

INTRODUCTION TO WRITING THE GRADUATE SCHOOL COURSE PAPER IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

by the UCLA Graduate Writing Center

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Writing the Graduate School Course Paper in the Social Sciences

Section 1: Reading in the Social Sciences

While most of the emphasis of what we do at the Graduate Writing Center (GWC) is on writing, the majority of your graduate school career will be spent reading. And although good reading habits are essential to building your knowledge in your chosen field, they are also critical to the early stages of the writing process. As a full-time graduate student, you will be expected to read no less than 300-500 pages a week. Managing your school workload in addition to your other interests and obligations can be a bit overwhelming. However, adopting an effective reading strategy can help you to be more productive, more efficient, and better organized, all of which can drastically improve your writing.

(i) Types of Readings

Most of the readings you will be assigned will be articles from peer-reviewed journals and other periodicals, book chapters or entire books, reports, or other texts. These readings will often be based on some research. The significance of this research will vary from study to study. Academic literature can range from contributions by scholars who have helped form the foundation for some of the more prominent theories in the field to more recent contributions by scholars whose theories are still emerging.

As you embark on the first few reading assignments, you may find it challenging to navigate such long and difficult texts. The first step in alleviating the stress of trying to make sense of the material assigned to you is to determine what type of text you're reading from the outset. Making this determination early will help you better navigate the text and make it easier for you to ascertain the key points you are expected to derive from it.

The body of literature in a given discipline is wide and varied. In the social sciences, especially, scholarly contributions to the field are often theory- or evidence-based. Hence, research in the social sciences can be divided into two broad categories: *theoretical* and *empirical*. Although they are similar in that they both seek to further our understanding of a particular subject, theoretical and empirical pieces each have different objectives.

Theoretical vs. Empirical

The intent of a theoretical piece is to advance knowledge in the field by establishing a new conceptual framework to help explain a particular phenomenon. The intent of an empirical study, on the other hand, is to answer a specific research question. As a result, you will find that a theoretical piece builds on existing concepts and theories to support its rationale, while an empirical study relies on data collected to support its findings. Additionally, because of the numerous ways in which data can be collected, empirical studies can be further broken down into two major categories depending on the method of data collection: *quantitative* or *qualitative*. Quantitative studies are often hypotheses-driven studies that report findings based on statistical or other numerical data, and qualitative studies report findings based on interviews, observations, and other fieldwork.

The different objectives that underscore theoretical and empirical pieces also lend themselves to differences in their basic structure. Manuscripts which report the findings of an empirical study must meet very specific criteria, including four sections: introduction, methods, results, and

discussion. Theoretical pieces, on the other hand, may not contain these sections, but most, however, contain a section stating the background or purpose of the inquiry, a critique or discussion of the current state of the body of literature and/or existing data on the topic, a detailed explanation of the theory the author is trying to advance, and/or an argument for how application of this new theory (or theoretical construct) will improve the field. An easy way to tell the difference between a theoretical and empirical piece is by the presence or absence of a methods section.

Each section of a theoretical or empirical article serves a unique function. Once you become more familiar with each, you will find it much easier to extract the key points from them. Below, we will discuss strategies that will further assist you in understanding your reading assignments.

(ii) How to Read for the Social Sciences

In grad school, rarely does one plan to sit down to read a 20-page journal article only to get to the end of it having retained little or nothing. Then again, rarely are grad students assigned readings exciting enough to land on the *New York Times Best Seller* list. In short, graduate level readings can be long, dull, and dense. In the early stages of their graduate school career, many graduate students find themselves reading the same paragraph five times before they realize they have no more insight the fifth time they read it than the first go 'round. This scenario is often caused by boredom, which can prevent you from concentrating, making it very difficult for you to retain anything. We have a few tips for how to avoid unproductive reading.

Become familiar with the geography of the text.

Whenever you read an unfamiliar piece, the first thing you should do is become familiar with the geography of the text. The *geography of the text* refers to the layout or organization of the text. As we discussed previously, empirical studies in the social sciences, for example, often include an introduction (including a review of the relevant literature on the topic), the methods used, the findings, and a conclusion or discussion—often in that order. Each section serves a unique function and will often be accompanied by a header or sub-header (usually indicated by bold typeface, all caps, or some other special formatting).

