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A 12-Step Guide to Research and Writing: One Essay at a Time

Candis Steenbergen and Robyn Diner

Whether you're a seasoned writer, an emerging scholar or a student just learning the ropes, writing an essay (or a review, journal article, or book chapter, or anything for that matter) can be - depending on the day - either an absolute pleasure or an exercise in complete and utter frustration. Rather than banging your head against your keyboard or incessantly cleaning your apartment, we've developed a series of steps that may help get you (or your students, or your roommate) through the research and writing blues.¹

Regardless of your area of study, there are a number of key things that make an essay solid from introduction to conclusion. These guidelines were compiled by us after teaching various topics in women's studies, facilitating writing workshops at Concordia University's Simone de Beauvoir Institute, and struggling with our own writing time after time. They include the criteria that we use for evaluating student work and which we use ourselves when writer's block inevitably hits. Some topics covered herein will be more useful to some than others, but all combined should help you or your students get the grade. Again, these are just the basics to help lay the foundation - feel free to use your own style to dot the "i"s and cross the "t"s. After all, it is *your* paper, and your style should shine through.

The 12-Step Program

1. Read the assignment (or call for papers or submission guidelines). Read it again.

Do you know what is expected of you? Did your professor ask you to use course readings? Outside sources? Primary data collection? Should the paper comply with a particular style? Don't be afraid to ask questions. Be sure.

2. Think about possible themes.

For example: If you are required to write a paper for a course on "Women and Health," there are an innumerable number of themes to choose from. Breast cancer, AIDS/HIV, substance abuse, nutrition, eating disorders - how do you decide? The best course of action is to select a theme that genuinely interests you. There's nothing worse than having your interest wane when there's still 10 pages left to write!

3. Think about possible paper topics.

Say you choose to write on “Issues Facing Young Women with HIV in Canada.” What made you come to this decision? What have you read that made you want to investigate further? Was it personal experience? Do you know a young woman with HIV? Do you volunteer at an AIDS organization? Did you find and read an old *Cosmo* article that made you question media reporting on HIV/AIDS or STIs? Have you often thought that sex workers have been unfairly targeted as harbingers of disease?

Other questions to think about at this stage: Do you have a reasonable grounding in the topic, or will you be starting from scratch? Is there enough information available to adequately cover the issue(s)? Make sure it’s doable within the time frame you have for completion.

4. Start your preliminary research.

Remember: **CONTEXT IS CRUCIAL**. Your paper will not work if you make generalizations about a phenomenon in Canada using resources from the United States. [Note: if you are comparing and contrasting, this is an altogether different story. Make this clear to yourself, and ensure that the sources you select for one region are on par with the other, to make your assessment sound.] Also important to the preliminary research stage is keeping your discipline in mind. For instance, if you’re writing for a feminist theory course, ensure that a good number of your sources are feminist, are indebted to feminism, or are grappling with feminist discourses. Or if you’re writing a historical analysis, ensure that the texts you use deal with a time period appropriate for your work.

- a) Does your faculty or department have a resource centre or reading room? If so, it should be your first destination. Quite often, departmental collections have precisely what you’re looking for, the materials will all be relevant to your discipline, and their staff is extremely knowledgeable and helpful. It could be one-stop shopping!
- b) Search the library’s database (either online or at a computer in the building). Get a good idea of what kinds of materials are available to you, how up to date they are, and note where they are located. Don’t just search for books; periodicals are especially useful, and could provide you with a gem of an article your paper will appreciate.
- c) Find out who the reference librarian for your discipline is at the University’s main library. Reference librarians are remarkable people, and know the ins and outs of the stacks like no one else. Once you’ve got a pretty good idea of what your research question will be, make an appointment and start asking pertinent questions to help you get the most relevant resources for your paper.
- d) Having a list of potentially useful texts is only the beginning; going to the library and seeing what’s within the spines will give you a better idea of what you have to work with. Instead of loading up your backpack with potentials, pull up a stepladder and leaf through them; only checking out (or photocopying) what you think will be valuable to your work.
- e) Search the Internet. Many online journals (like *thirdspace*) are scholarly in nature and peer-reviewed, and are valuable locations for current studies.²

Warning: googling your topic (looking it up on Google) is **NOT** a good idea - chances are you'll end up with hundreds of thousands of pages of irrelevant material that'll keep you occupied for hours while your deadline rapidly approaches. *Editor's note:* Google now has a beta version of Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com/>) that is designed to bring up scholarly resources. Give it a try, but note there still will be tons of resources to plow through (and their search engine's not perfected yet). Better yet, try out a site like **Feminist Collections: A Quarterly Of Women's Studies Resources** (<http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/fcmain.htm>).

