

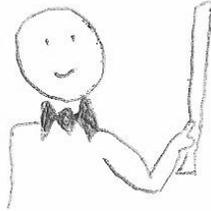
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I began teaching composition in Korea in 2003 I worked with industry textbooks, but found that they were unsatisfactory in teaching research level writing, and so I began to generate class materials, eventually forming the genesis of this book, which has been in regular revision since 2011. I am grateful for all those colleagues who freely traded around their handouts and materials in the spirit of making things better for everyone, as well as to students who continue to ask questions and motivate me to repair and expand upon this work.

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The opinions expressed here are my own and do not necessarily represent Hanyang University.

1 STARTING OUT



If people cannot write well, they cannot think well, and if they cannot think well, others will do their thinking for them. – George Orwell

Five Common Reasons Research Papers are Failures

1. The paper is filled with grammatical errors. If your paper has brilliant things to say but no one can understand your sentences, it is a failure.
2. The paper does not follow MLA or APA standards. Non-standard title pages and sloppy reference lists tell the reader that you are neither competent nor professional as a writer.
3. The paper has no clear thesis. If you merely present information or describe a topic without taking a position which the reader can recognize and follow, there is little reason to read the paper.
4. The paper's subject is too broad. The argument attempts to cover too many topics for the space of the paper, and ends up in only a thin summary.
5. The paper's evidence is weak. The paper does not quote or cite its claims, and instead presents vague statements or generalizations (“Koreans believe”—“Many people nowadays”).

Writing manuals always compare themselves to the grandfather of all writing manuals, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* (1918), an essential guide to English grammar and usage now in public domain. This book is not intended to match the austere minimalism of Strunk and White but will hopefully in a short space introduce and explain to the undergraduate or graduate student, whether a native speaker or Korean, how to better plan, research, write, and edit an academic argument paper, whether for a freshman composition class or an honors/graduate thesis project. I have written this book as a course text for undergraduate and graduate students at Hanyang University ERICA, but this book is meant to be useful for anyone working on a research writing project for a course or degree.

1.1 An Argument Research Paper Defined

Korean university students typically have prior experience writing essays in English on personal topics or opinions on preferences or current events, as do native speakers of English in western universities. The goal in these projects for Korean speakers is a necessary one—learning language fluency—but the subject may not be an academic one, or discussed in an academic tone. New writers often have the form of a speech script in their essays, with the questions and pauses usual in a delivered speech. Every language has a gap in style or grammar between the spoken form of the language and the written form. French, in fact, has verb tenses only for writing (*temps littéraires*). English has no exclusively literary tenses but the stylistic difference between its spoken and written forms can be quite large.

In basic description, an argument research paper—the subject of this book—has three qualities: **one**, it has an academic tone in its writing and subject; **two**, it involves incorporating information outside of the writer’s own ideas, such as books, websites, or other sources; and **three**, it does not *describe* the subject: it states an argument or opinion about the subject.

All of these points will be expanded on in this book, but the third needs clarification now. Some academic writing is *expository* writing, which means that it simply defines or examines a subject. Personal writing, technical writing, or journalism may simply seek to explain, amuse, or give information without asserting any overt opinion. You might also be assigned *persuasive* writing, in which you might attempt to convince someone to accept or do something—for example, to get married, or move to Spain, or to drink a certain brand of beverage. But most academic writing, and the focus of this book, is argument research writing, which is stating and supporting a position with reasons and external evidence.

You might also be confused here because one of the goals in journalism or informative writing, such as a Wikipedia or newspaper article, is to be objective and fair and to explain all sides of the issue. In such writing you should *not* push your own opinion. Some academic writing is done in this style. But academic *argument* writing is not “fair and balanced” to both sides of an issue. It commits to a position and provides evidence that the writer’s position is correct. Most academic papers, at least in the humanities, are more like editorials or opinion letters. They take a position and support it. A courtroom lawyer cannot be fair and argue both sides of the case—he or she must assert only guilt or innocence. A verdict must be given.

1.2 Why Do We Write?

Writing is one of the most important inventions in human history. Penicillin, printing, sanitation, the internet, cars, and agriculture are all crucial innovations, but the knowledge of those inventions and the transmission of their techniques mostly rely on writing. Writing is essential for the communication and preservation of knowledge. The European Middle Ages were nowhere near as ‘dark’ as the cliché suggests, but it is not coincidental that during the centuries when literacy declined, the growth of civilization slowed as well.

Being a good writer will not only help you pass some class you have to take during college. It will help your career and possibly your personal life. If you can write effective and clear work memos or academic papers for conferences, you will be a more valuable employee and more likely to take on leadership roles. When people write poorly and are misunderstood, careers are endangered, relationships end, wrong orders get placed, bridges fall down, and businesses lose money. Although you may write papers about content knowledge in some upper-level courses, or in what are called “Writing across the curriculum” courses, lower-level writing courses are usually less concerned with the material in papers for its own sake, and more focused on how your ability to plan and think develops in your writing.

Thus we can say that good writing in general in contemporary usage is informative, efficient, and most of all, clear. Unless you are writing a diary for yourself, it is not enough that you understand your own writing. Your reader must also understand it, or else the writing is a failure. Arguing with a reader, *but the paper does make sense*,

can't you see it, is already admitting failure, like trying to convince someone that they don't have a stomach ache, or that they love you. The major responsibility is on you to be clear and the reader has a lesser responsibility to work to understand your ideas.

This book will stress clear writing, but a specific type—in particular, our subject is writing academic research papers for the humanities. This is not a value judgment on other genres. Writing poetry, fiction, diaries, or news stories are all important and valuable activities, but our focus here is academic writing for university courses or degrees or other professional career situations such as publications or conferences. Such writing typically encourages some position to be taken or new knowledge or conclusions to be derived.

Western universities often require undergraduates to take composition courses for the papers and essays typically required in later subject courses, and some professors continue to assign them in their major courses. Many honors and graduate programs also require the writing of a longer research thesis for graduation. These are not make-work projects or a lazy way to evaluate students. Writing papers inculcates independent work habits and a deep breadth of cognitive and linguistic skills valuable not only in the university but also in future careers. While the undergraduate term paper only became common in the nineteenth century, the scholarly article and the written thesis go back to the seventeenth and sixteenth.