Give yourself an overview of the reading first.

Reading the abstract of an article can give you a broad overview of the study. It usually includes a brief background of the study, the methods used, the results of the study, and a brief statement on the implications of the results on the field. Oftentimes, however, this overview is too broad to give you any real understanding of the article. Reading the introduction and discussion/conclusion sections will give you a fuller understanding of the study without overwhelming you with minor details or overly technical language, each of which can prevent you from concentrating. Since these sections often include an articulation of the research question, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, background of the study, a brief description of the methods, the findings, and the limitations of the study, reading only these two sections is usually sufficient enough to give you pretty good understanding of the study.

Sometimes, though, a “pretty good” understanding of an article is not sufficient enough for you to be able to cite it in a paper (the devil is in the details!). Nevertheless, gaining a brief overview of the article first is a good way to begin reading an article, even if you plan to read it in its entirety.

Prioritize sections.

As you become more familiar with each section and their respective functions, you will learn which sections you should read closely and which sections you can skim. Having a clear objective for why you are reading an article can help you prioritize individual sections. For instance, in your

statistics class, your professor's goal might be to teach you how to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a particular method. Therefore, he or she may assign an article placing more emphasis on the methods section. Thus, after you've become familiar with the background/purpose of the study and the results, you should focus the rest of your attention on the methods section. In a different class, the History of Urban Education, for example, the professor may want you to know and understand the body of literature around the subject of culturally relevant curriculum. In this instance, it might be wise to pay the most attention to the literature review section of the readings assigned.

Hence, prioritizing sections means alternating between skimming some sections of an article and honing in on the minor details of others.

Annotate.

Annotating involves taking notes as you read a text. This is usually done by writing symbols or sentences in the margins of the text. These notes may include definitions of terms within the text, observations you made about the text, or any unanswered questions you may have. The purpose of this technique is to help you retain the information you read by highlighting interesting or important points within the text. Annotating also allows you to explain the text in your own words, making it easier for you to remember.

Another way to annotate is to extract key terms, phrases, concepts, or other information from the text and save it on a separate sheet of paper. (For an example of this, see below.¹)

Author/Title:		
Subject:		
Thesis:		
Scope:		
Methodology:	Theories Used:	Advances Made:

This approach is useful because you can refresh your memory about various elements of the reading without having to go back to the actual text. Doing this will come in handy once you've accumulated a large number of texts.

¹ Adapted from Professor David Gere's annotation handout.

In sum, learning how to read the different types of commonly assigned texts in your discipline can significantly improve your writing by helping you retain and understand the research that forms the basis for the body of knowledge in your field. While there can be no substitute for a close reading of a text—the only way to truly master the content of a particular text is to read it more than once—reading strategically can help you save a lot of time and effort but still allow you to retain useful information. With time and practice, you will become a more productive reader.

Section 2: Writing in the Social Sciences

Over the course of your graduate study, you will be required to prepare a significant amount of written material. The number of written assignments you receive will depend on your discipline and degree objective. Social sciences and Humanities majors are expected to complete many writing assignments while science majors are expected to do relatively fewer. Also, since doctoral students spend more time in graduate school, they are required to write far more than master's students.

Below is a brief breakdown of the writing requirements for each degree objective.

<u>Master's Degree</u>		<u>Doctoral Degree</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Course papers ▪ Master's Comprehensive Examinations ▪ Master's Thesis 	or	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Course papers ▪ Comprehensive Examinations* ▪ Qualifying Examinations ▪ Dissertation Proposal ▪ Dissertation
<p>*For doctoral students who have not obtained the Master's degree or equivalent prior to being admitted to their doctoral program</p>		

As you can see, the master's thesis and dissertation represent the final written product in your graduate study.

However, these written assignments don't include the various other writing projects that most graduate students will complete before they graduate.