- f) Read, making notes of relevant concepts, ideas, and quotations (with page numbers for easy reference!). Some people use index cards - to allow for easy sorting - while others prefer using a word processor for longer lists.

The research stage is probably the most important one. Doing thorough research (or not) can make or break a paper, and make the writing process itself that much easier. Having too much information is far better than too little!

5. Return to your chosen topic, and create an Outline.

Now that you've got a handle on what kind of literature surrounds your area of inquiry, return to your chosen topic. Has it changed? Should it change? Is it too narrowly focused? Or is it too large for the parameters of your assignment? If there's just not enough adequate information available, you'll have to switch (perhaps from "Issues Facing Young Women with HIV in Canada" to "A Comparison of Issues Facing Young Women with HIV in Canada and the US") or rethink your approach altogether.

For example: Say you've done your reading, and based on what you've read and found you've discovered that a) sex workers do not necessarily have higher rates of HIV than non-sex working women; b) there is a stigma facing sex workers that often influences how the media portrays them; and c) actually, many sex workers are actually more like sex educators when it comes to condom use; d) and so on. Depending on the length requirements of your assignment, this may be more than enough. If it's a longer research paper you've set out to complete, you'll have to find more.

Once you've got a good collection of materials and ideas, it's time to make an outline. While it may sound like a lame exercise, it is remarkably valuable in terms of getting your notes and thoughts organized and into some semblance of a cohesive paper. Keeping an outline handy (taped to the side of your monitor helps!) will keep you on track and prevent you from straying from the topic at hand.

An Essay Outline Template (PDF) is available for download at:
http://www.thirdspace.ca/chora/Outline_Template.pdf

Having multiple copies on-hand is a good idea - that way, if your essay shifts mid way (or if you catch yourself going off on a tangent) you can alter your outline and keep your focus instead of panicking about going too far off course.

Now you're ready to write!

6. (Optional) Write a preface.

Not everyone does this, but it is often a fun, creative, and playful way to get started on your essay. It can take the form of a fabulous quote you found while researching, song lyrics that you feel encapsulate perfectly the tone you'll be setting in the paper, an anecdote, or a more personal take on how you came to this paper topic in the first place (it's also a good reminder to yourself). It can also work to seduce your reader into wanting to read on. Why did you choose this topic? What does it make you think about? The preface is usually a couple of paragraphs of loose writing that can be written in non-academic language.

For example: So I'm walking down Ste-Catherine street or St-Laurent boulevard, and I see a sex worker leaning against Burger King. Cool skirt, I think, and keep on walking. Then for some reason I think of AIDS. Sex work. AIDS. Sex work. AIDS. I can't get the connection out of my mind. Maybe that's because I've been less than safe during my last few after-bar encounters. Or maybe it's because I've been reading so much about the connection in the media. Anyway, I wonder: is this woman at more risk of getting AIDS than me?

A few things to keep in mind:

- Choose your preface according to your reader. One professor may find your account of a drunken one-night stand (true or not) enticing (or at the very least amusing); another may not.
- Your preface does not count in terms of your overall word count - it is extraneous to the essay itself.

7. Introduction and Thesis Statement.

While an introduction is self-explanatory (it is a preamble on the subject of your essay), a thesis statement is somewhat more elusive. In short, a thesis statement is a sentence (or a couple of sentences) that clearly and concisely indicates the main points you will discuss, and the order in which you will discuss them. It should include what you'll prove, your argument, the scope, the main idea(s), and the purpose of the paper. You *should* give the "punchline" away in the beginning - your reader doesn't want to wait until your conclusion to find out what your paper is actually about.

The best way to think about your Introduction and Thesis Statement (arguably the foundation of your paper, as this is what tells your reader what they're getting in to) is to ask yourself two simple questions: "What?" and "So What?"

For Example: This paper revolves around media representations of sex workers in North America. Drawing on recent statistical data, I will show that sex workers in Canada and the United States have relatively low rates of HIV infection. In turn, I will suggest that one of the reasons that North American media coverage of sex workers is skewed revolves around the stigma associated with sex workers. As I engage in a brief review of recent sex-radical feminist literature, I will demonstrate how this stigma cannot be disassociated from erroneous assumptions that all sex

workers are helpless victims of pimps and poverty, as well as drug addiction, and are thus always at risk. Moreover, I will posit that this stigma is also linked to the good girl/bad girl binary which works to regulate female sexuality and separate women into divisive spheres. In sum, I will suggest that all women - regardless of their occupation or perceived place on the good girl/bad girl spectrum - can become infected with HIV if they engage in unsafe sex.

