
Tricks of the Writer's Trade – MP3

The secret to writing a great sentence is keeping it simple. Many people imagine that good writers use words in a complicated way, but the tricks of the trade are all about making your writing easy to read.

This audio explores some straightforward methods of constructing your writing in a clear, engaging manner and conveying your meaning as directly possible.

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This content is based on *Write it Right* by John Peck and Martin Coyle.

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How to write an excellent, superbly structured essay...

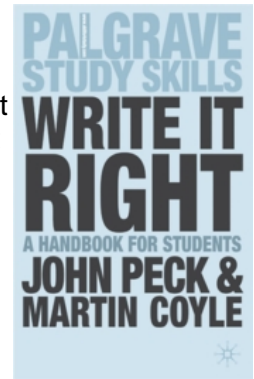
First and foremost, there are three key parts to an essay: **the introduction, body and conclusion.**

Deal with the introduction first of all. The introduction has to have these elements: **the question** (or the argument), **the answer** (or main point), **the preview of the essay** and some scope or parameters. What is the question? This is simply the question that you need to find an answer to. What is the answer to your question? This is called your thesis or main point. Sometimes called merely an answer, your thesis is the key answer that sums up your entire case in one simple strong sentence. What am I going to talk about in the essay? Here is where you advertise what you want to speak and write about during the course of your essay.

What are the definitions and parameters of the terms in your essay? There are **two important elements** here. **One:** "definitions" meaning what **you are going to talk about** and that you define the words such that you can write your essay. **Two:** "parameters" meaning the things that **you are not going to talk about** or the restrictions of your essay.

The **body of the essay** comes next and many people actually don't know how to do this properly. They actually write whatever they want and whatever comes to their mind. This is incorrect. Here's how you actually do write the essay body to make your writing good and clear. A topic sentence is a sentence that sums up your paragraph and makes a key argument or key idea. **You need a topic sentence because this is what you promised to write about.** Explain what you mean by the topic sentence and give more details and more information. Sometimes you need to define words - so just do it here in the body as well. Give an example or examples. Tell the reader what the example means or what the examples mean. **Summarize your paragraph or argument after doing that.** Answer the question using your topic sentence once again at the end. You do this systematic and methodical approach for each and every paragraph.

There are only **three things** you do at the conclusion of your excellent essay and nothing more, if you want a structured and clear essay. **Summarize** what you have just said. **Conclude with your restated thesis** and not with the original words of your original answer. **End with something catchy** or end with some unexpected twist, or even with some unique, aphoristic, cunning maxim or quotation. This will bring your essay to a great close.



Four Tips to Improve Your Writing Skills and How to Avoid Common Mistakes

Below are some basic writing rules, along with an example of the rule being broken. Learn how to avoid these common mistakes.

1. Be Consistent

Sequence of Tenses

After he broke his arm, he **is** home for two weeks.

Shift of Pronoun

If **one** is tense, **they** should try to relax.

Parallelism

She skis, plays tennis, and **flying** hang gliders.

Noun Agreement

Eric and James **want** to be a pilot.

Pronoun Reference

Several people wanted the job, and **he or she** filled out the required applications.

Subject-Verb Agreement

There **is** eight people on the shore.

2. Express Ideas Logically

Coordination and

Jen has a rash, **and** she is probably allergic to something.

Subordination

Logical Comparison

Joey grew more vegetables **than** his neighbor's garden.

Modification and Word Order

Barking loudly, **the tree had the dog's** leash wrapped around it.

3. Be Clear and Precise

Ambiguous and Vague

In the newspaper they say that few people voted.

Pronouns

Diction

He circumvented the globe on his trip.

Wordiness

There are many problems in the contemporary world in which we live.

Improper Modification

If **your car is parked here while not eating** in the restaurant, it will be towed away.

4. Follow Conventions

Pronoun Case

He sat between you and **I** at the stadium.

Idiom

Jack **had a** different opinion **towards** him.

Comparison of Modifiers

Of the sixteen executives, Gretchen makes more money.

Sentence Fragment

Abby **having** to go home early.

Double Negative

Andie has **scarcely no** free time.

Writing in College, Part I

by Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney

http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/preparing_to_write_and_drafting.htm#_Toc431538579

From high school to college

Some students make very smooth transitions from writing in high school to writing in college, and we heartily wish all of you an easy passage. But other students are puzzled and frustrated by their experiences in writing for college classes. Often, what your instructors are asking of you is not just something *better* from high school type writing, but something *different*. If that's the case, then you won't succeed merely by being more intelligent or more skillful at doing what you did in high school. Instead, you'll need to direct your skills and your intelligence to a new task. We should note here that a college is a big place and that you'll be asked to use writing to fulfill different tasks.