In addition to course papers, exams, theses, dissertation proposals, and the dissertation, a graduate student will invest a great deal of time producing other written

material such as journal articles, grant and fellowship proposals, conference papers, and a host of other projects. Although these projects, in addition to the master's thesis and dissertation, are crucial to a graduate student's success, this section will focus on written material assigned during the coursework phase of your graduate study.

(i) Types of Course Papers in the Social Sciences

Hopefully, by the time you receive your first writing assignment in grad school, you will have already been exposed to the different types of writing in your discipline. As we mentioned previously, different types of writing have different functions and will, thus, be characterized by different conventions. These conventions often dictate the style and organization of a paper. If you receive a writing assignment and you are unfamiliar with the conventions of that genre, do not panic. You can easily ask the professor what his or her expectations are regarding style and structure, or you can browse research databases for papers similar to what your professor assigned.

In the social sciences, you will be given several different types of writing assignments, including the following:

- a reflection paper
- a research paper
- an analysis paper
- a position paper
- a literature review
- a research proposal
- a critique of a research article
- a book review
- an annotated bibliography

Below, we will discuss the most common: the literature review, the analysis or position paper, the research proposal, and the research paper.²

Literature review

The purpose of the literature review is to describe, summarize, and synthesize the body of literature on a given topic. In addition to this, you will be expected to compare and contrast the articles, discussing their strengths and weaknesses. While you won't be expected to exhaust the literature, i.e., include every single article on the topic, you will be expected to include seminal pieces and other well-known articles. (See "Tips for Writing an Analytical Literature Review" and "The Structure of Literature Reviews" in the Appendix.)

Analysis or Position paper

In the analysis paper, the professor will give you a prompt with an issue, scenario, or dataset, and ask you to analyze it using the theories and concepts you learned throughout the quarter. In the position paper, however, the professor will require you to assume a position and then provide a well-supported argument for why you have taken this position. This type of assignment will require that you not only describe, summarize, and analyze the data given to you, but formulate an argument designed to show the reader why your position is valid. (See "Towards a Strong Argument and Thesis Statement" in the Appendix.)

Research proposal

Commonly, research proposals are written for graduate students to apply for and receive project-based funding. In preparation for future proposal writing, some courses may assign a research proposal as one of the assignments required in class. The goal of the research proposal is to allow you to synthesize the information from the course into a more practical application using your topic-specific knowledge and methodological training. You will be expected to construct research questions, to provide background evidence to support your proposed hypotheses/theories, to outline general methodological approaches for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data, as well as to describe the overall significance and contributions of your proposed research. As with research articles, the proposal will include sections such as background/introduction, specific aims/research questions, and methods. The introduction

² See tips for "Critiquing a Research Article" in the Appendix".

section will provide a brief overview of your research topic. The specific aims/research questions will identify the specific research questions your proposed research will address. Finally, the methods section will discuss the proposed methods you will use to answer your research questions.

Research paper

The goal of the research paper is to inform other scholars about a new discovery in the field. These papers are generally written in the IMRD format (introduction, methods, results, discussion). Most research papers will also include a theoretical framework or review of the literature on the relevant concepts/theories. The introduction will provide a brief background of the topic that will be covered. This section will also state the problem the paper is addressing, the significance of the problem, and the question you seek to answer. Next, the methods section will provide a detailed description of the participants, setting, procedures for collecting data, instruments used, etc. In the next section, you will report your findings in detail. And last, you will interpret your findings using the theories you mentioned in the theoretical framework or literature review section of the paper.

****A word about style:** In addition to the foregoing rules and suggestions, social science majors must also pay close attention to style (including word choice and tone). Reading several papers from different genres in your discipline can help you become familiar with the conventions of these genres. Also, guidelines for proper citation may differ slightly according to genre. It is very important that you pay attention to these guidelines in order to avoid inadvertent plagiarism and other mistakes that may raise ethical concerns about your writing. (For guidelines on how to avoid plagiarism, see “Avoiding Plagiarism, Self–Plagiarism, and Other Questionable Practices” in the Appendix.)*

Combined, the aforementioned writing assignments constitute some of the basic building blocks of the master’s thesis and dissertation. By the time you are finished with your coursework and have significantly improved on your ability to successfully complete these writing assignments, you will find all this training extremely useful in preparing you for the dissertation and beyond.

