can be as small as reading one story, or poem, or article for class, or as large as combing through half a dozen psychology texts until you find what theory you're looking for.

Once you've got a list, you could move to another form of brainstorming – clustering. This asks you to take all the items in your list and find the relationships between them, connecting them in a visual way by drawing "bubbles" around your main ideas, and putting lines between bubbles that work together, almost like a family tree, where every family member is another of your ideas.

Write vs. Right

Just write! Teachers call this free-writing, and sometimes it's the best thing if you feel overwhelmed by all the things you could say. Anything you can put down on a page can be useful, even if it's not always what ends up in the final draft of your paper.

Be Curious, George

Ask those typical news reporter questions: Who, What, Why, When, Where, How? This could help you with your lists, your clusters, or even your initial thesis.

Try it Out

Write an initial thesis. And don't get caught up in the term, "thesis." It could just be the position you take on an arguable issue, the answer you come up with to a question posed, or a possibly solution to a stated problem.

Ask the following questions of your thesis:

- Is it too simple? Saying that apples are not oranges is not saying much at all.
- Is there evidence to back it up? Remember that a good thesis can't just be your opinion. Vanilla is a better ice cream than chocolate will be almost impossible to prove.
- Does it require the page limit to explore? The topic of Shakespeare's life might produce a much longer paper than just The Globe Theater.
- And the ever important, So what? Why is this a topic to be explored? What might your reader gain from looking over *your* paper?

Blueprints for Continuing

Once you've got your thesis – that is, what you're trying to prove – you need to think about *how* you're going to prove it. This can be the time that an outline can come into play, even a very informal one. Think about what subsequent paragraphs your kind of argument will produce. How will they link to one another? What will they ultimately achieve?

Here's another corny metaphor: think of your paper like a building. Your thesis is the foundation, which all other paragraphs and pages produced stand on. However, your paper can't begin and end in the foundation. You have to be able to build upon what you've started, your paragraphs must be walls which both stand alone and connect to one another somehow. But remember never to lose focus of the thesis, your foundation, because if you pull that out, the whole paper comes crumbling down.