- You'll find occasions where you'll succeed by summarizing a reading accurately and showing that you understand it.
- There may be times when you're invited to use writing to react to a reading, speculate about it.
- Far more often--like every other week--you will be asked to *analyze* the reading, to make a worthwhile *claim* about it that is not obvious (***state a thesis*** means almost the same thing), to support your claim with good reasons, all in four or five pages that are organized to present an *argument*. (If you did that in high school, write your teachers a letter of gratitude.)

Argument: a key feature of college writing!

Now by "argument" or "apologetic" we do not mean a dispute over a loud stereo. In college, an argument is something less contentious and more systematic: It is a set of statements coherently arranged to offer three things that experienced readers expect in essays that they judge to be thoughtful:

1. They expect to see a ***claim*** that would encourage them to say, "That's interesting. I'd like to know more."
2. They expect to see ***evidence***, *reasons* for your claim, evidence that would encourage them to agree with your claim, or at least to think it plausible.
3. They expect to see that you've thought about ***limits and objections*** to your claim. Almost by definition, an interesting claim is one that can be reasonably challenged. Readers look for answers to questions like "But what about . . . ?" and "Have you considered . . . ?"

This kind of argument is less like disagreeable wrangling, more like an amiable and lively conversation with someone whom you respect and who respects you; someone who is interested in what you have to say, but will not agree with your claims just because you state them; someone who wants to hear your reasons for believing your claims and also wants to hear answers to their questions.

At this point, some students ask why they should be required to ***convince*** anyone of anything. "After all," they say, "we are all entitled to our opinions, so all we should have to do is express them clearly. Here's my opinion. Take it or leave it." This point of view both misunderstands the nature of argument and ignores its greatest value.

It is true that we are all entitled to our opinions and that we have no duty to defend them. But universities hold as their highest value not just the pursuit of new knowledge and better understanding, but the ***sharing*** of that knowledge. We write not only to state what we have think but also to show why others might agree with it and why it matters. We also know that whatever it is we think, it is never the entire truth. Our conclusions are partial, incomplete, and always subject to challenge. So we write in a way that

allows others to test our reasoning: **we present our best thinking as a series of claims, reasons, and responses to imagined challenges**, so that readers can see not only what we think, but whether they ought to agree.

And that's all an argument is--**not wrangling**, but a serious and focused conversation among people who are intensely interested in getting to the bottom of things *cooperatively*.

Those values are also an integral part of your education in college. For studies, you are asked to read, do research, gather data, analyze it, think about it, and then communicate it to readers in a form in which enables them to assess it and use it. You are asked to do this not because we expect you all to become professional scholars, but because in just about any profession you pursue, you will do research, think about what you find, make decisions about complex matters, and then explain those decisions--usually in writing and then in teaching--to others who have a stake in your decisions being sound ones. In an Age of Information, what most professionals do is research, think, and make arguments. (And part of the value of doing your own thinking and writing is that it makes you much better at evaluating the thinking and writing of others.)

We begin with the assignment that gets you started; then we discuss some ways to plan your paper so that you don't waste too much time on false starts. We conclude with some strategies for drafting and revising, especially revising, because the most productive work on a paper begins after you have gotten your ideas out of the warm and cozy incubator of your own mind and into the cold light of day.

Interpreting assignments: a guide to professors' expectations

Not all of your instructors will be equally clear about what they expect of your paper! Some will tell you in detail what to read, how to think about it, and how to organize your paper, but others will ask a general question just to see what you can do with it. Some instructors will expect you to stay close to the assignment, penalizing you if you depart from it; others will encourage you to strike out on your own. Some few instructors may want you to demonstrate only that you have read and understood a reading, but most will want you to use your understanding of the reading as a jumping-off point for an analysis and an argument.

So your first step in writing an assigned paper occurs well before you begin writing: **You must know what your instructor expects. ASK!** Start by assuming that, unless you see the words "Summarize or paraphrase what X says about . . . ," your instructor is unlikely to want just a summary. Beyond this point, however, you have to become a kind of anthropologist, reading the culture of your particular class to understand what is said, what is not, and what is intended.