(ii) How to Write the Social Science Course Paper

Contrary to popular belief, your career as a scholar begins the moment you enter graduate school, not *after* you leave. Hence, from day one, you should be doing everything you can to maintain a good reputation among your colleagues and professors. In addition to your level of participation in class, the quality of your work will speak volumes about you as a scholar. If you submit papers that are poorly written or filled with spelling/grammatical errors, you will give your colleagues and superiors the impression that you do not take your work seriously. Every time you receive a writing assignment, your aim should be to demonstrate to your audience that your topic is well-researched, your ideas are well-organized, your arguments are well-articulated, and the final product is presented without errors.

Unlike undergrad, where you were able to sit down at your desk, write a first draft of your term paper, edit it (i.e. hit the spell check button), submit it to your professor and score an A+, graduate-level writing requires a significant amount of revision and planning ahead of time.

Good writing habits in grad school require the following:

Assembling your sources

Before you even begin pre-writing, it is a good idea to assemble the sources you intend to use in your paper. Earlier we discussed annotating while you read so that if, for some reason, you find yourself having to revisit a particular text, you don't have to read it all over again. However, even if you do opt to read it all over again, an annotated bibliography of your sources will help you to determine if the article is worth re-reading.

According to OWL Purdue³,

A **bibliography** is a list of sources (books, journals, Web sites, periodicals, etc.) one has used for researching a topic. Bibliographies are sometimes called "References" or "Works Cited" depending on the style format you are using. A bibliography usually just includes the bibliographic information (i.e., the author, title, publisher, etc.).

An **annotation** is a summary and/or evaluation. Therefore, an **annotated bibliography** includes a summary and/or evaluation of each of the sources.

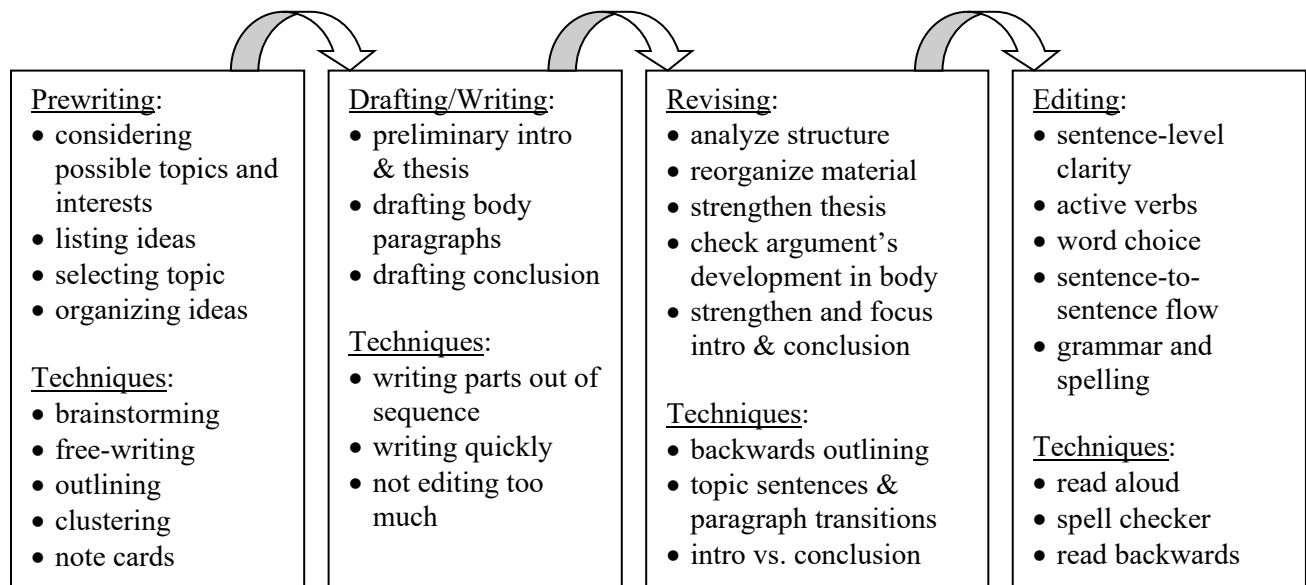
Based on this description, you may want to consider creating and maintaining an annotated bibliography from the first day of classes. When you get to the writing phase, an annotated bibliography can really come in handy in helping you decide which sources to use in your paper without you having to first track down every single article, book, or report.