Composition theory is in addition an academic discipline of its own which has begun to develop a structure of research issues in the last half century. University students who take advanced writing or literature courses aren't of course expected to learn the

pedagogical and theoretical minutiae of composition theory, but they should understand some basic abstract principles and should see that writing well trains you to understand your intended major better, and also makes you a more disciplined and precise thinker.

In other words, the *process* of a writing course, the broader cognitive agility you develop while working on specific tasks, is often as important as the content learned, which is true for many pursuits in the humanities. The subjects covered in this book—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—are in fact the components of the *trivium*, the basic program of a medieval university education. These are the oldest subjects in the western university system, taught continuously since the sixth century A.D.

1.3 Making an Argument

What is an argument? One of the unfortunate drawbacks of the English language is that it has a massive vocabulary, but sometimes English's words are not efficient. A word like *argument* covers several sub-meanings. In common situations it usually involves anger, such as two people at a nightclub yelling at each other: "Keep your grubby hands off my boyfriend!" Two people involved in an automobile accident might have a loud argument based on high emotions.

But an academic argument by definition is not necessarily belligerent or emotional. It is simply a formal position to be proven or investigated: Hamlet is(n't) insane; this country should(n't) sign a free trade agreement with Brazil because a, b, and c; private messages on social networks can help promote budget cosmetics. So one of the first things you should understand about this form of academic essay writing is

that by definition it takes a position and defends it with reasons and evidence. The role of writing in academia is often the asserting of new positions or conclusions, and this is the activity modeled in composition classes and thesis projects at the undergraduate or graduate level.

An argument paper assumes that the reader already has some information about the subject, and is expecting you to lead by making some evaluation or explanation about what it all means. Is Hamlet crazy, or isn't he? Well, which is it? The reader expects you to take a stand and to explain and provide evidence for it. One of the most common comments I write on student papers is "What is the point of your essay? What are you trying to prove or discover?"

There are many similarities between the persuasion techniques of academic writing and those of debate. In both you are attempting to construct and prove a position with reasons, evidence, examples, or statistics. Where the two usually differ is purpose. The reason you write an academic paper is to inform and convince the reader to accept your position.

A debate may not have that goal. A debate as a formal exercise may seek to convince an observing jury that one team has performed better. In its most degraded practice, such as in American cable talk-shows, the only goal may be to monopolize the conversation and prevent others from speaking, to goad opponents into losing their temper and saying something foolish (what Latin calls a *stultiloquentia*), or to bully and humiliate opponents into silence. Insulting or offending your opponent into quitting the exchange may be seen as 'victory' in an angry online argument but is not the proper technique of scholarly writing.

The point of academic writing is not to 'beat' an

imaginary opponent but to win over the reader to your position through persuasion—much like what theorists call Rogerian argumentation. This is less like a court or debate proceeding where you are trying to convince a third party, and more like two judges conferring on a case. Your reader is your ally, and in essence the game is win-win for everyone. My favorite arguments were with close friends late at night over coffee and donuts, certainly not occasions for anger or hurt feelings.

New writers may nevertheless feel intimidated by the necessity to construct argumentative positions, particularly Korean students in a culture which values consensus. Richard Nisbett's *The Geography of Thought* (2003) is a useful book which analyzes how the culture of ancient Greece gave western thought its analytical and argumentative flavor, and how ancient China gave eastern thought its emphasis on relationships and harmony.

This raises a sensitive question: isn't asking Asian writers to form a western-style thesis argument a type of cultural imperialism? Possibly yes; but if you are taking a course speaking or writing in English, or learning about western literature or other ideas, using western concepts of rhetoric is going to be inevitable. Equally, your readers may be native English speakers, and audience is always an important consideration in crafting a paper. Moreover, in Asian rhetoric as anywhere, pointless writing is pointless writing. Your thesis statement may certainly seek to demonstrate a relationship of harmony or synthesis of various viewpoints so long as there is an identifiable position.

Third, you might also protest that you are a young freshman and unqualified to argue new viewpoints on subjects you are still learning about in a field of experts. But your opinions and conclusions are still valid and

valuable as a practice exercise; the ‘experts’ began the same way. Second, not all arguments need to be ones that change the world. They can be smaller observations, or they can be arguments about matters you *are* an expert on. Everyone has particular interests or experiences that set them apart from others.

You need to have some confidence to write an academic paper, because you must believe that your conclusions on your position are worth stating. Again, this is not necessarily done with arrogance or aggression. It is simply a position that forms the basis of your paper. Without an argument your paper is useless because it has no point. Just as a politician who will not take a stand on an issue can be infuriating, if you do not commit to a position in your paper out of shyness you will frustrate the reader, who is reading your paper for that very purpose: Is it up or down? Are you going to marry me or not? You tell *me*.

Tip



“Do you love me?” “Well, there are certain reasons to say yes or no, and everyone has to decide.” Your girlfriend won’t accept such an answer. You need to take a stand! Equally, in an argument paper you need to take a stand.

1.4 Three Parts of Writing

It is puzzling that our brains often seem comfortable thinking in threes, and we watch movies and read literature in trilogies: *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Divine Comedy*. Not all arguments will have three reasons

(a, b, and c), but for ease of memory in this book we will divide many aspects of writing into threes, and the first and most basic concerns the three building blocks of effective academic writing: grammar, structure, and content. A tripod will fall over if one leg is missing—and similarly, all three parts of writing are necessary.

Grammar involves writing meaningful sentences with correct punctuation according to accepted English rules. Grammar rules are not natural laws in themselves; they are simply conventions agreed on by the language’s speakers. But without some common system giving meaning to words and their combinations, communication cannot happen. Thus the province of grammar is sentence writing and being correct on punctuation and spelling or on parts of the sentence, such as word class. This is the most basic issue in writing, and for some people it is their sole concern when writing in any language, native or foreign.

Grammar is somewhat like playing a musical instrument. Learning a foreign language’s grammar can be a tedious chore just as the basics of playing a guitar or piano are not very fun, but as you attain proficiency some of these skills become automatic, allowing you to concentrate on other matters.

