THREE

Writing “The Paper”

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What "The Paper" Is

Papers are chances to take care of
little pieces of your soul.

—Luke Reinsma, during a class I took from him

What's a "paper" in university? It depends (surprise!) on what your professor says, what class you're in, and what the assignment is.

If you're in a first-year writing or composition course, you'll probably be assigned what is often called a "research paper," or what we called a "paper from sources" in the "Genre" section of this book. In its most basic form, this is a piece of writing that will make a point about some issue related to the course. Your professor may give you a "topic" (this is a word I don't like, which I'll explain later), or you might have to choose your own.

This may feel, like many first-year writing assignments, a bit fake. In real life, you're almost never put in a situation where your boss at work, or whoever, says, "Write something!" And you ask, "What should I write?" And they say, "I don't care. Just make an argument about whether drugs should be legalized, or climate change, or something!"

If this is how you felt when you got your "paper" assignment, I'm sorry. When I was in college, I had a professor who told us that writing a paper was a chance to take care of a little piece of your soul, which is something I really liked. He was giving us the freedom to pursue something that might matter to us, to approach a problem that bothered us, to learn about something we wanted to learn more about. Ideally, any writing assignment will at least have some part of that in it.

So, here's how a paper – which from now on I will refer to in title case, as The Paper, to make it look more important – usually emerges:

1. You're studying a certain subject or academic discipline, or have at least done some readings about a certain issue or problem, in one of your courses.
2. You're given an assignment to write a longish text related to that subject or discipline or issue or problem. (The definition of *longish* varies. The Paper is usually more than two or three pages. In some courses, it may be around four or five pages, or 1,000 to 2,000 words; in others, especially in your upper-year courses, you may get up into the eight- or ten- or fifteen-page territory.) This assignment usually comes in the second half of a course and is usually one of the final assignments you turn in, often for a large chunk of your grade.

3. Usually for this assignment, you need to do more reading about the specific thing you're writing about. Your professor might have a handful of readings you're meant to draw from; more often, you may have to find these on your own.
4. You need to figure out how to write about the thing in a way that expresses a position or stance or argument (that is, your "original" idea, in some way) by using or drawing on the texts you read in step no. 3 or no. 1 or both.
5. You need to find a way to make The Paper coherent and cohesive – one whole thing rather than a lot of little unrelated parts or a list of semi-related points or ideas.

Numbers 1 and 2 are pretty simple, and the course you're in will usually prepare you for them well. Numbers 3, 4, and 5 are a bit more complicated. We'll review them in the coming sections.

TL;DR: In a lot of classes, you have to write a long paper that uses academic articles, books, or book chapters as sources to make a somewhat original point about something related to the class.

Structure

Tell 'em what you're gonna tell them. Tell 'em.
Tell 'em what you told 'em.

—Mr. Ulmen, my Grade 7 English teacher
(and probably thousands of teachers throughout history)

Make the Paper Do What You Say It's Going to Do

We've already talked about genre, and this is the part of the book where I should tell you about some different genres or types of The Paper. I'm not sure I really want to do this, however. Usually, a book like this would list different types of papers you could write, with different structures:

- *argumentation:* trying to prove a point or persuade the reader that something is true
- *comparison:* showing how two things are alike or different
- *cause and effect:* explaining the cause(s) of something
- *problem and solution:* proposing and evaluating various solutions to a particular problem

- *narrative:* telling a story about something
- *exposition:* explaining or offering information about some phenomenon.

These can be helpful ways to think about different purposes your paper might have, but I'm not going to go into detail about each of them, for a few reasons.

First, The Paper is not a stable enough genre for me to be able to break it down into all these different categories and tell you how to write each one. People who teach writing classes, or classes that involve writing a paper, have many different opinions about how to write The Paper and what it should include.

For example, I don't really think cause and effect is a real genre; I think it's actually just an argumentative paper, because the purpose of a cause-and-effect paper is to persuade a reader that Thing B has various causes: X, Y, and Z. In a way, they're all just argumentative papers, because usually the purpose of The Paper is to make a point about something that the reader might not have known or believed or considered before.

But even good argumentative papers shouldn't really be argumentative in the "let's fight with words" way that our culture, especially on the internet, seems to demand.

I think we would all be better writers, and just better people, if we could tone down what the rhetoric scholar Robert Connors (and others) calls "agonistic" writing –

that kind of hardcore "debate" style that looks to score points and win arguments by crushing the loser with a deadly blow of reasoning. We could instead embrace what he (and others) call the "irenic" style, one that attempts to do its persuasion by means of consensus-building and seeking peace. But maybe that's just me.

My other reasons for not giving you cheat sheets for these different genres or structures is that they're overly simplistic. I don't think I've ever really seen a good academic paper I would categorize as only argumentative, or only comparative, and so on.