Start by looking carefully at the words of the assignment. If it is phrased in any of these ways, one crucial part of your task has been done for you:

- "Agree or disagree: 'Freud misunderstood the feminine mind when he wrote'"
- "Was Lear justified in castigating Cordelia when she refused to . . . ?"
- "Discuss whether Socrates adequately answered the charge that he corrupted the youth of Athens."

For questions like these, you start (but it's only a start) by considering two opposing claims: Freud understood the feminine mind or did not, Lear was or was not justified, Socrates did or did not answer the charges against him. For reasons we will discuss below, you will *not* want the claim of your paper to be merely yes or no, he did or he didn't. But an assignment like this can make it easier to get started because you can immediately begin to find and assess data from your readings. You can look at passages from the reading and consider how they would support one of the claims. (Remember: this is

only a start. You do not want to end up with a claim that says nothing more than "Freud did (or did not) understand the feminine mind." "Lear was (or was not) justified in castigating Cordelia " "Socrates did (or did not) adequately answer the charge.")

More likely, however, your assignments will be less specific. They won't suggest opposite claims. Instead, they'll give you a reasonably specific sense of subject matter and a reasonably specific sense of your task:

"illustrate," "explain," "analyze," "evaluate," "compare and contrast,"

"Discuss the role that the honor plays in *The Odyssey*. "

"Show how Molière exploits comic patterns in a scene from *Tartuffe*."

None of these assignments implies a main point or claim that you can directly import into your paper. You can't just claim that "honor does play a role in *The Odyssey*" or that "Molière does exploit comic patterns in *Tartuffe*." After all, if the instructor has asked you to discuss *how* Molière used comic patterns, she presumably already believes that he *did* use them. **You get no credit for asserting the existence of something we already know exists.**

Instead, these assignments ask you to spend four or five pages explaining the results of an analysis. Words such as "show how" and "explain" and "illustrate" **do not ask you to summarize** a reading. They **ask you to show how** the reading is put together, how it works. If you asked someone to show you how your computer worked, you wouldn't be satisfied if they simply summarized: "This is the keyboard, this is the monitor, this is the printer." You already know the summary--now you want to know how the thing does what it does. These assignments are similar. They ask you to identify parts of things--parts of an argument, parts of a narrative, parts of a poem; then show how those parts fit together (or work against one another) to create some larger effect.

You must shape and focus that discussion or analysis so that it supports a **claim** that you discovered and formulated and that all of your discussion and explanation develops and supports.

A third kind of assignment is simultaneously least restrictive and most intimidating. These assignments leave it up to you to decide not only what you will claim but what you will write about and even what kind of analysis you will do: "Analyze the role of a character in *The Odyssey*." That is the kind of assignment that causes many students anxiety because they must **motivate** their research almost entirely on their own. To meet this kind of assignment, the best advice we can give is to read with your mind open to things that puzzle you, that make you wish you understood something better.

The best place to begin thinking about any assignment is with what *you* don't understand but wish you did!

If after all this analysis of the assignment you are still uncertain about what is expected of you, **ask your instructor. Do this as soon as possible.** You're not likely to succeed on an assignment if you don't have a clear sense of what will count as success. You don't want to spend time doing something different than what you're being asked to do.

Another key feature of college writing: what's your point?

However different your assignments may seem, most **will share one characteristic**: in each, you will almost certainly be asked to make a point. Now when we talk about the "**point**" of your paper, you should understand what we do and do *not* mean. If asked what the point of their paper is, most students

answer with something like, "Well, I wanted to write about the way Falstaff plays the role of Prince Hal's father." **But that kind of sentence names only your topic and an intention to write about it.**

When most of your instructors ask what **the point of your paper** is, they have in mind something different. By "point" or "claim" (the words are virtually synonymous with *thesis*), they will more often mean the most **important sentence** that you wrote in your essay, a sentence that appears on the page, in black in white; words that you can point to, underline, send on a postcard; a sentence that sums up the most important thing you want to say as a result of your reading, thinking, research, and writing. In that sense, you might state the point of your paper as "**Well, I want to show/prove/claim/argue/demonstrate (any of those words will serve to introduce the point) that**

'Though Falstaff seems to play the role of Hal's father, he is, in fact, acting more like a younger brother who'"

If you include in your paper what appears after *I want to prove that*, then that's the point of your paper, its main claim that the rest of your paper supports. !***!**

But what's a good point?