If you are Korean, you normally do not think about speaking or writing sentences in Korean—they simply flow out, and your intuition tells you instantly when something is ungrammatical or unnatural, even if you cannot cognitively understand why. The ‘little bird’ in your head tells you that something is wrong. Similarly, no native speaker of English ever fully masters grammar, but many of its processes become unconscious. Yet this activity is only one third of writing.

Structure is arranging sentences and paragraphs into a meaningful and connected sequence. How do the sentences in a text fit together into a coherent whole? A short e-mail may have very simple and formulaic sections—A greeting, a message, and a “goodbye” element: “Hello David, please come to the pizza house tonight at 7, bye for now, Somyeong.” Even these parts form a structure which the reader will recognize: greeting, message, and closure. A two-paragraph essay would also have some sense of an opening and a closing. In academic writing there are more formalized sections of introductions, body support, and conclusions which indicate the parts of the paper.

You might write grammatically correct sentences, but with no structure they will have no connection to each other. If your first sentence is about your stomach ache, your second sentence is about a television show you watched, the third sentence is about orangutans, and the fourth sentence is about Macbeth, as a group the sentences will seem disconnected and meaningless.

Content is the third aspect of academic writing. Is the writing clear and informative? Does it support the thesis statement? You might write grammatically correct sentences and they might form a coherent and consistent unit that moves from one idea to the next in perfect linear precision, but the whole paper might be garbage, with meaningless or faulty information.

You might have an argument that is clearly wrong, you might have an argument with no proof or support, you might have a ridiculous argument, or you might have a contradictory argument. You might begin your paper by saying that policemen should carry guns, and then in the

middle of your paper state that you have changed your mind and that policemen should not carry guns. This sort of paper is inconsistent and will be rejected as worthless by the reader regardless of grammatical or structural quality.

So by content, we ask what the value is of what you have written. Has your essay proven your thesis argument? Has it explained vital information to the reader? Are your arguments clear? All of these questions belong to the province of content.

A related issue to content is that of audience, or purposes. What sort of readership are you writing to, and what type of paper? Normally, if you’re an undergraduate, the answer is predetermined—you are writing a research paper for course credit for Prof. x, and there are certain guidelines and prompts for the paper. A graduate student may be doing the same, or completing a thesis or dissertation. While I realize that this will probably be the case for most readers of this book, I bring the matter up to remind you that there are other writing genres and situations outside the course paper, as summarized at the end of the last chapter.

It is also misguided to write your paper as though its audience is *literally* your professor or committee (I’ve had students begin their essay with “Hello, Professor Eckert!”); the purpose of such papers is usually to simulate a group of addressed readers, however theoretical. As a rule of thumb, when I was a student I imagined my readers as my classmates—people with similar interests and knowledge who might have an interest in reading my paper.

1.5 Three Steps of Writing

The three building blocks of grammar, structure, and content deal with how we evaluate or approach academic essays. It may be helpful to see the main activities or processes of academic writing as another group of threes: planning, writing, and editing.

Planning involves considering your paper's subject, size, and audience—who you are writing it for—and making decisions on how the paper will be arranged to meet these goals. This process might be quickly done mentally or may involve a detailed written plan.

Sometimes when I give essay exams, which are often timed exams out of necessity, I see two general types of students. One type thinks, “I have an hour—I need to hurry, hurry, write, write.” The other thinks, “I am going to take five or ten minutes to plan.” These students look as though they are doing nothing, but they are really thinking about what they are going to write, or making scribbled notes, before they write their essays. Even though they have sacrificed a few minutes of exam time to plan, these students usually get better grades because their essays are more focused and consistent.

Successful writers see writing as more than a one-step process. If you do not plan your writing, there are two possible dangers. One danger is that you end up staring at a blank computer screen, frozen and unable to begin, and it is demoralizing to see the cursor and not know where to start. If you have a good outline or some other form of planning, the paper is already well on its way and you know what to do, and even if you freeze sometimes you have something tangible to refer to which will help you to continue.

When I wrote my master's thesis, my outline was about 20-30 handwritten pages, and that took months to

prepare. That may be a little extreme in terms of planning. But doing all this actually saved me a great deal of time, because once I had that groundwork of information I knew what I was doing on each page. We have a human tendency to be lazy and to look at our short term benefit. We do not want to plan because it is extra work at the beginning, but that extra work you do in advance is going to make the actual writing of the paper quicker and easier.

The other danger in not planning your writing is that with longer papers you will be a little bit like a drunk driver. You may start writing about something, move on to something else, and then come back to subject x again, forgetting that you have already written about it. At the end of the paper you will have a meandering mess which drifts back and forth between topics. Having some type of outline prevents you from repeating the same materials, or from driving off the road into an irrelevant topic.

Your outline need not be a formal bullet-point schedule of steps. It can be any sort of textual or visual plan which helps you organize your ideas—I suppose it could even be a sound or video recording on your smartphone. The actual format or arrangement is your business. An outline can be serious, tightly organized, or a mess of scribbles, arrows, and notes. No one is ever going to see it. It can perform its job for you, and then you can throw it away.

It is possible to overplan too. What if I had begun to write after my 30-page outline and realized I had made an enormous mistake, and needed to make considerable changes—or worse, was too proud or impatient to do so? Do not worry if you find that your ideas evolve after you begin writing; part of writing itself is discovering and

refining ideas as you progress. You can always return to your outline and alter or re-write it. If you want to drive to Seoul and you discover that you are headed toward Busan, only a fool would stubbornly continue, refusing to turn around, intending to drive around the earth and reach Seoul from Russia. If your outline proves wrong and you see that your ideas or information are faulty, it is obviously better to stop and make changes or begin again. For this reason, do not be locked into the mindset that planning, writing, and editing forms an ironclad, sequential series of steps. Sometimes you might jump back and forth between different activities. During writing, you might need to return to your planning stage momentarily. You might also be in the middle of editing when you realize you need substantial rewriting.

When I emphasize that these three activities are essential I do not mean they will always occur in this fixed order. Most people “write to think,” typing or writing down ideas and refining them as they read them or craft them into sentences, and I think it’s a mistake to believe that writing is merely the skill of transcribing what we have previously decided to communicate. It is my own experience, and of course your mileage may vary, that I usually have only a rough idea of what I intend to write beforehand, which will become fully developed *as* I write and edit.