Honestly, I still believe the basic structure of most academic papers is as simple as my Grade 7 English teacher, Mr. Ulmen, taught us:

1. Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em.
2. Tell 'em.
3. Tell 'em what you told 'em.

I often tell students that they can organize their papers however they want, as long as they have declared a clear purpose, and the paper makes good on the declared purpose. I think of this as the paper following its own "internal logic."

What does that mean? Of course, the things you write about should all be related to the thesis statement, and we'll talk more about this soon. But on an even more surface level, I really think you should come out and declare

things clearly and obviously. You don't have to say it exactly this way, but I honestly think papers should say something like this:

My purpose in writing this paper is to explain why [Thing X] has been misunderstood by people who believe [Idea Y], and how current research in [Discipline C] clearly shows that [Thing Y is wrong and Idea Z makes more sense]. First, I'll explain the history of [Thing X] and how historical and cultural influences have made it the way it is. Then I'll explore the debates and disagreements between [people who believe Idea Y and people who believe Idea Z]. I'll also show how [Idea Z] can help us solve [Problems A and B with Thing X] and gives us hopeful new ideas for how to deal with [Thing X] in the future, even as [Problems A and B, and even possible New Problems D and E] exist.

I just made this structure up. You may not want to write about something that is misunderstood, or its history, or the other things I wrote. And, of course, all the stuff with letters would be real things in a real paper. But what I want to draw your attention to here is laying out all your cards on the table for the reader – give a clear map or blueprint or plan of what you plan to do in the paper and make sure you go on to follow it. We'll talk more about this later.

TL;DR: The Paper can have many different purposes and structures, but as long as you explain what you're going to do and actually follow through on it, you should be OK.

Creating an Outline (If You Want To)

You don't always *need* to write an outline, but sometimes your professor will ask you to. Use this as an opportunity to do some work that will help you organize your thoughts and help your instructor know what you plan to write about so they can offer you some advice.

If you *do* do an outline, you need to have done a lot of reading, because the outline needs to offer some idea of both the content and structure of your paper.

In terms of content, it's important to have some idea of what you want to say, rather than just an outline that says, "First, I'll introduce something, then make a point about it, then make another point about it, and then conclude the paper." That doesn't really help you plan your paper, or help your prof help you.

There are a lot of ways to structure a paper, and you shouldn't feel tied to a specific one. Many people are used to Intro | Three-Paragraph Body | Conclusion, which can be OK, but it is equally fine to have just two body paragraphs for a short paper, or seven or ten or more for a longer paper. The important thing is that every part of The Paper needs to clearly feel like it's related to the stated purpose of The Paper, which is usually the thesis statement.

Don't worry about making your outline perfect, and don't feel you absolutely must stick to it. If something you planned to write about in your outline isn't working, you can abandon it once you start writing.

TL;DR: An outline is a map of your paper, and it can help you make sure that everything in the paper fits together well. The more detailed it is, the more it will help.

Topic

[Students] have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline.

—Donald Bartholomae, "Inventing the University"

Moving from a Topic to a Question

In some guides to academic writing, they call the first stage of the writing process – the part where you figure out what to write about – "invention."

This term has never quite made sense to me, because when you're starting university, you usually don't have much freedom to just *invent* something to write about out of thin air. More often than not, your instructor will have some guidelines regarding what it is you're meant to write about.

A lot of people call this your "topic," but I also don't think this term is useful.

The main reason I don't like *topics* is that this term encourages us to oversimplify things. People tend to talk about topics in extremely broad and nonspecific language.

So if your topic is, I don't know, climate change, and you're not sure where to begin, you'll type *climate change* into a search engine or database and get 1,620,000,000 results and still have no idea where to begin. Plus, what can you learn or discover or explain about the generic topic of climate change that can't be done in a five-minute skim of a Wikipedia page? "The climate is changing because of pollution, which is bad." Ten words. Now what?

Also, when you start searching for resources, you might get a bunch of results from different perspectives. If your topic is global pandemics (something pretty much everyone in the world was interested in when I started writing this book, and something we'll all probably be interested in for years to come) and you type some relevant terms into an academic database, you might find information from medical researchers, virologists, epidemiologists, sociologists, psychologists, and historians. Do you need all of these perspectives? They're definitely all valuable in their own way, but it's also possible that trying to cram them all into a paper will result in something confusing and incoherent, and you might end up with too many different conversations with too many different audiences. Plus, your history professor might not think you need to cite the virologists, and your biology professor might not think you need to cite the historians.

So the problem with thinking about topics is that topics can be vague, confusing, and, often, just bland and boring.

Instead, try to think of your paper as addressing a *problem* or a *question* that you can answer in the scope of a few (or however many) pages.