A question just as important as what a point is, though, is what counts as a **good one**. We will answer that question here, even though it gets us ahead of ourselves in describing the process of writing a paper. Many beginning writers think that writing an essay means thinking up a point or thesis and then finding evidence to support it. But few of us work that way. Most of us begin our research with a question, with a puzzle, something that we don't understand but want to, and maybe a vague sense of what an answer might look like. We hope that out of our early research to resolve that puzzle there emerges a solution to the puzzle, an idea that seems promising, but one that only more research can test. But even if more research supports that developing idea, we aren't ready to say that *that* idea is our claim or point. Instead, we start writing to see whether we can build an argument to support it, suspecting, hoping that in the act of writing we will refine that idea, maybe even change it substantially.

Everything you do at the beginning aims at finding a good point, it is useful to have a clear idea about what it is you are trying to find, what makes for a good point. (*Sometimes a good point is not found until all of the research is done and the paper is half written!*)

A good point or claim typically has several key characteristics:

- it says something significant about what you have read
- something that helps you and your readers understand it better
- it says something that is not obvious, something that your reader didn't already know
- it is at least mildly contestable, something that someone may not agree with just by reading it
- it asserts something that you can plausibly support in five pages, not something that would require a book.

Measured by those criteria, these are *not* good points or claims:

- "*1 Henry IV* by William Shakespeare is a play that raises questions about the nature of kingship and responsibility." Sounds impressive, but who would contest it? Everyone who has read the play already knows that it raises such questions.
- "*Native Son* is one of the most important stories about race relations ever written." Again, your readers probably already agree with this, and if so, why would they read an essay that supported it? Further, are you ready to provide an argument that this point is true? What evidence could you provide to make this

argument? Are you prepared to compare the effect of *Native Son* with the effects of other books about race relations?

- "Socrates' argument in *The Apology* is very interesting." Right. So?
- "In this paper I discuss Thucydides' account of the Corcyrean-Corinthian debate in Book I." First, what significant thing does this point tell us about the book? Second, who would contest this (who would argue that you are not going to discuss Thucydides' account?).

None of these is a particularly significant or contestable point, and so none of them qualifies as a good one.

What does qualify as a good claim? These might:

- The three most prominent women in *Heart of Darkness* play key roles in a complex system of parallels: literally as gatekeepers of Africa, representatively as gatekeepers of darkness, and metaphorically as gatekeepers of brutality.
- While Freud argues that followers obey because each has a part of themselves invested in the leader, Blau claims that followers obey in order to avoid punishment. Both neglect the effects of external power.

Writing is a way of thinking through a problem, of discovering what you want to say. So do not feel that you should begin to write only when you have a fully articulated point in mind. Instead, maybe write to discover and to refine it.

Preparing to prove your point: the process of gathering evidence

Once you understand the assignment, your next task is to find data relevant to meeting it. The word "data" makes some people flinch a bit, but we need a word that distinguishes all the facts, quotations, references, numbers, events that might be relevant to your assignment from those fact, quotations, references, etc. that might support your specific claim or point. All the information related to your assignment is data; data becomes evidence when you use it to convince readers to agree with your point.

We do not have the space here to discuss the process of researching and selecting data, thinking about what you have gathered, analyzing it, and discovering the point or claim that you want to make and support. Every assignment will ask you to look at your readings in a different way, and every text you read will raise its own problems of interpretation and analysis. In fact, that is what most of your classes are about: selecting and analyzing data, and arriving at a plausible conclusion about them!

The best generic advice we can give is this:

- Go through your readings once and mark with a highlighter or copy/paste *everything* you think plausibly relevant to answering the assignment.
- So that you can get a sense of it all, go through a second time, skimming what you have highlighted or copy/paste..
- Go through a third time, marking passages that seem **most** central to your assignment. Try to assign to each passage a key word that will help you sort them later according to your outline.
- Now try to categorize those passages according to how they might support different points. Which ones support one point, which ones support another point. (Spend the time it takes to find data that might support different, even opposing, points. You need such data so that you can critically balance one point against another.)

- Jot down what you think are the central concepts that emerge from this analysis.
- To these central concepts attach subsidiary or detail concepts. Make lists of the central concepts, order and re-order them, find categories and subcategories.
- Then create a working outline around details suggested by your original outline.

At this point, you may have a fairly clear idea about the point you want to make; more often, you won't. Either way, if you have an idea about the shape of your general point, prepare to start your first draft.