Writing. The physical writing or typing of your paper might not be beginning-to-end either. One of my personal tricks is to write my introduction in a rush to warm myself up and then re-write it as a last step. The reader will never know or care in what order you wrote the paper’s sections. It makes no difference whether you write your body paragraphs early or late. Some people like

to begin with title pages to warm up, and for many it is the last step.

Editing. Close, disciplined editing makes text leaner and more effective, and catches mistakes. Normally, when you write, you return later and correct grammatical or typographical errors, or you might cut out the pieces that do not fit or which waste space. This is a skill which requires discipline, because we tend to fall in love with our writing. We do not want to change it and we think it is beautiful the way it is on the bright, clean paper with the shining, perpendicular paper clip. But that sort of self-control is going to make you a better writer, and is a valid third stage in the process of writing.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the greatest American authors of the twentieth century, published *The Great Gatsby* only after lengthy revisions done with his editor, Maxwell Perkins. In turn, Fitzgerald also helped younger Ernest Hemingway with *The Sun Also Rises* as the latter developed as an author. These were two high-level, high-functioning writers—at the time Hemingway already had experience as a journalist. These people needed editors, and so do we; we all benefit from someone who will help us cut the pieces of text that we love the sound of but which do not work. In fact, sometimes very experienced writers need editors even more, as they may develop egos which prevent them from seeing their own work dispassionately. As much as I like Harry Potter, Rowling’s later books get too long, as she likely relied less on outside editors.

If you do not have someone else to edit your work, you can at least still edit yourself. But you need to give yourself time between the stages of planning and writing your paper and revising it. Your brain needs to rest

between those stages.

At the undergraduate level, you will typically write your paper and then the instructor will grade it and add some comments. At the graduate level you will usually write several drafts of your thesis until your advisor feels it is ready to present. The revision you do between these drafts is a form of editing—but if you are an undergraduate and only receive your paper back once with a final grade, the comments on the paper are personalized advice which will help you improve your future writing. It is natural to be disappointed or upset if the comments are critical—but once you calm down, they may be very helpful to you in assessing what you are doing right and wrong.

1.6 Part Science and Art

As you are going to see, academic writing is part science and part art. Some writers are tightly organized and others are more freewheeling and spontaneous. Some people prefer to plan with traditional outlines with numbers, others like mathematical flowchart-style outlines, and visual people may have circles and arrows or use different-colored pens. Academic papers are fairly regimented in format, but how you get to the end result is entirely your business. No one can really teach you how to dance or how to write the perfect paper. I can only show you what I do as a model.

There is some room for personal idiosyncrasies in content and writing style, but much less in structural format in a scholarly paper. I have tried to explain the importance and usefulness of writing at the research level, but one basic objection to this entire book which I might anticipate is, *who* said that papers have to be arranged or

written in such and such a way? Who ultimately has the authority to judge how a paper is written or constructed, and why should these rules be respected? Why can't I write a paper the way *I* want to?

This is a difficult matter to address. Composition Theory is a new field and hasn't answered many such basic questions. But to me there is both a philosophical and practical answer. Whether these standards are essential Platonic or heavenly 'ideals,' or simply reflect how human cognition has come to work, there are some fairly universal patterns in written argumentation: People tend to understand an essay better when the author first presents the subject, then discusses it, and then has some recognizable form of closure. People are probably going to understand ten papers better and faster if all of them have a somewhat similar organizational pattern. Thus all over the world formal writing generally has introduction, body, and conclusion sections of some sort. Second, people are more likely to believe arguments if they are made with reasons and evidence.

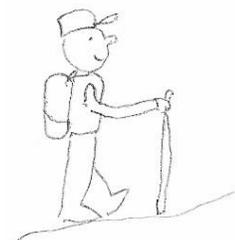
But of course, many of the rules I'll lay out seem capricious, and don't seem handed down from the heavens. Perhaps it's obvious that we can't prove an argument that wasn't yet stated; but why do page numbers need to be on the top right? These are admittedly merely conventions of organization and style that happen to predominate in the last century or so. You will not go to jail for breaking them. But neither will you go to jail for wearing socks on your ears and your tie on your toes at your job interview—you are just unlikely to get the job for flouting accepted modes of conduct. In the same way, there are expected practices in writing you are obliged to follow so that you conform to a community. These professional normative prescriptions

allow your writing to be admitted into a dialogue.

Some directions I give will be quite strict—formats such as MLA / APA are particularly inflexible in how page formatting and citation typography, and your paper may be rejected or at least not taken seriously by others if you violate such standards. To some extent we need to accommodate to the current academic community standards of the early twenty-first century. English grammar as well is notoriously rife with exceptions, but it also demands a certain level of compliance to established contemporary norms.

Concepts of structure and argumentation are more flexible and somewhat arbitrary. Modern conventions such as topic sentences and paragraphs are somewhat open to stretching once you become more expert in their application. It may be helpful, then, to begin by discussing some principles of how English-language research papers are conventionally planned and structured.

2 PLANNING



By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail. — Benjamin Franklin

You cannot write about the entire world in a few sheets of paper. Much of planning is *narrowing*—specifying with increasing detail what you are going to write about. Typically, a paper with a weak plan wanders, repeats, or tries to discuss too much, resulting in an essay which discusses nothing.

In essence, planning is the process of deciding what you will write about and then amassing and organizing the information you will use in your paper. The sequence I use is to choose a topic, research and organize my sources, and then make a working argument and outline for the paper. All along the way, I am narrowing my topic down to a manageable size for the project I am working on. Of course, we're all human beings—sometimes the finished argument springs out at you immediately, and sometimes your steps will be mixed up or repeated. How you produce that plan need not be exactly the same every time; it is only important that you *have* a plan to keep yourself organized.

Johann Goethe once wrote that what makes people

unhappiest is trading what we really want for something we want right now. This applies entirely to planning as well. One reflection I have made in life is that we all think we are rational beings when we are not. Why else would poor or lazy writers refuse to spend twenty minutes planning their paper when having one might save hours of confusion later? It makes as much sense as being too impatient to buy a blueprint for a house and rushing out to randomly nail boards together. What time you save will be lost when everything falls down, and at best the frustration of getting the house to stand up will outweigh any time initially saved.