Additionally, citation managing software programs are available to help you create your bibliographies and manage your reading lists. Some software programs have additional features that will allow you to upload PDF versions of papers and to record notes accompanying those papers. Two examples of these programs are EndNote and Zotero. EndNote is a citation management software with many features to help you manage your citation lists, and organize papers you are reading for your research and/or classes. Student pricing for EndNote is available. Zotero is a free and similar program that can help you to organize and manage your references.

After you've assembled your sources, the process of creating a quality work product will involve prewriting, drafting/writing, revising, and editing (see diagram below⁴).

³ Retrieved from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/01/>

⁴ Diagram created by Marilyn Gray



Prewriting

Prewriting allows you to explore your thoughts and ideas before you formally begin to draft your paper. This process consists of outlining, talking, drawing and various other techniques designed to motivate you to get your ideas out in the open. (For a more detailed description of the different prewriting techniques, see the “Prewriting and Freewriting” handout in the Appendix.)

Drafting

Drafting or writing involves organizing your ideas into complete sentences. As you progress, sentences will become paragraphs and paragraphs will become larger chunks of writing that will ultimately make up the body of your paper.

Revising

Unfortunately, we rarely express our thoughts as clearly or as accurately as we anticipate. As a result, we must go back and review the portions of the paper that have already been written to make sure that we are properly articulating the ideas we intend to convey. Sometimes this may entail reordering sentences, reorganizing paragraphs, and adding or removing paragraphs/sentences altogether. Backwards outlining is an excellent technique for helping you visualize your papers holistically. This technique allows you to go to back and check whether your ideas are organized in the most logical fashion. Once you are able to see the weaknesses and gaps in your writing, you can make the necessary changes. (For a detailed description of how to use backwards outlining, see the “Revision and Editing Exercises” and “Tips for Academic Revision and Editing” handouts in the Appendix.)

Editing

Editing should be the very last step in the writing process. Once you have restated and rearranged different portions of your paper to improve its clarity and coherence, you must ensure that your paper is free of any spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors. Sometimes, in our pursuit of

perfection, we tend to edit each sentence right after it's written to make sure that it's perfect. This approach to writing is not only incredibly time-consuming, it is also counterproductive. By the time you get to the end of your paper, you may realize that you need to reorganize certain parts of your paper or remove sections altogether. Soon, those perfect sentences that you worked so hard to create have disappeared along with all your hard work. This is why it is best to avoid editing until the very end. Also, it is never advisable to rely solely on your computer's spell-check tool. You must personally review your paper very closely in order to detect all errors. However, if you can find someone willing to look over your paper for you, this fresh pair of eyes will assist you in detecting any errors you may have overlooked.

Remember, the writing process is a recursive one. This means you must go through each stage of the process more than once before you can finalize your work and submit it. The sooner you integrate this principle into your regular writing process, the sooner you will see a significant improvement in the quality of your work.

Section 3: Managing Your Projects

Many stakeholders in your education might prefer that you place your scholarly obligations above all else in your life. However, for many graduate students, this expectation is somewhat unrealistic. In order to be a graduate student and have a relatively active personal life, you will have to learn how to properly manage your time. As you begin to master the aforementioned strategies for effective reading and writing in grad school, you can combine these strategies with effective time management to create a system that can help you manage your workload and other activities in your life.

We encourage you to:

- adopt positive writing habits (plan and schedule writing tasks)
- keep your materials organized and well-maintained (use citation managers)
- improve your time management skills
- be proactive to eliminate or minimize distractions

If you need any further assistance or additional resources, feel free to visit us at the Graduate Writing Center.

Tips for Writing an Analytical Literature Review⁵

Questions Associated with a Literature Review.