If you find that you have to start with a big topic, try to focus on a small part of it, and find an interesting question you can ask about that small part. Narrow and narrow and narrow down your idea for a paper. Use your own experience, interests, and desires to hone in on a tiny little piece of a bigger issue.

Let's look at an example of narrowing:

Big, boring, generic topic: **language and society**

ϟ It's unlikely you'll get a topic *this* broad on an assignment, but I had to pick one I know something about.

Narrower: **the use of Chinese in North America**

ϟ This is already way better. We have a pretty good idea of what we're focusing on now, although there are still a lot of different angles one could take: Is this going to be a paper about the teaching of Chinese at American schools and colleges? Or bilingualism in the Chinese Canadian community? Or the linguistic landscape of airports that use English, Chinese, French, and other languages on signs? Those are just a few possibilities. We need to keep narrowing.

***Narrower still:* bilingual Chinese-English education programs in western Canada**

ϟ OK, we're getting pretty specific now, and this is starting to sound interesting. Still, depending on what course this paper is for, there are still some different approaches we might take. Do you want to talk about teaching methods? Do you want to say something about equity and access to language education for people from different backgrounds? Do you want to compare historical influences on British Columbia's and Alberta's education systems?

Now let's turn the narrower topic into an answerable question. Not all of these are going to be great – I'm just throwing out ideas at this point.

- What is the history of bilingual education in British Columbia, and how does Chinese fit into it?
- What teaching methods do bilingual kindergarten teachers use in Canada?
- How has Alberta handled the demand for Chinese and other languages in its bilingual education programs?
- How are French-language education and Chinese-language education different and/or similar in British Columbia?

I don't know how to find the answers to these questions yet. But if I *have* a question, I'm ready to start trying to figure out how I can answer it.

TL;DR: Try not to start with a big, broad, generic "topic" for your paper but think instead of a problem you'd like to solve or a question you'd like to answer.

Sources

Writing from sources is what we do in university.

—Doug Brent, "The Research Paper
and Why We Should Still Care"

At some point during the writing of The Paper, you'll probably need to do your own digging for sources.

As usual, your first course of action should be checking the parameters of the assignment. Reread the directions carefully, and if you're still not clear, ask a classmate, a TA, or writing centre tutor, or someone you trust who's an academic "insider" – that is, someone who knows the game of writing for university and ideally knows something about the area you're writing in. In some cases, your prof might have parameters like telling you to only use certain journals, or certain databases, when you look for sources.

Tips on Finding Sources

There are two places you might look: your university's library website and Google Scholar. They both work OK, but Google Scholar is likely to be more familiar to you at

first. However, Google changed its motto from "Don't Be Evil" to something else in 2015, which should tell you something. And I assume your university library is not a giant for-profit corporation whose main goal is collecting personal information about you in order to sell advertising, but that's not the point.

Here's the problem you're going to run into, Google or no Google: TOO MUCH INFORMATION. Seriously. Scholarly publishing has exploded in the last twenty or thirty years, and no one can keep up with all the published research in any field anymore. It's simply not possible to read even a tiny fraction of what is published in any area in any given year. The best most of us can do is to read important foundational texts in our fields and to keep up with some of the best-known and most well-respected academic journals that cover our disciplines, and even that is not easy.

To make matters worse, there has also been an explosion of poor-quality academic research. It's too complicated to explain the reasons why here, but there are thousands of poorly written, poorly argued, and inaccurate academic articles available in any keyword search you might be interested in, and it can be hard to spot them. (More on this later.)

What should you do when faced with this firehose of information? Here are some rules that are not always 100 percent accurate but should help:

- *Make sure your sources are recent, usually within the last ten or twenty years.* It's different if your assignment requires you to do historical or archival research, of course, and in some cases, you'll need to read older texts in order to understand historical perspectives on the phenomena you're studying, but it's important to know what the important issues are in the area *currently.*
- *Make sure most of your sources are academic.* Hot tip: If you're going to Google, use Google Scholar (scholar.google.com) not regular Google (google.com) – always! What makes a source "academic"? According to Wikipedia, an academic publication is one "in which scholarship relating to a particular academic discipline is published." Usually, these are academic journals or books, but sometimes they can be things like preprint repositories, which are websites that host papers written by researchers before they're published in academic journals (a site called arXiv is a popular example of this). Some nonacademic sources from credible institutions are often OK: the *New York Times* or a university-affiliated website or a well-known think tank would be all right, as long as they are balanced out by other academic sources. A random teenager's TikTok account would not be a good source to use in a research paper.