Planning your first draft: styles of outlining

You may have been told in high school that you needed an outline before you began to draft a paper. That's good advice. Some writers can't begin writing until they have a detailed outline consisting of their main point and every subpoint and in the order in which they intend to make them. Other writers need an outline of some kind, but usually only of topics so that we know what the parts of our paper are and the order in which we want them to appear. You will know which is right for you only after you write a few papers.

Everyone profits from at least a scratch outline that focuses your attention on particular aspects of your paper and in a particular order:

The traditional outline has three sections: introduction, body, and conclusion.

The basic model looks like this:

Title

- I. Introduction
 - A. The background
 - B. The thesis statement (main point)
- II. Body
 - A. First major category of support
 1. Supporting detail
 2. Supporting detail
 3. Supporting detail
 - B. Second major category of support
 1. Supporting detail
 2. Supporting detail
 - C. Third major category of support
 1. Supporting detail
 2. Supporting detail
- III. Conclusion
 - A. The answer, solution, or final option (application)
 - B. Review of the major categories of support (summary)

Example:

Alcohol Testing for Mass Transportation Employees

- I. Congress mandates testing for transportation employees
 - A. Background on why
 - B. Explanation of new policy

- II. How and why alcohol testing is used
 - A. Circumstances for Alcohol Testing
 - 1. Pre-employment
 - 2. Post-accident
 - 3. Reasonable suspicion
 - 4. Random
 - 5. Return to duty/follow-up testing
 - B. Method of Alcohol Testing
 - 1. Blood
 - 2. Urine
 - 3. Breath
 - 4. Performance
 - C. Options for Alcohol Abusers
 - 1. Retesting
 - 2. Treatment
 - 3. Termination of employment
- III. Conclusion
 - A.
 - B.

If you can formulate a complete sentence that captures the central idea in each section, so much the better. But it is likely that you will discover those sentences in the act of drafting, as well.

Beginning your first draft: the draft introduction

Every writer, beginner or experienced, feels at least some small twinge of anxiety when it comes time to write the first sentence of a paper. That's why some writing teachers tell you to write your introduction last. What they mean, of course, is that after you finish a draft, you need to go back and re-write your introduction. Once you know what you've said in the draft, you can write a much better introduction to it. So in that sense, you will have written the real introduction only after you've written the draft: you'll have written the introduction last. But even first drafts need introductions of some kind, so no one escapes that moment of uncertainty.

It is useful to spend more than a moment or two thinking about even this first draft introduction because it has a way of so entrenching itself in your paper that you will have a hard time getting rid of it when you get to your last draft.

First, here are some introductory strategies to *avoid* even in first drafts. If they survive into your last draft, you can be sure that your instructor will judge them amateurish.

- **Don't simply echo the language of the assignment.** If the assignment says "Discuss the logical structure of the Declaration of Independence, particularly those assumptions on which Jefferson based his argument," do not start with something like, "In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson based his argument on assumptions that are part of its logical structure." You're very likely to need *some* of the language from the assignment, but you should leave room, even in your first draft, for **language of your own**, so your readers will understand your unique approach to the question.

- **Avoid offering a history of your thinking about the assignment.** Don't begin, "In analyzing the logical structure of the Declaration of Independence, it is first necessary to define the assumptions that Jefferson worked with. In my analysis, I found that Jefferson began with one assumption, which was that . . ." Such a discussion of your own thought processes forces readers to wait a bit too long to find out what the paper will actually be about.

• **Avoid beginning with "Webster defines 'xxx' as . . . "** If a concept is so important to your paper that you feel compelled to specify its meaning, its dictionary definition will be too generic for your purposes. A somewhat better strategy here is to cite a definition by a specialist in a particular field or by an otherwise admirable individual. If you wish to explore "generosity," for example, you are unlikely to find a good starting point for your paper in a dictionary's definition, but you are more likely to find one in philosopher's definition, or a psychologist's, or an economist's, or a political theorist's, or a sociobiologist's, or Mother Theresa's. The reason for this is that dictionaries and thinkers are doing quite different things when they define: dictionaries are merely establishing a baseline of situations to which a word may be applied, while thinkers are participating in an ongoing intellectual conversation about a concept. And it is this conversation that your paper seeks to join, by citing such a definition and then contesting it, or elaborating on it, or finding exceptions to it, or adding to it. What if you're not sure who "counts" as a participant in this conversation? In that case, you have two choices: you may ask someone, such as your professor or Writing Intern or a Writing Tutor, or you may choose to avoid this opening strategy altogether until you are more familiar with the field.