In planning a literature review, you might ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is my central question or issue that the literature can help define?
2. What is already known about the topic?
3. Is the scope of the literature being reviewed wide or narrow enough?
4. Is there a conflict or debate in the literature?
5. What connections can be made between the texts being reviewed?
6. What sort of literature should be reviewed? Historical? Theoretical? Methodological? Quantitative? Qualitative?
7. What criteria should be used to evaluate the literature being reviewed?
8. How will reviewing the literature justify the topic I plan to investigate?

Key Terms Associated with a Literature Review

The function of a literature review can also be understood through several key terms that you might reflect on as you write:

- Compare and contrast—You might compare and contrast different authors' views on an issue.
- Criticize—You might criticize methodology or perspectives in previous work, thereby showing the importance of your own.
- Highlight—You might highlight gaps in existing research.
- Show—You might show how your study relates to previous literature and is superior in some way.
- Identify—You might identify a problem, conflict, debate, or gap in the literature.
- Define—You might define a research area in a new way.
- Question—You might question the results of previous work.

The above guidelines assume the context of introducing your own research project. While you may need to write a literature review as part of a proposal or research paper, you could be asked to write a literature review as a course paper. In that case you would define a particular problem or area of previous research to review, and you would critique and analyze the literature in a way that would support an overall argument or evaluation of the research area.

⁵ The set of questions and set of key terms are taken from Irene Clark, *Writing the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: Entering the Conversation* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2007), 110-111.

THE STRUCTURE OF LITERATURE REVIEWS

Literature Reviews: Common Organizational Options⁶

Topical:

- Most common structure
- Breaks the field into a number of subfields, subject areas, or approaches
- Discusses each subsection individually, sometimes with critiques of each
- Useful for organizing a large body of literature that does not have one or two studies that stand out as most important or a clear chronological development

Distant to Close:

- A type of topical organization, with studies grouped by their relevance to current research.
- Starts by describing studies with general similarities to current research and ends with studies most relevant to the specific topic.
- Useful for studies of methods or models.

Chronological:

- Lists studies in terms of chronological development
- Useful when the field displays clear development over a period of time
- Linear progression
- Paradigm shift

Seminal Study:

- Begins with detailed description of extremely important study.
- Later work is organized using another pattern.
- Most useful when one study is clearly most important or central in laying the groundwork for future research.

Debate:

- Another type of topical approach, with a chronological component.
- Emphasizes various strands of research in which proponents of various models openly criticize one another.
- Most useful when clear opposing positions are present in the literature.

Keep in mind that the above organizational patterns are often used in combination. For example, within one topical area, there might be a paragraph or two giving broader background (more distant or earlier research), then a discussion of seminal studies and/or debates, and finally summaries and critiques of the most recent and relevant studies on which your current study is based.

⁶ The section is adapted from “Strategies for Writing Literature Reviews” (Matt Weiss, Penn State University).

Towards a Strong Argument and Thesis Statement

In *The Craft of Research*, Booth, Colomb and Williams offer the following step-by-step guide to articulating an argument concisely:⁷

1. "Start by asking, 'So what?'" Occasionally, it is easier to account for the consequences of your research when it is posed in a negative question: "So what if I don't know or understand ... so what if I can't answer the questions I have posed for myself?"
2. Then backtrack to naming your topic with targeted questions.
 - a. *What are you writing about?* ("I am trying to learn about ...")
 - b. *What don't you know about?* ("I am studying X because I am trying to understand Y.")
3. Motivate your question by adding another indirect question, one that explains the significance of the first question
 - a. *What is your rationale for this research?* ("I am studying X because I am trying to understand Y, in order to help my reader understand how Z.")

Some templates to get you started:⁸

- "Although X may seem trivial, it is in fact crucial in terms of today's concern over _____."
- "These findings have important consequences for the broader domain of _____."
- "My discussion of X addresses the large matter of _____."
- "These conclusions/This discovery will have significant applications in _____ as well as in _____."