- *Use a lot of different combinations of keywords in your searches.* Your first idea for a search term might not be the word experts in that area use. *Cheating* is one way to talk about something, but *academic dishonesty* or *academic misconduct* or *academic integrity* might get you further. Try to figure out what the people who research this thing call it. Oh, and if your keywords are a phrase, be sure to put them all inside quotation marks.
- *Read titles and skim abstracts and reference lists.* Find which articles look interesting or relevant from their titles, then read their abstracts to see if they fit what you're looking for. Read *a lot* of abstracts. Read, like, fifteen or twenty, even if you're only looking for three or four good sources. Skim the reference lists of articles that you like, and look up a few articles with interesting titles. Repeat this until you've got as many good-quality articles as you can handle reading, or at least skimming.
- *Make sure the journals you're looking at are part of the conversation your professor wants you to be learning about.* This can be hard to do. If you're in an education course that takes a more qualitative, social approach to student well-being, you might not want to look for many articles that take a more quantitative, "hard numbers" approach to student success. In addition,

you need to watch out for journals that are outside the mainstream academic conversation your professor is hoping to teach you about. This is such a tricky thing to navigate that the next section is going to deal with it in more detail.

TL;DR: Try to find a lot of high-quality, recent journal articles that are relevant to the thing you're writing about.

Tips on Making Sure Your Sources Are Credible

Credibility just means whether a source can be believed or trusted – in this case, in an academic context. There are two problems you might run into when it comes to credibility:

- finding sources that seem relevant to what you want to write about but that are not appropriate for an academic paper
- finding sources that seem relevant to what you want to talk about and seem to be from legitimate academic publishers but are actually from low-quality or scam publications.

The first one is simpler to talk about. For a few reasons, there are some kinds of sources that aren't used in academic writing. For example, a tabloid newspaper like the

Daily Mail has a bad reputation for publishing sensational celebrity gossip that may or may not be true. Similarly, it usually isn't OK to use a random person's blog, personal website, or social media account as a source to prove a point or as evidence that something you're writing about is true. Even more trustworthy media sources like newspapers, magazines, or news websites aren't usually the main sources used in academic writing, though they certainly can be used in some disciplines. Why is this?

In the academic world, the currency of credibility is something we call "peer review." It isn't perfect, but it helps to assure the quality and trustworthiness of the knowledge produced by research. This is how the peer review process works:

1. A researcher engages in a project according to the standards of their discipline (we get trained on how to do this, often for years).
2. They write about what they learned in their project.
3. They submit the article or book they wrote to an academic journal or book publisher.
4. The publisher sends the article or book out to two, three, or four respected scholars who work in the same field as the researcher – almost always without the researcher's name on it, so they can judge it fairly – and those people write reviews. They evaluate things

like whether the research methods were followed correctly, whether the theory the researcher used makes sense, whether the conclusions they came to make sense, and whether the claims they make about the thing they studied are warranted.

This process isn't always 100 percent perfect. Every once in a while, someone submits a fake article as a joke, and it gets published, and every once in a while, there are big disagreements among scholars about whether a paper was really good enough to be published. But the process goes a long way in making sure that the research published is done well, and in good faith, and can be trusted. Peer-reviewed papers and books written by scholars who work at well-known, respected universities throughout the world tend to be the types of conversations your own professors are involved in, and they tend to produce the type of knowledge that they hope you'll learn.

The reason I keep saying "Google Scholar, not regular Google" is that if you use regular Google, you'll get a ton of resources that look relevant and useful but are not peer reviewed and are generally not used by specialists, researchers, and scholars in the area you're learning about. This doesn't mean that the information in those sources is always bad (sometimes it is, though!). It just means it's not part of that academic conversation we talked about.

There's also another, newer problem with credibility, which is that in the last ten years or so there are hundreds and hundreds of new academic journals that *aren't* credible, for a few reasons:

- Some journals exploit writers, charging high fees to scholars who are desperate to publish their work.
- Some of those journals don't have good peer review practices and publish almost anything, even if it's total garbage.
- Some of those journals misrepresent their location, who their editors are, and other such things in order to seem more "international" than they really are.
- Some newer journals, even if they're more credible and are not attempting to just make money off writers, have lower standards than others and might publish work that is poorly written or poorly researched.

I don't have a foolproof solution about how to tell a scam journal from a good journal. My suggestions would be this. If an article has a lot of citations, chances are it's worth at least looking at. You can see this on Google Scholar underneath the info about the article on the search page – it will say "cited by 4" or "cited by 853," etc. But don't always accept an article's credibility at face value. If something seems "off," like the website is poorly designed or there are a lot of language mistakes in the

article, it might not be trustworthy. When in doubt, ask an academic "insider" for some advice.

TL;DR: Peer-reviewed academic texts are mainly what you should use for sources. However, there are some low-quality academic articles out there, so you've got to be careful.

How to Use Sources Once You've Found Them

We've already talked about how to paraphrase and quote other texts, but what does it actually mean to "use" the three or four or fifteen (or whatever) sources you've found and have been reading for your paper?