Note: This is a fluid step. As your essay progresses, you will rewrite it and rewrite it and rewrite it again.

8. Paragraph Structure

This is a tricky skill to master, and your own style will inevitably affect the way in which you make your arguments and elaborate upon your position. However, if you do get stuck, here's a surefire way of getting your point across:

- State the purpose of your paragraph or point;
- Elaborate in your own words;
- Provide a quote or example;
- Comment (Note: never leave a quotation, especially a block quote, hanging alone).

For example:

In contemporary society, girls tend to be divided according to the good girl/bad girl binary. Good girls dress appropriately, speak sweetly, and do not engage in sex outside of long-term romantic relationships. On the other hand, girls who enjoy many partners, who speak boldly about their exploits and appear comfortable in their sexuality are often, unfortunately, labeled "bad." Kim Nicolini explains that this binary works to keep women in separate antagonistic spheres:

nice girls need the slut to affirm their own purity and righteousness, to secure their place in the good girl community. If they call me a slut: it means they cannot be one.³

In short, the good girl bad girl binary is a patriarchal construct internalized by women who often use it against one another.

In many ways, each point that you make within the body of an essay is a mini-essay in itself. Keep reminding yourself of the "What?"/"So What?" of each step, and your paper will not only retain its focus and organization, it'll be strongly argued throughout.

9. Conclusion

Put simply, your conclusion restates your introduction in summation. It may seem redundant, but your reader actually does want a reminder once they get to the end of your work. Say what you've done, and avoid introducing new ideas (unless you are pointing to areas for future exploration). A conclusion is also the space for critiquing the concepts utilized in your essay, or acknowledging limitations of your particular study.

10. (Optional) Write a Postscript.

The postscript is a loose paragraph or two - related to your preface and to the body of writing you've just produced. What are your personal parting thoughts on the ideas you have just explored? What have you learned along the way? A postscript is a nice way of 'bookending' your work and creating a clean, complete package for submission.

11. Return to your Introduction. Possibly (probably) rewrite.

This is also a very important step. Make sure that your introduction and your conclusion match: make sure your intro says what it is you actually did, and make sure that what you did is stated in your intro.

12. Edit, edit, and edit again.

Use your spell checker (but don't rely on Microsoft to catch all of your errors!). Read it aloud (if it doesn't make sense to you, it won't make sense to your reader). Get a friend or a colleague (or a person on the bus) to read it - if you're doing feminist work, this could serve a dual purpose as both an editing job and a political act!

Pet Peeves and Best Advice

Pet Peeves

Big words - Unless you're absolutely, positively, unequivocally sure of the word's definition, opt for simple, clear language.

Cites/sights/sites or their/there/they're - Microsoft cannot tell the difference between homonyms. Don't rely solely on your spell checker!

It's = it is

A lot is two words.

Papers that obviously weren't re-read before submitted.

Advice

If a paragraph isn't working, move on to the next one. Chances are you'll come back to it and it'll be okay, or you'll decide to eliminate it.

If you find yourself really stuck, take a break. More often than not, a brisk walk or a half-hour sitcom can do more for your writing prowess than hours drinking coffee and staring at the screen can do.

Don't get too stressed! You're not the only one doing this assignment, and you're certainly not the only person to ever write an essay and have a tough time of it. Talk to your peers and your professors. Give draft versions of it to others to read if you're super-duper-anxious.

Give yourself time to edit!

Checklist

Download a Checklist for Essay Writing (PDF) at: <http://www.thirdspace.ca/chora/Checklist.pdf>

Don't get discouraged! Essay writing is a skill that is learned slowly, after a lot of time and a lot of practice. Once you've mastered the basics, you can move on to bending the rules!

Notes

¹ If you're looking for some excellent tips on "getting published," see Jenéa Tallentire's "*thirdspace* Guide to Getting Published" [<http://www.thirdspace.ca/chora/getpubd.htm>].

² A good rule is to avoid personal homepages (i.e. geocities, tripod) like the plague for your academic research, as their claims are unsubstantiated and do not abide by a legitimation or review process. If the website you're viewing is peer-reviewed, it should also provide you with a bibliographic citation for each article (see note 1, above). Also, sites with domains ending in .edu or .org are generally safe as well, and some (like www.statscan.ca) can provide you with the most up-to-date statistics available.

³ Kim Nicolini, "Staging the Slut: Hyper-Sexuality in Performance" *Bad Subjects* 20 (April 1995): 26 pars. (web), 5 pp. (print). [<http://eserver.org/bs/20/Nicolini.html>].