• **Avoid beginning with grandly banal statements:** "The Declaration of Independence is the greatest and most logical document in American history. . . ." The danger here is twofold. Readers may find the statement too obvious to be worth reading, or (and this is more likely in an academic setting) they may think that it oversimplifies a complex matter, so much so that it cannot function as the beginning of an intellectually respectable argument.

How *should* a draft introduction begin? One way to focus your own thinking is to begin with a kind of sentence that *you must change in the final draft*:

I am addressing the issue of [-----fill in your topic here] in order to show why/how/what/who/whether [fill this in with subject and verb]

For example,

I am addressing the issue of *the relationship between Jefferson's assumptions and evidence* in order to show *how he depended on assumptions that he could not prove but needed in order to use the evidence he had*.

That kind of sentence focuses your attention not on what you are writing *about*, but on what you are trying to *do*. The indirect question such as, ". . . show *how* . . ." or ". . . explain why . . ." helps you identify something that you do not know but are trying to find out.

If you have even a tentative answer to your question, state it at the end of your introduction. That will launch you into the body of your paper with some sense of direction. If you do not have a tentative answer, make up some sentence that uses most of the key terms you came up with when you were assembling, organizing, and analyzing your data. (Not sure how to fit those key words into a sentence? Feel free to use question marks, ellipses or just blank space to reflect your uncertainty: "The evidence that Jefferson most relies on are specific acts of tyranny (injustice?), which caused him to rely on unproven assumptions . . . fundamental purpose of government." You can come back to this sentence after you've written the draft to fill in the missing pieces.)

If you can get some key terms into your draft introduction, you will help yourself focus on developing those concepts.

Remember, after you've completed your paper draft, you'll need to revise this first try at an introduction. We offer some suggestions in a later section on revising introductions, but you'll be better able to follow them after you've drafted the whole paper.

After your draft introduction: a common danger

After you finish the draft introduction, your biggest risk is that instead of laying down the foundation of your argument, you might lapse into a long narrative summary of what you have read. The act of producing such a summary can actually be a valuable part of your writing process, but only if you have started your paper at least two or three days before it is due and if you will substantially revise what you have written. In these circumstances, your summary is a useful way to allow you (but *not* your readers) to gain control over your subject matter.

But perhaps the most common problem that first year students have with their papers is that they take this summary of their subject, tack on a half-page conclusion and then turn the essay in. They may spend an hour or two tinkering with spelling and punctuation, but essentially, once they've written a summary of what they've read, and then added a short conclusion, they're done. It is a pattern of behavior that many students fall into without even noticing. Remember: if you feel you have to summarize, start drafting at least three or four days before the paper is due. Give yourself time not only to write the summary, but to transform it into an argument.

Two styles of drafting: fast vs. slow

There are two extremes in drafting styles. Some writers draft as fast as they can make pen or keys move. Not worrying about style or correctness, or even clarity (least of all spelling and punctuation), they try to keep the ideas flowing. If they bog down, they note why they got stuck, refer to their outline for their next move, and push on. If they are on a roll, they do not type out quotes or footnotes: they insert just enough to know what to do later. Then if they do freeze up, they have things to do: fiddle with wording, add quotes, play with the introduction, review what they've drafted, in a sentence or two summarize the ground they have covered. As a last resort, they correct spelling, punctuation—anything that diverts their minds from what is blocking them, but keeps them on task, giving their subconscious a chance to work on the problem. Or they go for a walk.

There are others, though, who cannot work with such "sloppy" methods, but only "word-by-perfect-word," "sentence-by-polished-sentence." They cannot start a new sentence, until the one they are working on is dead right. If this sounds like you, if you cannot imagine a quicker but rougher style of drafting, do not fight it. But remember: the more you nail down each small piece, the fewer alternatives you have thereafter. For this reason, if you are a "sentence-by-sentence" drafter, you must have a detailed outline that tells you where you are going and how you will get there.

Neither of these styles is "the" correct one; both can lead to excellent papers. Both also have built-in pitfalls of which you must be aware. The faster style can lead to careless errors in the final draft if you fail to proofread rigorously, and it may also degenerate into a history of your thought process rather than a carefully structured argument if you fail to revise it with readers' needs in mind. The slower style can become overly focused on sentence-level correctness and neglect the paper's overall structure; you must therefore use outlines and frequent rereadings to remind yourself of the role each part should play in the whole.