Sometimes it's easier to say what *not* to do. There are two extremes that people tend to fall into.

Quote mining. This is where you skim through a reading until you find a sentence or phrase that looks like it supports whatever you already believe, and you pluck it out and drop it into your paper without really explaining it. Then you do this again with four or five more sources. You're left with a paper that's really just a bunch of stuff you made up without thinking too much, and without much real support aside from a few awkwardly shoved-in quotes.

Accidentally writing a literature review. This is where you write a bunch of summaries of academic texts when

the assignment *isn't* a literature review. (A literature review, which is a comprehensive series of summaries of relevant articles about a given subject, is usually more of an upper-year or grad school assignment.) The problem here is that your paper is no longer thesis-driven. It becomes a list of summaries of every reading you did but with an introduction and a conclusion slapped on either end. Unlike the quote-mining paper, the accidental literature review has almost *none* of your own ideas in it.

Instead of falling into these extremes, a paper that uses its sources well will look like the product of an encounter between you and the texts you've read. You come to a topic (or idea or problem) with an interest in it and some ideas about what you might want to say, but you allow the texts you read to shape your understanding, and you enter into a kind of conversation with them – a conversation guided by a purpose you choose, even though it may change as you write. Think of the process looking this way:

1. You've got an initial idea of what you want to write about, because you've already done the course readings and taken notes on them, and you've got a problem or question or even something resembling a thesis statement.
2. You find some more relevant sources and read them while taking notes.

3 You think about what you read and allow it to help you edit or change your thesis statement.

4 You start writing about the thing you want to say, and as you explain and expand on your points, you summarize and paraphrase parts of the sources that add something meaningful to your point.

5 As you write, you allow the stuff in the readings to influence and change your main points, arguments, and ideas. Maybe you start thinking one thing and realize it's more complicated or different than you thought, so your paper changes as a result. This is a good thing – in fact, it's the whole point. In the process of reading and writing, you're also learning and thinking.

TL;DR: Your paper should be driven by your own ideas and purposes, employing a combination of quotes, paraphrases, and references to other texts that help to make sense of what you're saying. This is not always easy to do well, and you'll change what you write, and what you think, as you go.

Thesis Statements

The defining characteristics of a high quality thesis statement seem arbitrary and subjective.

—Daniel Chang, "What's within a Thesis Statement?"

Explaining Your Point in One Sentence

Thesis statements are another one of those things that everyone thinks are important but that people have trouble defining. Usually, a thesis statement is the final sentence of The Paper's introduction, and it expresses the main focus of the paper as a whole.

The Paper is almost always thesis-driven, meaning that it has a clearly defined main purpose, something it's trying to do. (Well, something *you,* the writer, are trying to do.)

As we've discussed, usually that thing is referred to as "making an argument" or "proving a point" or otherwise persuading a reader about something. Remember, this doesn't have to be a capital-A argument of the "I'm right, and you're stupid" variety. Often, the thesis is more complex than a simple black-or-white argument.

The thesis statement can be the outcome of the narrowing process I described in the "Topic" section. Let's try that again, but instead of coming up with a question, let's try to answer it by creating a thesis statement. We will start with an overly simple statement, using one of my favourite issues, academic integrity. I'm going to try to write a series of thesis statements starting with general, vague, bad ones and gradually make them better using my own interests and what I've learned by skimming relevant readings.

BAD **Academic integrity is important.**
ϟ Too general.

STILL BAD **Academic integrity is important for universities today.**
ϟ Still not good but at least it provides some context.

NOT GREAT **Universities should not harshly punish students who violate academic integrity.**
ϟ At least it shows a strong position on the issue.

BETTER **Universities should be more specific about how they define academic integrity violations.**
ϟ Getting more specific now.

EVEN BETTER **University policies need to more clearly define plagiarism so students are not unfairly punished for making mistakes.**

⚡ Still uses somewhat generic language.

REALLY GOOD **Universities need clearer policies about how plagiarism is defined, and they need to take a teaching-oriented approach to dealing with cases of plagiarism rather than a punishment-oriented approach. Most plagiarism cases are the result of ignorance of the norms of academic communication rather than intentionally deceptive violations of the rules.**

⚡ Clear context, stance, reasoning, and specificity.

You don't have to know exactly what your thesis statement is when you start writing, but doing something like this at the beginning of the process will help. You will probably change it as you continue to read and write, and that's OK.

⚡ **TL;DR:** The thesis statement comes at the end of your first paragraph (that is, the introduction) and is a single sentence that says what your paper is about as clearly as possible.

