18 January 2025

Outline

The Writing Process

*Read a text*: And then read it again.

*Identify a problem, ask a question*: Identify some quirks, quandaries, contradictions, gray areas, moments that run counter to expectation, etc. in your text—a problem that demands interpretation. The writing process begins not with a point that you want to make but with a question that you want to investigate.

*Identify your topic*: Articulate what specifically you are going to interpret. Identify, collect, and organize your evidence: Identify the places in the text that you will need to look in order to answer that question. You don’t need an interpretation; you just need a clear understanding of the information that needs interpretation: Just the facts, ma’am. Make a list of all of the relevant places in your text. Maybe make a timeline or chart of information related to your topic. Identify the passage that is the most-important place to look for answering your question.

*Analyze your evidence*: Start with your key passage. Do an explication, making as many observations about that key evidence as possible. How might an observation or set of observations about your key evidence unlock and elucidate the rest of the text? Consider making a conceptual map of your ideas about your evidence in which you visualize the structure of your idea about the material.

*Write out an argument*: If you make a conceptual map, writing it out in words should be fairly easy. Simply narrate the parts and progression of your analysis in, say, 300-600 words. We’ll call this an “argument statement,” which is different from a “thesis statement.”

*Draft a working thesis*: The sequence of ideas that led you to an important insight about the text is your argument. Your thesis is the one- or two-sentence main claim about your text that you want your reader to accept because it is true. It is true, but it isn’t obvious. If a thesis is obvious, then we don’t need you to write a paper arguing it. A thesis that is obvious is just as bad as a thesis that isn’t true (well, not quite as bad).

*Develop your implications*: Articulate the pay-off of your argument, which should illustrate its value. Do so by asking, What can we do with the knowledge created by my argument?

*Identify, find, and collect your scholarship*: Search for, find, and collect scholarship that has addressed your topic or similar topics. Download, print, or make copies or scans of all sources so that you will always have access to them.

*Read the scholarship*: Read through the scholarly books and articles you have collected. Create an annotated bibliography that summarizes each source you examine. Analyze your scholarship: Consider the relationship between your understanding of your topic (i.e., your working thesis) and the scholarship, not to change your ideas to match those of the published scholars, but to mark out where you might make an original contribution to the academic conversation. Are there any gaps in the scholarship?

*Reconsider your evidence and analyses*: Based on your collection, reading, and analysis of the scholarship on your topic and text(s), revisit the information you have collected and the analyses you have conducted to make your interpretation as complete and accurate as possible.

*Revise your thesis*: Based on your revised information and analyses, revisit your working thesis, revising it so that it is as complete and accurate an account of your interpretation as possible.

NOTE: Everything up to this point has been about how to develop a good argument; everything that follows is about how to present that argument effectively in a paper.

*Make a basic outline*: You now know the thesis that your entire paper should be devoted to supporting. Draft an outline with (1) an introduction that describes a problem and responds to it with a thesis; (2) a body that supports your thesis by walking your reader through the evidence and analysis that illustrate your argument; and (3) a conclusion that includes a full argument statement, considers any counter-evidence or -arguments, and discusses the implications of your argument.

*Write a draft*: Turn your outline into prose. Writing is the easy part of writing: putting words together in sentences to produce compelling claims is easy if you have done the work of interpretation that generates an argument worth presenting. It is only when you don’t have a quality argument that the actual writing is difficult.

*Revise your argumen*t: In the course of writing your draft, your argument may change. You may, while articulating your evidence and analyses, have landed upon some new insights that improve your argument or lead to a completely different argument. Write out a new “argument statement” that represents your most up-to-date understanding of your topic.

*Revise your thesis*: If you revised your argument statement, you also need to revise your thesis statement. Once you’ve updated your thesis to reflect your most current thinking on your topic, you’ve got a finished draft.

NOTE: What follows is the first step in the “cycle of revision”; revision is not something that happens just once, but over and over to make the paper better and better.

*Solicit feedback*: The first part of the revision process is to ask for comments from peers, teachers, random people on the street, anyone who will give it.

*Create a plan for revision*: Some of the comments you receive will simply be edits to your language; those are quick fixes. More importantly, carefully read their comments on your ideas, and rather than just diving into a revision, consider what it is you need to accomplish in your revision, and create a plan for doing so.

*Create a new detailed outline*: Revision is not about fixing your earlier draft; it’s about writing a new paper. Based on the comments you’ve received, and your continuing thoughts on your project, create a new outline—not a revision of your previous outline, but a new outline based on what the completely new paper you would write today would look like. Create first a basic outline (which covers the ideas you’re addressing and the order in which you’re addressing them), and then a detailed outline (which adds the substantive claims you’re making about those ideas).

*Reread and incorporate the scholarship*: Having developed your ideas, your argument, and your paper into a fairly mature form, go back and revisit some of the key sources from the scholarship regarding your topic; you’ll find that your enhanced understanding of the issue allows you to judge more effectively which critics get things right and which get things wrong. Incorporate your new insights on the scholarship into your detailed outline. Acknowledge and compliment those who have gotten the issue right; take down those who have gotten it wrong.

*Revise your paper:* The process of revision involves the cycle between updating your evidence and analysis, and then updating your argument and thesis to reflect your updated analyses. The most successful paper will be the one that is constantly updated—sometimes even rewritten from scratch—to reflect your must current understanding of your topic.

*Edit your draft*: Read through your paper, from start to finish, several times, to fix any language errors, to increase the clarity and concision of your language, and to ensure that your style and formatting are correct.

*Repeat the cycle of revision as needed*: Go back to the first step in the “cycle of revision,” having your peers and professors read your paper, and repeat the cycle as much as necessary until you arrive at a paper you’re happy with.

References