

## WRITING LONGER PAPERS

### A Cyclical Process

While short assignments may lend themselves to a linear strategy – first research, then writing, then revision – longer papers require a more fluid approach. Expect to move back and forth between these stages as you craft and sharpen your argument.

For example, you might read a few sources, take notes, then write a page or two comparing them, editing what you've written before returning to your sources, etc. It's fine to lack a specific thesis until you've done all your research; your thesis will be a result of this process rather than a precursor to it (and should reflect all of your evidence anyway).

In fact, think of your paper as having a “working thesis,” a potential thesis that is subject to change but can guide the development of your argument. Don't be afraid to revise this all the way through the final draft of your paper, in light of your continued writing, research, and revision.

### General Advice

Get started early. Long papers inevitably take time – you will be researching, writing, and revising continually. Doing so will ensure that you think about your project with the depth and complexity required of a long assignment, and that you remain engaged with your ideas.

It is natural to get stuck sometimes. Having trouble with writing? Try reading over what you've already written or reviewing your notes – you may come across something you hadn't yet considered. Feeling totally adrift? Speak to your advisor or a writing tutor – this is a collaborative process, and talking through your ideas can help you to make them more concrete. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is set things aside for awhile and recharge.

If the task of writing a longer paper seems overwhelming, think back to what you know about shorter papers. Basic research and writing skills will always serve you well. Use them to your advantage.

### Research

Select a topic that interests you. Your professor is the best resource for choosing something that is broad enough to discuss at length, but narrow enough to discuss in one paper. At this early point in the process, think of your topic as a question you're looking to answer, not a thesis you're trying to prove.

Look through class texts and their bibliographies for potential sources. If you're having trouble finding relevant sources, ask your advisor for suggestions. Read broadly – knowledge of opposing viewpoints will make for a stronger paper.

Take notes with writing in mind. Jot down quotes that appear important and record citations as you go. A well-organized and comprehensive set of notes will make your life much easier. Keep track of any organizational ideas, like potential connections between topics or similarities between arguments, that strike you during your research – these contain the seeds of your paper.

Remember that research is an ongoing commitment that will continue after you've started writing and is the key to a successful long paper.

### Drafting Your Paper

If you're having trouble coming up with an argument, think about how your notes relate to each other and try to draw interesting connections between them. This is the most effective way to produce a working thesis which you will continue to refine.

Start by writing the sections for which you have the most information, about which you have the most to say. You need not begin with the introduction and continue sequentially. Thinking about your paper in sections (regardless of whether or not you wind up dividing it that way) can help break up the work and make starting in the middle feel more natural.

Get down all that you are thinking – structural and stylistic concerns can wait. The basic organization of your paper will happen somewhat organically, depending on how your notes relate to one another and what elements you emphasize when putting them into writing. Think often about how to relate your different paragraphs to each other – what do you have to prove first?

Refining your thesis requires acknowledging counterarguments and weaknesses in what you may have originally thought you would argue. A more nuanced thesis will be more convincing and ultimately stronger than one that ignores relevant evidence for the sake of driving home one point. Because this is a longer paper, it's perfectly all right for your thesis to be more than one sentence.

Getting your paper to reflect your improved thesis will often require some rewriting and reshuffling: it's all part of the process. You should aim to have your entire paper reflect your thesis – if something doesn't quite fit in, then you probably want to modify your argument or remove that example.

Remember the cyclical process. Changes will beget further changes – more research will reveal an aspect of your topic you have not yet considered, rewriting one section will give you new ideas for rewriting another, or for adding a new section. All of this is natural, and will result in a stronger final product.

Your conclusion is a chance to think back on the work that you've done by drawing on broader ideas, discussing a related aspect of your topic, and/or exploring areas for possible future research.

### **Toward a Final Draft**

There is no rule for the number of drafts you should write. When you've gone through a few and feel that your paper is in a good spot, set it aside for a day. Return with fresh eyes and read it aloud. Your ear will catch incongruities that you might otherwise have missed.

Longer papers sometimes suffer from internal inconsistencies – each section's argument is cogent, but the whole does not quite cohere. To remedy this, approach the paper as a critic, trying to find logical holes and contradictions. Does each section explicitly follow that which preceded it, creating a clear overall argument that advances step by step? Have you anticipated counterarguments? In a longer paper, where there is space to do so, this is especially critical.

Remember that a paper can always profit from another reader. If possible, ask your advisor or a peer to review your writing. We hear the Writing Center is pretty good at that sort of thing too...