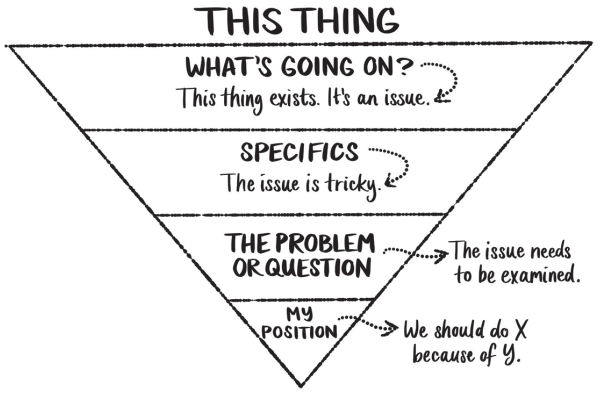
Introductions

I don't know where to begin.

—Death Cab for Cutie, "No Room in Frame"

How to Begin

The introduction is the first paragraph of The Paper, and it offers a general-to-specific explanation of the things you're going to be writing about. Usually, your introduction should function like an upside-down triangle, with the wide part at the top representing general information about the broad domain or topic the paper will touch on, and the point at the bottom representing the specific area of your focus. Here's a generic version of what it could look like. (Bonus: the whole intro looks like a big arrow pointing to the rest of your paper, which is kind of what it is!)



There are other ways to do it, but you can't go wrong with this. For the fat part of the triangle at the top, though, don't start with a dictionary definition. Professors hate that.

The last part of the introduction paragraph should usually include the thesis statement and/or a brief sketch of the structure of the paper – like a blueprint or a map of what the reader can expect.

As mentioned earlier, I really believe this second point is the most important part of the paper. If this sketch is wrong, the whole paper will seem like it didn't do what it was supposed to. It's got to actually match what comes in the rest of the paper. If it doesn't, you'll have to either change this part or change the rest of the paper.

TL;DR: Move from general to specific in an introduction and end with a thesis statement and a map of where the paper is going to go.

Paragraphs

Putting Together Sentences

The paragraphs in the middle of The Paper are usually called "body paragraphs." I don't know why.

A paragraph is just a bunch of sentences about a particular thing, put together. It doesn't really matter how long a paragraph is, but in an academic paper, if you're under about three sentences, they usually look too short, and if you're over about ten, they look too long. (A paragraph that is longer than a page is almost never a good idea. It's too easy for a reader to get lost without the visual cues of indentation when a new idea begins.) The sentences in a paragraph should be related in some way; the sentence at the beginning of the paragraph usually sums up the basic idea of the paragraph – this is called the "topic sentence." It helps to think of the topic sentence as a mini-thesis statement, since it should relate back to your overall thesis statement in some way.

Paragraphs are useful for signalling to your reader where you're going with your ideas. Breaking up text into visually readable chunks is even more important to readers today than, say, thirty years ago. In fact, the expression

TL;DR (remember?) is most often used in order to summarize giant paragraphs of text no one wants to read on the internet.

If we had to come up with a formula for where paragraph breaks should go, it would be something like this:

There have already been a lot of
sentences in this paragraph
+
it looks like a new idea of
some kind is starting now
=
paragraph break.

It depends on your prof's guidelines, but usually you'll want to create paragraphs by indenting and *not* putting a line space between paragraphs. And don't do both; it looks weird.

Use the "tab" key on your computer keyboard to indent and make a paragraph break. Do not create indentations by hitting the space bar a bunch of times. It'll really mess everything up.

You might have written five-paragraph essays in high school, but it doesn't matter how many body paragraphs there are in a paper. There could be two or three or seven or eighteen depending on the requirements of the assignment and the purpose of the paper. It just matters that

your paragraphs make points that are directly related to the paper's overall purpose as laid out in the thesis statement. Some people say you need to have a separate paragraph that introduces a "counterargument," but if you're writing in such a way that you're always in "conversation" with your sources, I don't think this is necessary (unless your instructor has really specific requirements).

TL;DR: Paragraphs are collections of related sentences and shouldn't be too long. You can have as many as you want as long as they're clearly related to the paper's overall purpose.

Conclusions

How to End

Conclusions aren't easy to write. Somehow it seems hard to sum up everything you've said so far in a meaningful way without repeating yourself or seeming overly self-important. I hate writing conclusions so much that I usually don't even label anything "conclusion" when I write an academic article, and I hope no one notices. But a piece of writing has to end somewhere.

Usually, a conclusion is a paragraph (or several paragraphs, in a longer paper) that does two things.

Summarize. A conclusion reminds readers about what you just said in the paper. It can be hard to do this without repeating yourself, but if you use some strategies that we talk about in the sections on paraphrasing and cohesion, you should be able to get through this with just a bit of language reuse. The goal is to re-emphasize your main points and purpose.