Whichever style is yours, establish a ritual for writing and follow it. Ritualistically straighten up your desk, sit down, sharpen your pencils or boot up your computer, get the light just right, knowing that you will sit there for an absolute minimum time. If you sit staring, not an idea in your head, write a summary: *So far, I have these points . . .* Or look at the last few paragraphs you wrote, and treat some important bit of evidence as a claim in a subordinate argument.

The crucial part of writing: revision

When you have finished your first draft, you should have enough time left for a few hours of revision. Ideally, you should leave enough time to put the draft aside so that you can forget at least some of what you were thinking when you drafted. The very worst time to revise a draft is right after you have finished it. At that moment you are the worst possible editor. You know too much about what you have written and are thereby constitutionally incapacitated from reading your essay as your readers will.

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1. The longer you can set aside something you have written before you revise it, the more you will have forgotten what you were thinking when you wrote it. This amnesia is a blessing: it will enable you to read what you have written more quickly.
2. Even then, you will still know too much. In the next section, we offer some ways to analyze, diagnose, and revise your own writing in a way that sidesteps your too-good memory of it.

Beginning your first draft: the draft introduction

Every writer, beginner or experienced, feels at least some small twinge of anxiety when it comes time to write the first sentence of a paper. That's why some writing teachers tell you to write your introduction last. What they mean, of course, is that after you finish a draft, you need to go back and re-write your introduction. Once you know what you've said in the draft, you can write a much better introduction to it. So in that sense, you will have written the real introduction only after you've written the draft: you'll have written the introduction last. But even first drafts need introductions of some kind, so no one escapes that moment of uncertainty.

It is useful to spend more than a moment or two thinking about even this first draft introduction because it has a way of so entrenching itself in your paper that you will have a hard time getting rid of it when you get to your last draft. You may be resolved to get rid of your first draft introduction later, but such a resolution can fade as your deadline approaches--especially if sunrise is approaching at the same time. It is not a bad idea even from the beginning to take some steps to avoid last minute trouble.

First, here are some introductory strategies to *avoid* even in first drafts. If they survive into your last draft, you can be sure that your instructor will judge them amateurish.

- **Don't simply echo the language of the assignment.** If the assignment says "Discuss the logical structure of the Declaration of Independence, particularly those assumptions on which Jefferson based his argument," do not start with something like, "In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson based his argument on assumptions that are part of its logical structure." You're very likely to need *some* of the

language from the assignment, but you should leave room, even in your first draft, for language of your own, so your readers will understand your unique approach to the question.

- **Avoid offering a history of your thinking about the assignment.** Don't begin, "In analyzing the logical structure of the Declaration of Independence, it is first necessary to define the assumptions that Jefferson worked with. In my analysis, I found that Jefferson began with one assumption, which was that . . ." Such a discussion of your own thought processes forces readers to wait a bit too long to find out what the paper will actually be about.

- **Avoid beginning with "Webster defines 'xxx' as . . ."** If a concept is so important to your paper that you feel compelled to specify its meaning, its dictionary definition will be too generic for your purposes. A somewhat better strategy here is to cite a definition by a specialist in a particular field or by an otherwise admirable individual. If you wish to explore "generosity," for example, you are unlikely to find a good starting point for your paper in a dictionary's definition, but you are more likely to find one in philosopher's definition, or a psychologist's, or an economist's, or a political theorist's, or a sociobiologist's, or Mother Theresa's. The reason for this is that dictionaries and thinkers are doing quite different things when they define: dictionaries are merely establishing a baseline of situations to which a word may be applied, while thinkers are participating in an ongoing intellectual conversation about a concept. And it is this conversation that your paper seeks to join, by citing such a definition and then contesting it, or elaborating on it, or finding exceptions to it, or adding to it. What if you're not sure who "counts" as a participant in this conversation? In that case, you have two choices: you may ask someone, such as your professor or Writing Intern or a Writing Tutor, or you may choose to avoid this opening strategy altogether until you are more familiar with the field.

- **Avoid beginning with grandly banal statements:** "The Declaration of Independence is the greatest and most logical document in American history. . . ." The danger here is twofold. Readers may find the statement too obvious to be worth reading, or (and this is more likely in an academic setting) they may think that it oversimplifies a complex matter, so much so that it cannot function as the beginning of an intellectually respectable argument.

