3.1: Writing a First Draft

Now that you have a topic and/or a working thesis, you have several options for how to begin writing a more complete draft.

Just write. You already have at least one focusing idea. Start there. What do you want to say about it? What connections can you make with it? If you have a working thesis, what points might you make that support that thesis?

Make an outline. Write your topic or thesis down and then jot down what points you might make that will flesh out that topic or support that thesis. These don’t have to be detailed. In fact, they don’t even have to be complete sentences (yet)!

Begin with research. If this is an assignment that asks you to do research to support your points or to learn more about your topic, doing that research is an important early step (see the section on "Finding Quality Texts" in the “Information Literacy” section). This might include a range of things, such as conducting an interview, creating and administering a
survey, or locating articles on the Internet and in library databases.

Research is a great early step because learning what information is available from credible sources about your topic can sometimes lead to shifting your thesis. Saving the research for a later step in the drafting process can mean making this change after already committing sometimes significant amounts of work to a thesis that existing credible research doesn’t support. Research is also useful because learning what information is available about your topic can help you flesh out what you might want to say about it.

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**Essay Structure**

You might already be familiar with the five-paragraph essay structure, in which you spend the first paragraph introducing your topic, culminating in a thesis that has three distinct parts. That introduction paragraph is followed by three body paragraphs, each one of those going into some detail about one of the parts of the thesis. Finally, the conclusion paragraph summarizes the main ideas discussed in the essay and states the thesis (or a slightly re-worded version of the thesis) again.

This structure is commonly taught in high schools, and it has some pros and some cons.

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**Pros**

- It helps get your thoughts organized.
- It is a good introduction to a simple way of structuring an essay that lets students focus on content rather than wrestling with a more complex structure.
- It familiarizes students with the general shape and components of many essays—a broader introductory conversation giving readers context for this discussion, followed by a more detailed supporting discussion in the body of the essay, and ending with a sense of wrapping up the discussion and refocusing on the main idea.
- It is an effective structure for in-class essays or timed written exams.

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**Cons**

- It can be formulaic—essays structured this way sound a lot alike.
- It isn’t very flexible—often, topics don’t lend themselves easily to this structure.
- It doesn’t encourage research and discussion at the depth college-level work tends to ask for. Quite often, a paragraph is simply not enough space to have a conversation on paper that is thorough enough to support a stance presented in your thesis.

So, if the five-paragraph essay isn’t the golden ticket in college work, what is?

That is a trickier question! There isn’t really one prescribed structure that written college-level work adheres to—audience, purpose, length, and other considerations all help dictate what that structure will be for any given piece of writing you are doing. Instead, this text offers you some guidelines and best practices.

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**Things to Keep in Mind about Structure in College-Level Writing**


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Avoid the Three-Point Structure

Aim for a thesis that addresses a single issue rather than the three-point structure. Take a look at our example from the previous section, “Finding the Thesis”:

“Katniss Everdeen, the heroine of The Hunger Games, creates as much danger for herself as she faces from others over the course of the film.”

This thesis allows you to cover your single, narrow topic in greater depth, so you can examine multiple sides of a single angle of the topic rather than having to quickly and briefly address a broader main idea.

There’s No “Right” Number of Supporting Points

There is no prescribed number of supporting points. You don’t have to have three! Maybe you have two in great depth, or maybe four that explore that one element from the most salient angles. Depending on the length of your paper, you may even have more than that.

There’s More than One Good Spot for a Thesis

Depending on the goals of the assignment, your thesis may no longer sit at the end of the first paragraph, so let’s discuss a few places it can commonly be found in college writing.

It may end up at the end of your introductory information—once you’ve introduced your topic, given readers some reasonable context around it, and narrowed your focus to one area of that topic. This might put your thesis in the predictable end-of-the-first-paragraph spot, but it might also put that thesis several paragraphs into the paper.

Some college work, particularly work that asks you to consider multiple sides of an issue fully, lends itself well to an end-of-paper thesis (sometimes called a “delayed thesis”). This thesis often appears a paragraph or so before the conclusion, which allows you to have a thorough discussion about multiple sides of a question and let that discussion guide you to your stance rather than having to spend the paper defending a stance you’ve already stated.

These are some common places you may find your thesis landing in your paper, but a thesis truly can be anywhere in a text.

Writing Beginnings

Beginnings have a few jobs. These will depend somewhat on the purpose of the writing, but here are some of the things the first couple of paragraphs do for your text:

- They establish the tone and primary audience of your text—is it casual? Academic? Geared toward a professional audience already versed in the topic? An interested audience that doesn’t know much about this topic yet?
- They introduce your audience to your topic.
- They give you an opportunity to provide context around that topic—what current conversations are happening around it? Why is it important? If it’s a topic your audience isn’t likely to know much about, you may find you need to define what the topic itself is.
- They let you show your audience what piece of that bigger topic you are going to be working with in this text and...
how you will be working with it.

- They might introduce a narrative, if appropriate, or a related story that provides an example of the topic being discussed.

Take a look at the thesis about Katniss once more. There are a number of discussions that you could have about this film, and almost as many that you could have about this film and its intersections with the concept of danger (such as corruption in government, the hazards of power, risks of love or other personal attachments, etc.). Your introduction moving toward this thesis will shift our attention to the prevalence of self-imposed danger in this film, which will narrow your reader’s focus in a way that prepares us for your thesis.

The most important thing at this point in the drafting process is to just get started, but when you’re ready, if you want to learn more about formulas and methods for writing introductions, see “Writing Introductions,” presented later in this section of the text.

### Writing Middles

Middles tend to have a clearer job—they provide the meat of the discussion! Here are some ways that might happen:

- If you state a thesis early in the paper, the middle of the paper will likely provide support for that thesis.
- The middle might explore multiple sides of an issue.
- It might look at opposing views—ones other than the one you are supporting—and discuss why those don’t address the issue as well as the view you are supporting does.

Let’s think about the “multiple sides of the issue” approach to building support with our *Hunger Games* example. Perhaps Katniss may not see a particular dangerous situation she ends up in as being one she’s created, but another character or the viewers may disagree. It might be worth exploring both versions of this specific danger to give the most complete, balanced discussion to support your thesis.

### Writing Endings

Endings, like beginnings, tend to have more than one job. Here are some things they often need to do for a text to feel complete:

- Reconnect to the main idea/thesis. However, note that this is different than a simple copy/paste of the thesis from earlier in the text. We’ve likely had a whole conversation in the text since we first encountered that thesis. Simply repeating it, or even replacing a few key words with synonyms, doesn’t acknowledge that bigger conversation. Instead, try pointing us back to the main idea in a new way.
- Tie up loose ends. If you opened the text with the beginning of a story to demonstrate how the topic applies to average daily life, the end of your text is a good time to share the end of that story with readers. If several ideas in the text tie together in a relevant way that didn’t fit neatly into the original discussion of those ideas, the end may be the place to do that.
- Keep the focus clear—this is your last chance to leave an impression on the reader. What do you want them to leave this text thinking about? What action do you want them to take? It’s often a good idea to be direct about this in the ending paragraph(s).
How might we reconnect with the main idea in our *Hunger Games* example? We might say something like, “In many ways, Katniss Everdeen is her own greatest obstacle to the safe and peaceful life she seems to wish for.” It echoes strongly, the original thesis, but also takes into account the more robust exploration that has happened in the middle parts of the paper.

As mentioned about writing introductions above, the most important thing at this point in the drafting process is to just get started (or in this case, to get started concluding), but when you’re ready, if you want to learn more about formulas and methods for writing conclusions, see “Writing Conclusions,” presented later in this section of the text.