Synthesize. A conclusion makes it all come to some new, final, emerging insight. (Don't introduce brand new

evidence or examples or supporting information, though.) It's like the flower that grows out of the dirt of the paper, or, to continue the plant metaphor, the garden that grows from the soil of the rest of the paper. It's made of the same stuff, but it emerges as something new. You might also think of synthesis sentences as answering questions like these:

- So what?
- Who cares?
- What should happen next, given [everything I said in this paper]?
- Given [everything I said in this paper], what is important to know or do?
- What should people who just read this paper be thinking about now?

You can think of the end of the paper as a kind of call to action. You don't have to be super dramatic about it, but try to show your readers why what you wrote might matter in the real world. It doesn't even have to be a real action – it can just be a suggestion for them to think more carefully about something.

Here are a few examples of conclusions I wrote when I was a student – I'll give you the last sentence or two of three papers. I'm not going to promise that they're perfect, but I got OK grades.

Augustine's *Confessions* do just what they set out to accomplish: we learn by Augustine's example. In his spiritual journey we can see more clearly our own.

ϟ I wrote this as a first-year undergraduate, and it seems OK. I can see how a reader might be intrigued about this and want to read the book.

For the sake of our students, a conversation must begin among ESL writing teachers, researchers, and administrators about how we understand the concept of culture and whether traditional understandings are adequate. We must begin to change. The world has.

ϟ This is the final section of my master's thesis. I'll be honest, it's pretty cringe. It's unnecessarily dramatic. Yet I do think it's doing something a conclusion should: giving one final push to the reader that says, "You should care about this!"

China remains one of the most important centres of language teaching and learning in the world, and the future will bring new innovations in the way foreign teachers are integrated into its massive project of English education.

ϟ I wrote this as a PhD student, and I think it's pretty good – it's a lot less dramatic than the above, and it seems like it would make readers interested in learning

more about what's going to happen in the near future in this area.

TL;DR: The conclusion should remind readers of your main points without repeating them exactly or introducing new information, and it should leave them with a sense of why what you said matters.

Flow

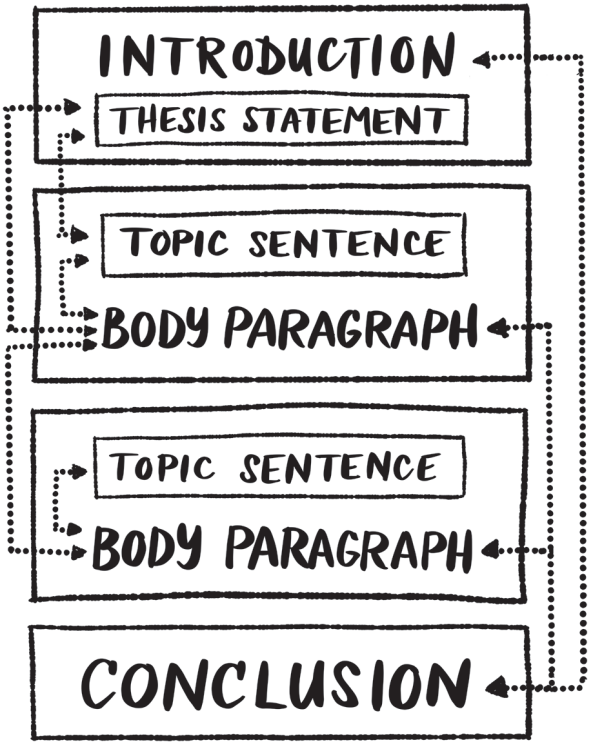
Coherence and Cohesion

When I ask people what good writing should do, they usually say it should "flow." When I ask them what *flow* means, they usually have no idea how to answer.

What they're really talking about are coherence and cohesion.

Coherence is how all the parts of a piece of writing fit together at the big-picture level. Does the intro match the body? Does each paragraph seem related to the thesis? Does the conclusion wrap everything up? And so on. This is easier to get right than cohesion because you can look at a paragraph and say to yourself, "Oh, I can see that this paragraph talks about something unrelated to what I said the paper was going to be about in the introduction. I better change it."

In most of my classes, I draw something that looks like this on the board (this looks better, though, because I asked a professional illustrator to draw it):



Notice that all of the arrows point in two directions. All of these things should in some way point to each other. The thesis should point toward each paragraph's topic sentence, which should point back to the thesis. Each topic sentence should prepare the reader for the rest of the paragraph; each sentence in a body paragraph should point back to its topic sentence. The conclusion should point back to the body and the thesis. And so on.

Cohesion is how well the parts hang together at the sentence and word level. This is probably what most people think of as flow.

There are two main ways to create cohesion.