2.1 Fear and Your Body

I could certainly have chosen a better-paying profession, or one easier to enter, but I was born to be a professor. I *enjoyed* writing my dissertation. Many people liken it to childbirth. I *like* teaching writing. Most English professors prefer to leave it to adjuncts and graduate assistants. I admit that it probably does not beat sitting in a gondola in Venice with a supermodel, but I find both teaching and doing academic writing satisfying and sometimes even fun. Most people aren't like me.

As noted earlier, one of the reasons you should plan your paper is to avoid the awful feeling of looking at your computer monitor in frozen panic, not knowing where to begin. But it's natural to feel anxiety during at least some stage of writing, and although experience will diminish this and give you confidence, you will be more effective when you write papers if you develop strategies and habits to minimize avoidance reflexes.

One recommendation is that you *write a lot*. Perhaps one reason I never found academic writing intimidating is

that from childhood I wrote stories, poems, and letters. On a regular basis I write e-mails, blog posts, and discussion board comments. Optimally, if you are headed for university or career years writing research papers you should develop a habit of frequent scholarly writing. If not, I still advise that you make regular time to keep up a blog, or comment on other sites, or have some form of written expression you enjoy. This action, even if unrelated to the subject of your papers, will develop quicker and sharper skills of thinking through and arranging ideas, as well as building your comfort level with writing.

Additionally, looking back on my undergraduate years, I often think how foolish it was that I learned so many things but never reflected much about *how* I learn or think. Kenneth Burke once wrote that "Thinking which does not include thinking about thinking is merely problem solving, an activity carried out very well by fish." We have owner's manuals for every gadget, but not for our own brains. Another means of reducing the impulse to fear or avoid writing is to take the time to learn how you can maximize your personal efficiency and comfort level with it.

Ernest Hemingway advised writing drunk and editing sober, but for a scholarly paper I would not advise this! Nor do I have much regard for the romantic idea that writing should be some painful, agonized struggle. My experience is that I accomplish more when my mind is clearest and I'm at ease, and for me that is late morning. Through experimentation or life experience you can work out whether you write best at a particular time of day or night; if you need dead silence, or you need the white noise of a café, or music; if caffeine makes you alert or jittery; if you need to be warm, or cool, or on the floor, or

outside, or with others. Learning to accommodate your own mental and physical inclinations may lessen the anticipation of writing being unpleasant.

2.2 Choosing a Topic

Before we begin to write a paper, we need to decide what it will be about. How do writers come up with ideas for papers? Someone may give you a topic or set of choices, or for some reason the topic may suggest itself based on circumstances. A professor may say something interesting which gives you an instant subject. Or, you may have to cold-bloodedly concentrate on developing a suitable and workable paper idea. The audience you will be writing for—your peers, the professor, the public—will also affect the direction of your topic.

My own approach to planning a new paper is to decide on a topic and then research the subject in books or websites to give myself a basic foundation of knowledge. Then I try to come up with a temporary position or opinion on the subject. This may take some time, and I may need to do things such as wash dishes or walk or listen to music to let my mind wander and make connections or ideas. At other times I may be reading about the subject and have a sudden inspiration or disagreement about the writer's ideas, giving me a ready-made position.

Every writer has a favorite technique to help generate ideas, and others rely on chance flashes of insight. Every grad student has a story about a classmate who sat on a couch for months and then suddenly jumped up and wrote a master's thesis in a weekend. At times, you might need to sit down and cold-bloodedly concentrate, or you might need to let your mind float.

While I discourage students from writing papers the night before, I admit that for a few people the pressure and adrenaline helps them. It just does not help me—and if your printer cartridge runs out of ink an hour before class your delaying might also result in a late paper.

Some composition theorists also advocate brainstorming—writing down every thought as it randomly floats into your head—to help fertilize your mind with ideas. Scholars such as Peter Elbow even recommend forcing yourself to write continuously about the subject without stopping, flying through some pages to warm up your thinking, and then going back and repeatedly editing down the text as you attempt to solidify what is worth using.

I know composition professors who are dogmatic in stating “*research* first, *then* argument.” Their reason is that some writers commit the error of fixing on a position and then discounting or ignoring texts or evidence which disprove it. While that is true, I find this rule too simple for two reasons. One, it doesn't fit everyone. Second, if you have nothing specific to prove or work toward, writing an effective outline will be very difficult and your thinking will be vague. You can drive your car as fast as you want, but if you haven't decided where you are going you will accomplish nothing.

My advice, then, is that you develop a temporary position or idea on your topic and then allow yourself to affirm or modify your thinking as you read. This gives your research some structure but does not restrict or blind you from changing your opinions. This may happen either because after reading you decide the argument is impractical or contradicted by the evidence. This is not a failure and it sometimes happens to writers as they define their paper's contents—again, some of writing is the act

of writing-to-think.

2.3 Refining your Topic into a Position

Tip



Choosing a broad topic to get the prof off your back requires less work initially—“My paper is about China.” (Gee, thanks for that.) But in the long run a focused, narrow topic is usually easier to research and write about.

Refining your topic is largely a process of *narrowing*, increasing specificity as you move from a general subject to a focused position and argument. Refining also involves considering the parameters set on your project such as audience and length. You will need to consider the sort of readership the paper is meant for. The cliché ‘general audience’ is thrown around a great deal—except there really is no such thing as a general audience. In a professional situation such as a journal or conference you may have a more precise idea of your audience’s level of knowledge and their expectations, and you might actually *know* many of them. But in a classroom, I suppose I imagine I am writing my paper at the level of the best students in the class. What are they likely to already know about the subject?

The other concern in refining is considering how long a paper you want or are instructed to write. Perhaps the most common problem students have with topics is choosing one matching the length of the paper. This requires experience. A fifty-page research paper about thumbtacks will be difficult to write without boring the

reader, but a three-page paper might be just right. Yet the far more typical error is papers where the subject is too broad, resulting in shallow arguments and evidence. I cringe whenever students write about globalization, which is probably the single largest change in human civilization in the last two centuries. To attempt to discuss globalization in three pages is ridiculous—nothing profound is likely to come from that short space. What you are likely to produce is a light skim of ideas without giving any compelling discussion or proof of anything—a list as opposed to a paper.