How *should* a draft introduction begin? One way to focus your own thinking is to begin with a kind of sentence that *you must change in the final draft*:

I am addressing the issue of [-----fill in your topic here] in order to show why/how/what/who/whether [fill this in with subject and verb]

For example,

I am addressing the issue of *the relationship between Jefferson's assumptions and evidence* in order to show *how he depended on assumptions that he could not prove but needed in order to use the evidence he had*.

That kind of sentence focuses your attention not on what you are writing *about*, but on what you are trying to *do*. The indirect question such as, ". . . show *how* . . ." or ". . . explain *why* . . ." helps you identify something that you do not know but are trying to find out.

If you have even a tentative answer to your question, state it at the end of your introduction. That will launch you into the body of your paper with some sense of direction. If you do not have a tentative answer, make up some sentence that uses most of the key terms you came up with when you were assembling, organizing, and analyzing your data. (Not sure how to fit those key words into a sentence? Feel free to use question marks, ellipses or just blank space to reflect your uncertainty: "The evidence that Jefferson most relies on are specific acts of tyranny (injustice?), which caused him to rely on unproven assumptions . . . fundamental purpose of government." You can come back to this sentence after you've written the draft to fill in the missing pieces.)

If you can get some key terms into your draft introduction, you will help yourself focus on developing those concepts.

Remember, after you've completed your paper draft, you'll need to revise this first try at an introduction. We offer some suggestions in a later section on revising introductions, but you'll be better able to follow them after you've drafted the whole paper.

After your draft introduction: a common danger

After you finish the draft introduction, your biggest risk is that instead of laying down the foundation of your argument, you might lapse into a long narrative summary of what you have read. The act of producing such a summary can actually be a valuable part of your writing process, but only if you have started your paper at least two or three days before it is due and if you will substantially revise what you have written. In these circumstances, your summary is a useful way to allow you (but *not* your readers) to gain control over your subject matter.

But perhaps the most common problem that first year students have with their papers is that they take this summary of their subject, tack on a half-page conclusion and then turn the essay in. They may spend an hour or two tinkering with spelling and punctuation, but essentially, once they've written a summary of what they've read, and then added a short conclusion, they're done. It is a pattern of behavior that many students fall into without even noticing. Remember: if you feel you have to summarize, start drafting at least three or four days before the paper is due. Give yourself time not only to write the summary, but to transform it into an argument.

Two styles of drafting: fast vs. slow

There are two extremes in drafting styles. Some writers draft as fast as they can make pen or keys move. Not worrying about style or correctness, or even clarity (least of all spelling and punctuation), they try to keep the ideas flowing. If they bog down, they note why they got stuck, refer to their outline for their next move, and push on. If they are on a roll, they do not type out quotes or footnotes: they insert just enough to know what to do later. Then if they do freeze up, they have things to do: fiddle with wording, add quotes, play with the introduction, review what they've drafted, in a sentence or two summarize the ground they have covered. As a last resort, they correct spelling, punctuation—anything that diverts their minds from what is blocking them, but keeps them on task, giving their subconscious a chance to work on the problem. Or they go for a walk.

There are others, though, who cannot work with such "sloppy" methods, but only "word-by-perfect-word," "sentence-by-polished-sentence." They cannot start a new sentence, until the one they are working on is dead right. If this sounds like you, if you cannot imagine a quicker but rougher style of drafting, do not fight it. But remember: the more you nail down each small piece, the fewer alternatives you have thereafter. For this reason, if you are a "sentence-by-sentence" drafter, you must have a detailed outline that tells you where you are going and how you will get there.

Neither of these styles is "the" correct one; both can lead to excellent papers. Both also have built-in pitfalls of which you must be aware. The faster style can lead to careless errors in the final draft if you fail to proofread rigorously, and it may also degenerate into a history of your thought process rather than a carefully structured argument if you fail to revise it with readers' needs in mind. The slower style can become overly focused on sentence-level correctness and neglect the paper's overall structure; you must therefore use outlines and frequent rereadings to remind yourself of the role each part should play in the whole.

Whichever style is yours, establish a ritual for writing and follow it. Ritualistically straighten up your desk, sit down, sharpen your pencils or boot up your computer, get the light just right, knowing that you will sit there for an absolute minimum time. If you sit staring, not an idea in your head, write a summary: *So far, I have these points . . .* Or look at the last few paragraphs you wrote, and treat some important bit of evidence as a claim in a subordinate argument.

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