The first way is to use a lot of words that refer to other words in your text and be clear about what they refer to. This way of flowing has to do with the *meanings of words.* Pronouns like *it, that,* and *this* will point your reader to other things in your text and make the flow stronger – *if* you're clear about what "this" and "that" are. (Usually, the closest noun or phrase that comes before one of these words is what it refers to.) You can also use synonyms to do this. (Like, if your paper is about academic dishonesty, you can use words like *academic misconduct, cheating, academic integrity,* and so on throughout the paper.)

The second way is to use more traditional conjunction or "connector" words and phrases. This might be what you think of as "transition" words. This way of flowing has to do with words that are more about the structure of sentences. You should learn a lot of these and learn the differences between them. They include conjunction words like *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so* and phrases like *furthermore, nevertheless, anyway, instead, besides, as a result of, instead of, in addition to, therefore, on the contrary, as a result, in addition, because of,* and so on. There are a lot. Getting to know them and using a wide variety of them is important.

Another Note on Transitions

You can use obvious "transition words" at the beginning of paragraphs, and those will work OK. The really, really obvious ones sometimes feel tired and overused, though. I don't usually recommend starting each paragraph with "firstly," "secondly," "thirdly" and so on, and I don't usually think a conclusion should start with "In conclusion." It's not wrong to do this, but I always encourage people to use the actual content of what they're writing about to make transitions rather than relying on these types of words.

Let me give a quick example from one of the papers I quoted in the "Conclusions" section. It's the final sentence of one paragraph and the beginning of the next one:

Maley (1983) comments on other difficulties, like unrealistic expectations of both foreign teachers and their employers, isolation of foreign teachers, and lack of detailed information about foreign teachers' objectives.

The number of foreign English teachers in China continues to grow, yet the difficulties that Maley first noticed in the early eighties continue to be common for foreign teachers in China today.

Note that the paragraph doesn't start with an obvious transition word, but does repeat a number of words from the previous sentence – *foreign teachers, difficulties,* and

Maley (the scholar I quote in the previous paragraph). It also makes a shift in the time frame discussed – the first paragraph quotes a paper from 1983, and the new paragraph mentions that year, as well as things happening "today" – that is, now, when I was writing the paper. With little things like this, you can usually avoid overly relying on those classic (overused) transition words.

TL;DR: Flow means coherence and cohesion, which are largely done by using words that point to other words in your text.

Making Changes

The only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts.

—Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

Rewriting and Editing

You should always assume that the first draft you pound out is going to be, more or less, garbage.

Sorry. It's this way for everyone, even really good writers.

I heard once that the word *draft* often has different a meaning for students than professors:

- *Student:* A draft is not quite finished – maybe missing a body paragraph and a conclusion, no references, no in-text citations, some parts are just notes jotted down to yourself, some parts are cut-and-pasted excerpts from articles you read that you plan to paraphrase later. You're hoping to get some feedback about what to write next or just buy some time until you sit down to really finish.

- *Prof:* A draft is a complete, turned-in paper with references and citations, maybe already proofread once or twice by the student, that will eventually be significantly changed and rewritten, even though the student already worked really hard on it and it looks finished.

Whatever your draft looks like, *revision* (also known as *rewriting*) is one of the most important parts of writing The Paper. For most writers, this is where 50 to 70 percent of the actual stuff you see in the finished paper happens.

Hopefully, you'll get some good feedback from your professor or TA (or a friend or two, or someone in the writing centre, etc.), and then have enough time to put the paper away and not think about it for a few days, and then come back to it with fresh eyes (re-vision, literally!).

Even if your prof doesn't ask for a draft, I highly, highly, *highly,* HIGHLY recommend doing some version of what I said in the last paragraph. You should assume you'll make *many* major changes to your paper during the revision process. Maybe you'll remove or rearrange whole paragraphs, delete or add multiple sentences, rearrange huge chunks, make the introduction the conclusion and write a new introduction – whatever works.

Editing and Proofreading

Revising is different from what we call "editing" or "proofreading." (These things have official definitions used by

professional editors, but we'll talk about the more general way these words are used in academic writing.) Revising is making radical changes to the content of the paper; it's basically the same thing as writing – just, you know, more of it.

What many people call editing or proofreading involves making the final finishing touches, where you make sure everything is working right – grammar, punctuation, citations, precise and correct word choices, formatting. You won't catch everything when you do this, but 95 percent of the time there will be obvious mistakes you didn't notice at first that you'll catch if you go over it one last time.

Some general tips for editing:

- Have someone else do it.
- Be aware of issues that challenge you (verb tenses? commas? subject-verb agreement?) and read the paper through once just paying attention to those specific issues.
- Once you're satisfied with the coherence, try reading backwards, sentence-by-sentence, to look for errors at the sentence level.

TL;DR: Your paper probably will and should change a lot from the first draft to the last. It's best to write, put it aside for a bit, and then come back to rewrite. Be sure to check for errors (and/or have someone else do it) before you turn something in.