Having a focus which is far too wide can happen when students are lazy and choose a vague topic, but can happen even to good writers. As little as a generation ago the challenge in doing research was usually finding enough information. Now the obstacle is often the overwhelming amount of information online and in books to navigate through. After doing some initial research you may find yourself feeling that you have bitten off more than you can chew.

If you are in this position, there are two possible solutions. One is to narrow your focus; for example, instead of discussing globalization, filter it down by one or more limiters:

- Concept: politics, marriage, travel
- Demographics: globalization’s effects on elderly, females, fathers, redheads
- Geography: globalization’s effects on one country
- Industry: globalization’s effects on agriculture, entertainment, banking
- Time: a specific time period, or a comparison of two meaningfully similar or different periods

Case studies often offer a way of specializing your topic, limiting it by all of these factors. A second solution, albeit a rather mechanical one which I've used in past, is to look at your thesis and choose only one sub-argument. For example, if you have *Globalization is important for A, B, and C*—write a paper on C and subdivide *that* into sub-arguments. This will make more sense when we discuss thesis statements in chapter 3.

The example here is for international relations. For literature majors, you might think about a feature of the text which interests you. When I supply sample topics to students, I phrase them as questions so that writers will conceptualize them as answers to be explained by arguments—but I also try to make them specific so that they deal with an interesting aspect of the text.

When scholars write journal articles about works of literature, they rarely discuss the whole thing; they often use a *reading* or lens for the text to focus more closely on some part of it. A reading means they are analyzing the work according to a specific aspect, such as the ones listed here:

- Plot: What does the plot mean? What events in the narrative have important meaning to the text as a whole?
- Characters: Is there a special meaning to a character, or in a relationship between two or more characters? Does a character change or react to an event in an interesting way?
- Symbolism: Is there a political, ethical, historical, feminist, religious, or other level of interpretation in the text which you see?
- Scene analysis: Does one scene or passage in the text

help to explain or change the meaning of the entire text?

- Poetics: Is there an unusual way of phrasing words or arranging words in the text, or making them rhyme or create an image pattern? Why?
- Biographical/historical: Can the text be explained by examining the author's life, or by the historical or cultural circumstances it was written in?
- How can the text be interpreted by feminist, queer, eco-green, Marxist, psychological, or other theoretical models?

All of these ideas might help you to find an interpretation of the text which goes beyond a shallow, broad summary. For example, instead of analyzing theme x in novel y, you might analyze *one character* in novel y, arguing how that character exemplifies or advances that theme. Or, if this is too broad, you might filter again and select one scene or significant section of the novel where that character does this. For example:

Harry Potter & the Philosopher's Stone demonstrates the value of courage.

(Boring and vague! There are ten other papers on my desk with the same sentence.)

Hermione in Harry Potter & the Philosopher's Stone demonstrates the value of courage.

(A little better.)

Hermione, in the first train scene in Harry Potter & the Philosopher's Stone, demonstrates the novel's value of courage.

(Now I am curious. What is it about that particular scene which you think has importance?)

Or:

An important theme in *Dubliners* is selfish people taking advantage of the innocent.

(This is pretty vague.)

An important theme in “The Boarding House” in *Dubliners* is selfish people taking advantage of the innocent.

(Better; at least we have a specific story.)

An important theme in “The Boarding House” in *Dubliners* is Polly selfishly taking advantage of Mr. Doran, as it mirrors what happened to Polly’s mother.

(Good. This is interesting and I want to see how the writer connects these two things.)

You might also believe it’s uninteresting to write or read a paper about something very narrow and specific, but in my experience that’s not the case at all—some of my favorite authors, Malcolm Gladwell and Leavitt & Dubner (*Freakonomics*), write essays on such things as ketchup or cheating teachers in Chicago; it’s much more memorable reading than a general essay on “fast food” or “education.” I’ve read countless identical papers about plastic surgery in Korea, but if someone writes about “freckle surgery for elderly left-handed businessmen,” I’m going to take a special interest in that paper as it’s something new.

Tip



Don’t forget the minor characters in literature papers. Some of my best papers were written about Gertrude and not Hamlet, or Neville instead of Harry. It’s also easier to research and focus on them.

Another irony is that students resist producing a specific, narrowed topic because it involves more initial mental labor than “My paper is about religion,” but a precise topic is easier in the long run to write because there will also be less to research and read about, and the idea may be easier to hold in your head and conceptualize if it is more restricted. I remember a high school teacher telling me ruefully never to write my Masters’ thesis on Shakespeare!—which would involve reading *everything* on Shakespeare, an impossible task.

2.4 Using Argument Moves

If you already know by instinct how to arrange the ideas for your specific argument, wonderful—if you do not, it might help to use one of the argument designs or ‘moves’ which I list here. The most basic type of argument forms a binary: x is *not* y, it is z. This might also be a value judgment: x is *better* than y. For this reason, a comparison argument tends to be easy to formulate: x is better or worse in some way than y.

Binaries are very useful in human cognition for understanding and analyzing issues because you break them down into clear oppositions, but—and this is somewhat of a western disease—binaries can also be

limiting if you see every issue as a battle between two opposing ideas: 0 or 1. More sophisticated arguments move beyond either-or binaries into shades of grey, exploring more sophisticated or complex relationships. X may not be the opposite of y; it may be partly y or even somewhat z, and your argument may concern how much. Logically, if two concepts were *totally* different from each other there would be little to say about their relationship.

Here are some common moves which might help you to spatially or logically conceptualize your argument:

Comparison

As stated, in this paper you compare things and argue that one is better somehow, or explain how they differ. This format is also called *compare and contrast*. For example: “A big university is better than a small one because a, b, and c.” Again, the paper may not make a value judgment; it might simply explain how two things are similar (compare) or different (contrast): Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* is x as opposed to her daughter Pearl who is y.

Such papers require a *basis of comparison*—in what way are x and y comparable? Paris and New York are both cities. The things you compare should not be too similar—if you compare two pencils there isn’t much to say—or too different: if you compare Lady Gaga and a train, saying both are made of atoms, or Beowulf and Atticus Finch, because both are fictional characters, your ideas will be limited. The best comparison papers suggest a unique but plausible connection: cooks and musicians are similar because both a, b, and c.

