



Writing in College, by Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney 2: Preparing to write and drafting the paper

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 humanists 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 reading critically 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 *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.
- 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.
- 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.)
- On a piece of paper, jot down what you think are the central concepts that emerge from this analysis.
- To these central concepts attach subsidiary concepts. Use some sort of symbol to represent the kinds of relationship that the subsidiary concepts have to the central concepts and to one

another: cause and effect, similarity, contrast, more important-less important, earlier-later in time, and so on. Spend time playing with these relationships. Make lists of the central concepts, order and re-order them, find categories and subcategories

- Then create a working outline around topics suggested by your categories of evidence

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 even a dim 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 a detailed outline before you began to draft a paper. For some writers, that's good advice; for others it is not. Some writers can't begin writing until they have a detailed outline consisting of their main point and every subpoint, 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.

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

- Harlem Renaissance- art using experience to develop urban identity
- African-American art muffled in rural south.
- Migration north: transforming effect of urban life.
- Armstrong transforms mainstream song using folk and African elements.
- Significance of opposition to jazz
- Motley transforms painting with bold color, form and subject (stereotypes?)
- Clash of dignified vs. primitive

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. 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.

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.

Some research at Carnegie-Mellon University suggests why. A group of researchers created a passage on a technical subject and inserted into it problems of organization, sentence structure, clarity, etc.. They asked two groups of readers to read the passage and indicate where they had trouble understanding. One group, however, was given background reading in the subject of the passage before they read it. Which group was better able to identify those deliberately inserted problems? The readers *without* the background reading, of course: when the ones with the better knowledge hit a passage with errors, they were able to bring up from memory what they already knew. They didn't spot the errors in the writing because they were not relying on the writing to understand the ideas--they already understood. The ones without previous knowledge were much

more effective at spotting flaws because they were much more attentive to the text. They had to be--without the background reading, the only way they could understand the material was to concentrate on the text.

At the moment you finish writing something, who knows more about it than you do? When you re-read your own writing, you aren't really reading it; you're only reminding yourself of what you wanted to mean when you wrote it. That means two things:

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. To see our suggestions for revision, go to [**"A strategy for analyzing and revising a first draft."**](#)

[Writing in College Contents](#) [Writing Program Home](#)
[Download this page as a pdf](#)

Lawrence McEnerney is Director of the University of Chicago Writing Program. Joseph M. Williams (1933-2008) was Professor of English Language and Literature and the founder of the University of Chicago Writing Program.

Writing in College is licensed under a [**Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives**](#) license. You may use and share this essay and/or its chapters for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that you give credit to the authors (Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney) and reproduce this notice.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO WRITING PROGRAM
1116 EAST 59TH STREET
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60637

STUART 330 | (773) 834-6911 | (773) 702-2658
WRITING-PROGRAM@UCHICAGO.EDU