

Before Your Final Draft

Few good writers complete their work--even their work on a short essay--in one sitting. Most divide the task into several stages. Doing this makes the task seem less threatening than if it were scheduled for completion all at once, without any opportunity for the author to look carefully at the individual parts of an essay and revise them, move them around, eliminate some and add others. This doesn't mean that good writers usually just sit still (or watch television), while waiting for "inspiration." It means that they are writing notes and preliminary drafts, getting ready for the final version.

Here are some suggestions about a sequence of activities that are often helpful to go through before turning the typewriter on for the final draft of a Humanities paper.

First, think about the assigned topic, ask your teaching assistant (right away) any questions you have about it, and adopt at least a tentative position on it; **formulate a hypothetical thesis statement** that expresses your present view of the question to be discussed. Write this hypothetical thesis statement down. Don't try to perfect it right away; don't get that devoted to it. You may want to revise it later; you may even lose confidence in it completely and adopt an opposing position as your thesis. But for now, write it down and test it.

Second, **review the evidence** for your position, recalling what you have learned from lectures and texts that bear on the question at issue. Another way of putting this is: Question yourself about your reasons for coming up with the hypothetical thesis statement. You must have some reasons for it--what are they? Make a list of evidence you might use.

Third, **consult your sources** of evidence. If you are having trouble remembering some points from lecture or text, this is the time to review your notes or reread relevant portions of the text. Make sure that your general impression of what the text says can be backed up by specific passages of the text itself.

Fourth, look over the list of evidence and **determine which items seem most powerful**. This is the evidence that you want to make sure to use in your paper. You will seldom have enough space to use all the evidence you can possibly think of, and it is never a good idea to bore your reader with comparatively trivial information. The crucial question is: What evidence is best to support my thesis? Exclude evidence that is not related directly and forcefully to your thesis. Often a writer will make notes on some piece of evidence that seems interesting but will not be able to explain to himself precisely how that piece of evidence bears on the thesis. It will be a difficult and time-consuming task to fit this "evidence" into the paper. A good rule is: When in doubt, cut it out.

Fifth, **consider the arguments that might be used to oppose your thesis**--the counterarguments. Make a list of the evidence that an intelligent person, familiar with your topic, might use to argue against you. If you can't think of any opposing arguments or evidence, you probably have a trivial, obvious thesis which you should replace with a more interesting one. Why "argue" that the sun will rise tomorrow? Who could argue against you? What's the opposing evidence?

Sixth, think carefully about your list of opposing evidence and **see if you have the arguments or evidence necessary to overcome such evidence**. Make a list of the evidence you plan to use against the plausible counterarguments that might be used to attack your thesis. If you can't make such a list, then you need to retract or modify your thesis, because that thesis may well be wrong. This is the point at which you should look at your thesis statement and make whatever revisions are necessary if it is to meet the test of the evidence. For a moment, stop looking at your thesis in a friendly way. Look at the thesis as if you were determined to discredit it, and see if you can. If you can, you should replace your original thesis with one that opposes it, since the latter seems more in line with the facts. If you believe that your hypothetical thesis will still stand up, or if you've revised it sufficiently to make it stand up, or if you've discarded it for a better one, you are ready to go on.

Seventh, **look at your list of evidence and arrange it in the order** in which you can use it most easily and effectively in your paper. There's nothing especially valuable, in itself, about a formal outline with all the contents of a paper listed next to a sequence of Roman numerals. It's more valuable to experiment, on a series of messy sheets of paper, with several possible arrangements of the parts of your paper. Move those parts around until you find the best arrangement. In your experiments, try to apply these four principles of arrangement:

A. Relationship

See what items of evidence are most directly related to other items of evidence--which ones, for instance, can be connected with previous discussions by just a word or phrase: "Nevertheless," "Another, still more powerful, evidence for my view is this," etc. (Your teaching assistant can help you develop a list of connectives.) Probably it will be easiest to put closely related items in neighboring paragraphs.

B. Avoidance of duplication

Ask yourself: What items come close to duplicating others? Consolidate these items, or cut some of them out.

C. Forcefulness

Try to determine which items of evidence seem to support your thesis most strongly. In order to avoid an anticlimax, you will probably want to place your strongest evidence last. This arrangement may even permit you to omit a separate "conclusion"--see memo on conclusions. The strongest argument is often an effective rebuttal to a counterargument; don't be afraid to bring up and even to emphasize counterarguments, as long as you have an effective reply to them.

D. Clarity

What items of evidence does the reader need to see as foundations for understanding or accepting others? This "foundation" evidence will normally be placed early in the paper.

There are no set rules about the arrangement of arguments, because every paper has a different thesis and different arguments to substantiate it.

By thinking about these four principles, you can move your items of evidence around until you are satisfied with an arrangement that works for your paper. The main thing is to experiment with moving them, and not to get trapped into some arbitrary arrangement. If you are writing a paper on the Iliad and your evidence comes from Books 3, 7, and 12, it may be the weakest and most difficult arrangement that leads you to discuss Book 3 first, Book 7 second, and Book 12 last.

Once you're sure of your thesis, and you've arranged your arguments, you're ready to start writing the paper, not just notes for it. Two pieces of advice for this stage:

1. Follow a **two-draft policy**; make sure that you complete a full draft of your paper two days or so before writing the draft you hand in. This will insure that you have time for revision--not just the time it takes to jot down a few corrections but the time necessary to look at the paper freshly. Half an hour after writing a first draft, most people are still so locked into their own arguments and their own phrasing that they can't see the difficulties that other people could see in their work. Retiring from the paper for a day or two allows you to put yourself in the position of your audience.
2. Some people find it useful to begin their first draft by writing those paragraphs that come most easily to them, gradually building up their confidence (and their material) until they are ready to write the hardest ones. Often the first paragraph is the hardest and actually gets written last. If you have arranged your material before you start writing the paper, you have a good idea of where the various paragraphs will go when they are finally joined together in the first draft.