My least favorite comparison papers are where the author writes “Both big and small universities have benefits and drawbacks, and everyone has to decide for

themselves.” Thanks for that. *Everything* has benefits and drawbacks! Comparison papers are best when the differences are made clear and sharp: either a big university *or* a small one is better, or have meaningful differences or similarities. Pick a side, dammit! No one wants to watch the soccer game with you if you want both sides to win.

Analysis

In this paper you prove a position by breaking down things or concepts into parts, explaining how they interact or deriving a conclusion: “Examination of blood glucose levels in these patients suggests that they might benefit from low-carbohydrate diets.” These papers are often good for breaking down an engineering or design problem, such as identifying why an engine component failed. A business paper might analyze a specific business or event and make an argument about its qualities or results: “We can see that Acme Products’ marketing advertisement uses the visual strategies of a, b, and c.” This can also be done with literature: “Through examining the evidence, Inspector Poirot can find out *who* killed Mr. Ratchett.”

Process Analysis

In this paper you take a position explaining how a sequence or grouping of steps creates a result: “The earthquake happened because a happened, which caused b, which caused c.” Process analysis papers need not be sequential: “The best way to build a bridge is by doing a, b, and c.” These papers are like analysis papers but tend to emphasize how certain steps or a sequence is significant in producing a result, focusing on relationships

between different events or things in a series. This sort of paper is more common in science or social science topics, but could be done in literature also: “A, b, and c form a series of sequential events which cause the Savage to reject Lenina in *Brave New World*.”

Cause & Effect

This argument establishes a sequential connection between two events: “Because x happened, Mango Airlines went bankrupt.” This paper is similar to a process analysis one, but is more binary as the emphasis is not on the process but on causality—how two events are logically interconnected by sequence. There was a war, and then an economic recession. These things are not coincidental; we can prove that the recession was caused by the war, and this is what happened because of the war. Because Napoleon did x in 1812, y happened. Because Macbeth didn’t listen closely to what the weird witches really said, z occurred.

Although both cause and effect need to be stated in your paper as connected issues, one or the other is normally the focus of a paper: the causes or the effects. Students often ask for permission to emphasize both, and there is no ‘rule’; it’s just simply more difficult to construct such a paper as you do not want to confuse the reader by chasing two horses.

Prediction

In this paper you take a position predicting future events: “Next year the American dollar will decrease in value because of a, b, and c.” For many topics this argument frame is limited, and your paper might not be worth reading next year after the prediction is no longer

relevant; but for quickly-changing subjects such as current events or politics such papers can be very interesting.

Problem / Solution

Here a writer describes a solvable problem and proposes a solution: “The best way to diminish prostitution is by a, b, and c.” These papers often involve social or political issues. Both problem and solution need to be stated in the paper. Theoretically you could emphasize both, or even focus on the problem, but in practice your paper is likely to have more discussion of the solution.

Unless you have special purposes, the solution ought to be a realistic one: “The best way to solve traffic jams is to give everyone helicopters” is not a useful argument. Another problem I see in this sort of paper is vague solutions: “Obesity can be solved by better eating habits.” “Prostitution will be eliminated by teaching men to have better attitudes to sex.” Thanks for clearing that up. Normally the paper is not very helpful unless the solution is specifically stated. How can it be implemented?

A case study (more on that below) might also work well here. For example, if your paper is about school bullying you might examine how a school district in California dealt with bullying and then examine how it might be applied to your situation. Business paper writers also often like such papers as they have practical applications; for example, you might examine how to make hiring or supply management more efficient.

Interpretation

What does something *mean*? This sort of paper involves explaining the meaning or significance of a text, act, or some communication. I don’t want to give you the idea

that this is the only or chief mode for literature students, but such a style often fits papers on literary criticism, where a problem of understanding a written text is involved. *Why* does Steinbeck have a chapter about a turtle in *The Grapes of Wrath*? *What* is the character function of Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*? Is *1984* meant to be prediction or satire? Such papers take a position attempting to answer such questions. In a way this mode is similar to analysis.

Challenging Conventional Wisdom

This is perhaps my favorite structure for paper writing. Most people believe that x is true, but I am going to prove that y is a better explanation. The critical consensus is that an author meant a in her book, but a closer reading shows that she meant b. Or, perhaps less aggressive for a less confident newcomer to a field is something like this: No one seems to have noticed that a is related to b.

Recently, I read an essay where the author argued that people *should* show favoritism in hiring friends; though I disagreed, the logical process which the writer used was very interesting. This is a more advanced type of paper to write, because you need to learn about what scholars believe first, or have evidence to prove what ‘most people believe.’ You will need to do some research on what the conventional wisdom *is* on something before you confront it, so that you avoid a “scarecrow” argument: “Most people believe Dorian is a villain, but the text shows...” This isn’t an honest statement—you need to prove that most people believe Dorian is a villain before you construct an argument against that belief.

Case Study

This somewhat overlaps with other categories, because a case study paper could be a comparison, analysis, or problem/solution paper, and so on. The difference is that in a case study, you focus specifically on one event, person, or institution and attempt to understand it or draw conclusions from it. The reasoning may be more *inductive*, meaning that you are trying to generate larger principles or explanations from examining a specific example of something.

As they are in the social sciences, international business and international relations papers often make use of case studies. A business paper might examine a company’s decision or some event that affected it (a labor strike, bankruptcy, technological change) and attempt to derive explanations or lessons from it for future application.

In international relations, you might examine a political event or cultural phenomenon. For example, in a *single-case-based* study you might ask, “Why did the French leave Vietnam?” In a *comparative-case-based* study you might ask, “Why does Germany have much better relations with post-war allies in the twenty-first century than Japan does?” Again, the focus is on that particular situation and secondarily on the wider principles which affect it.

In time you will find your own favorite pattern or format. There are of course paper styles which do not fall squarely into any of these categories and which simply employ some general reasoning: x is true because of a, b, and c. These arguments often rely on *should* statements, advocating a moral action: “We should do x because of a,

b, and c.”

