

Writing a Paper For Me

“ ‘All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence you know.’ So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there. It was easy then because there was always one true sentence that I knew or had seen or had heard someone say. If I started to write elaborately, or like someone introducing or presenting something, I found that I could cut the scrollwork or ornament out and throw it away and start with the first true simple declarative sentence I had written.” - Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*

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Preparing to Write

- [1] Choose your theme/question
- [2] Articulate for yourself the two most interesting opposing positions on this question.
- [3] Decide which side of this divide you will fall on. Write down for yourself the initial reasons that you fall on this side. These may not be the strongest arguments, but you want to develop those arguments from your true convictions and strong intuitions.
- [4] Outline your argument. You will probably deviate from the outline, but it is still useful for getting started and keeping on track.

The Paper

[1] Clearly state the question you intend to answer in the opening paragraph. It is helpful if you give the reader a sense of the direction your argument will take. For instance “I intend to demonstrate X. If I can demonstrate Y and Z, which, I will argue, entail X, then I will consider my thesis substantially supported.” *You can greatly influence the way your paper is read by the way you set it up. If you specify your own criteria for success in the argument, the reader will most likely judge you by those criteria.* Most good opening paragraphs are written after the paper has been completed, though it is good to run this through as an exercise before writing the rest of the paper.

2] Please avoid filler: “The question of the nature of love has puzzled humankind since the dawn of time. Many a night by the campfire did our Cro-Magnon ancestors gaze at the stars and.....blah blah.” Just cut to the argument. I am not opposed to beautiful prose, but every word in your paper should advance your arguments.

[2] As your argument proceeds, give continuing clear signals of where it has been and where it is headed. Turn signals, sub-conclusions when a part of the argument is concluded, sentences linking two sub-arguments, anticipation of coming arguments - it is much better to err on the side of over-explaining the argument to the reader than under-explaining it. Subheadings within the paper are often helpful.

[3] When you have concluded your argument, step into the shoes of your cleverest opponents and give me their most important and persuasive objections to your argument. Then tell me why I should not be convinced by those arguments.

[4] Your concluding paragraph should really sum up the argument, reminding me of the course it has taken, of the criteria of success you set for yourself and how you have fulfilled it.

[5] An honest conclusion is better than b.s. A paper which admits that it has fallen short of proving its case can be an excellent paper. If, in addition, you can give some suggestions about what direction you might take to strengthen the argument in the future, I will admire your honest appraisal of your situation. If you conclude that ‘Therefore, obviously, the question of the nature of love has been solved.’ or some such, I will have you committed to the ward for deluded undergraduates.

After The Paper

A good way of telling if your argument proceeds in an orderly fashion is to try to outline the paper when completed. If it can be reduced to standard outline form, then you have an orderly argument. If not, you may need to do some rearranging.

Random Tips

1] IN THE AGE OF SPELLCHECK, MISPELLED WORDS ARE A SIGN THAT THIS PAPER WAS NOT EVEN IMPORTANT ENOUGH FOR YOU TO PUSH A BUTTON AT THE END.

2] YOUR PAPER SHOULD SHOW SIGNS OF THINKING AND RE-THINKING BEFORE BEGINNING TO WRITE.

3] MY PET PEEVES:

A] WORDS YOU ARE FORBIDDEN TO USE IN YOUR PAPERS WITHOUT SAYING PRECISELY WHAT *YOU* MEAN BY THEM: OBJECTIVE, SUBJECTIVE, REAL.

B] YOU CANNOT USE THE WORD ‘VALID’ TO REFER TO ANYTHING OTHER THAN A PROPERLY CONSTRUCTED ARGUMENT.

Technical

1] No name on papers, only I.D. #

2] You must number your pages

3] Papers submitted via email (details will be given in class)

4] Preferred format is Word or RTF. If you must use Open Office, that is acceptable, though a bit of a pain. **Please do not send a PDF**, as I will just have to convert it in order to add comments.

5] You do not need to consult any material other than what we have read for class.

6]. I am not a stickler for length, but if your paper is short and it seems clear that you could have profitably said more, then this will count against you. If you have run out of things to say, try the technique of stepping into the shoes of your worthiest opponent.

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