When I teach lower-level academic writing, I often design the course so that students practice these different argument frames. Conceptually, comparison papers are generally easiest and structures involving analysis or synthesis of ideas are more difficult. But at some point I will have a student complain that a certain idea just doesn't perfectly fit any of these formats. This is the point where the student hopefully realizes that the frames are there to help you, not to restrict you—the idea and the argument should come first, and then the paper structure can be bent to fit your purposes.

It's my experience that the argument structure usually suggests itself naturally based on the topic, and it's seldom that I've had to actually decide which one to use. Again, don't be afraid to abandon or change these frames when you outgrow them.

Again, this list is concerned with argument formats. You may be asked to write a descriptive, narrative, personal, definitional, or other type of essay. These are important genres but generally do not emphasize a position to be taken.

2.5 Note Taking

As you read about your subject you may want to take notes to remember ideas and quotations you wish to use in your paper. There is no single best way to research and to take notes. I prefer writing on paper, but many might type their notes on a computer. I will only explain the system which I have developed over many years and which works well for me.

If my paper does not require external sources or evidence and can be written purely on my own experience

and knowledge, I can go directly to preparing an outline. But this is not usually the case—and that sort of writing isn't a *research* paper—and so I usually begin by going to the library to find books on my chosen subject, and I augment these sources with journal articles and perhaps internet resources and websites.

While reading, I may do a quick scan or overview of the text to perform a triage—meaning that I will divide the sources into ones which are useless, those which have some minor data or evidence I can use, and the ones which may be important for my paper. I don't want to waste time on the sources which do not help me, even if they might be interesting for other reasons. I can always write down the title for another time.

I then proceed to a deeper reading of the sources. As I read, I have a sheet of paper beside the book or the computer screen where I scribble down ideas, quotations, or facts which may be useful to me later along with the page number. I also make sure that I have the book or source written down:

contemporary novelists

ishiguro likes Russians - Chekhov - Bronte as influences 123
 ishiguro also left Nagasaki 123

- a meditation on sublimated pain - lost her homeland, husband, daughter 123
 - all Ishiguro's characters are looking back to explain themselves 125
 3 vivid narrator memory compromised by contradictions 127
 Ftsuko grieves and copes by fixating on the past 130
 more sources 140

narrative skepticism

- the modernist concern of knowing 167
 pale light suggests a self-deception realized 177
 suffer from obsessive, compulsive repression 189

All this allows me to easily find what I want later when I am writing the paper and am reminded of some quotation or piece of information which will help me support my ideas. If I have a longer and more complex project, or I have several sheets of paper with these notes, I might even use numbers or colored highlighters to indicate which part of the paper the entry is related to. I use letter/A4 sheets, but some people use index cards or sticky notes.

Why bother with all this extra work? Why not just read some books or websites and then write the paper? As I will repeat throughout this book, a three-page paper is writing on training wheels. You are learning the basics of a skill which can then be expanded in size and scope. Your brain is probably capable of keeping straight all of the elements of the paper and the external information you have read for a three-page assignment. When your projects grow to five, ten, or two hundred pages, relying solely on your memory becomes progressively impossible without outlines and notes.

Nearly every new writer has paused while writing a paper and thought, “I read the best piece of text on this which will sum up the whole argument!”—and then wasted minutes or hours in frustration while frantically searching through a pile of books or photocopies to find that quotation, only to forget what he or she was looking for or how it fit into the paper. Having the notes already laid out would have reduced that process to seconds, allowing the writer to incorporate the source while the idea is fresh and clear.

Thus having some knowledge of the subject through reading, some notes on those sources, and an idea of what you intend to prove or explain, will all greatly assist you in the next two steps of planning: formulating a thesis

statement and creating a rough outline. The point of it all is to help you to speed up the final writing of the paper.

2.6 Outlining

The essay structures I have given in this chapter are meant to explain and illustrate the logic behind academic paper structure, but they are also examples for you to imitate. As well as having notes, before you write your paper, write an outline for it on a separate sheet of paper, or on your computer. It is that simple. Including this step in the sequence of writing processes—planning, writing, and editing—will make your paper more organized and easier to write. If you scribble four vague words you will get what you pay for in a vague essay, but a reasonably detailed outline will be immensely helpful.

The other good news is that again, an outline can be in any format that you find useful or easy to write. Because I am a little older my outlines are quite conventional with numbers and key-words. But a more scientific or mathematical thinker might prefer a flowchart or a more symbolic arrangement on the paper. A visual person might have connected circles with different-colored words or lines. What type of outline you use makes no difference to the reader. He or she will never see it.

<p>Number / point-form style</p>	<p>Spatial / color style</p>

Is it possible to *overplan* an outline? Of course. It is important that you not see your outline as commandments handed down from on high, fixed and permanent. You may be well into your paper when you realize that an argument does not work or that it would be better elsewhere. There is nothing wrong with an outline full of scribbled arrows, changes, or erasures.

In my experience though, it is far more common for students to *under-plan*. If they write a point form outline, they tend to have only first-level headings:

- 1) Thesis: No character in *Brave New World* is heroic
- 2) Lenina
- 3) Bernard
- 4) The Savage
- 5) Conclusion

For a quick scribble before writing an in-class exam, perhaps this is adequate. For a planned paper, it's awful—

it gives little help to guide the writer in building the paper. It would provide much more guidance with second or third-level headings (or a corresponding hierarchy or complexity if visual shapes or something else is used):

- 3) Bernard
 - a. Bernard is flawed and self-pitying
 - b. Bernard does not really love Lenina
 - c. Bernard betrays his friends to try to save himself

A longer paper may again break down this structure further, and even perhaps list some page numbers in the book for later reference (numbers here are imaginary):

- c. Bernard betrays his friends to try to save himself
 - i. He gives no help when the others are attacked (p. 188)
 - ii. He blames the others to the World Controller (p. 205)
 - iii. He breaks down and cries in childish whining (p. 207)



One of my own outlines—a sort of combination number / spatial style

Once again, planning *saves time later*. Not many people are like Mozart, who write in a passionate frenzy toward a finished masterpiece. Most people are more like Beethoven, who need to write carefully and make changes in plans and repair wrong turns or mistakes. People *have* seen Beethoven's score manuscripts, which are full of scrawled notes and alterations, and nobody seems to think worse of him for it.