The thesis sentence is a clear, concise statement of the position you will defend in your paper. The thesis sentence should argue a position, not summarize information. When composing your thesis sentence,⁹

- Make sure your thesis reflects the full scope of your argument.
- Avoid using a thesis that is too broad to be defended in the your paper or too narrow to be a full response to the assignment.
- Argue as conceptually rich a position as you can support. Ask yourself "how?" and "why?" questions to deepen your thesis.
- Make sure your reader can easily identify your thesis sentence.
- Do not just reword the professor's question; claim your own position.

The argument and thesis-like statement of the argument do not have to be a single sentence, but the presentation of a paper's argument should be as clear and concise as possible.

⁷ Adapted from Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 49-52.

⁸ Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Persuasive Writing*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 173-174 (selected examples).

⁹ From the Nesbitt Johnson Writing Center retrieved from <https://www.hamilton.edu/documents/writing-center/Intros.PDF>

PREWRITING AND FREEWRITING¹⁰

PREWRITING

Prewriting constitutes all of those things that a writer does before actually beginning to write a draft. However, sometimes prewriting comes during a draft when you pause and work on a new idea or as a way to get unstuck. Prewriting may or may not involve actual writing.

LISTING OR BRAINSTORMING

Record every idea that comes to mind in relation to a given topic.

Set a time or quantity goal (for example, 10 minutes or 50 ideas)

Record each idea without prejudging it.

FREEWRITING

Freewriting entails writing without stopping. Usually it is helpful to have a time goal, usually between 5 and 20 minutes. Write what immediately comes into our heads without pausing to think about phrasing or to filter our idea. Freewriting can help overcome writer's block.

FREETALKING

Much like freewriting, freetalking is freeform expression without editing. It could be a conversation with a friend or an advisor during which you take notes of all the main points.

Or you could use a tape recorder and later transcribe what you recorded.

FREEDRAWING

Some people think visually and like organize ideas in charts or tables. Diagrams could be particularly helpful if you need to describe a process. Making a visual representation of ideas with arrows can be a first draft that you later turn into text.

CLUSTERING

Clustering creates a visual map of your ideas. When you cluster, start with a key word, circle it, and then let that first word suggest related ideas or issues. As you fill up the page, circle key words and use lines to link related ideas. This kind of exercise can help develop an outline.

COLLAGE/IDEAS JOURNAL

Write ideas down as they come to you, whether on scraps of papers, post-its, or in a small journal. A more conventional way to form a collage of thoughts and ideas generated during research and reading is to put notes and comments on post-its. These notes and scraps of paper can then be collected and organized when it comes time to write or construct an outline.

OUTLINING

Some people find that a formal outline structure (I, II, III and A, B, C organization) really gets them ready to write because it helps them organize structure and evidence. Often informal outlines work just as well, such as headings and bulleted points under those headings. It is also very helpful to outline what you have already written to help you analyze your draft's structure, make revisions, and proceed further.

¹⁰ This handout was developed by K. Cole, based on Writing Lives and Talking About Writing, and modified by M. Gray.

Revision and Editing Exercises

Backwards Outlining

Backwards outlining is a technique for (re)constructing an outline from an existing paper draft. The goal of this exercise is to take you out of the narrative flow of your essay—by going backwards—so that you can look at the structure objectively. A backwards outline helps us to identify the purpose or task each unit (usually the paragraph) in our writing. Once that's clear, we can move the units around much more freely.

1. Number and label each paragraph with a phrase that expresses its main point.
2. When you are done, take a large sheet and pen/marker and write down the outline of what you have using the labels.
3. Analyze your outline:
 - *Does the organization make sense?
 - *Does the organization of content support a developing argument (to the extent it should)?
 - *Does each paragraph move the main argument forward? (Test this by articulating the relationship between a paragraph and the main argument for each questionable paragraph.)
 - *What material should be moved around?
 - *What material seems redundant or extraneous?
 - *Are there gaps in your content/argument?
 - *Does the content suggest headings or sub-headings that would be helpful to put in?
4. Revise and add to this outline, based on what you have discovered, to reflect what still needs to be improved and changed.
5. At home, move content around, revise and continue to write based on your new outline.

Sharpening Transitions

It's often difficult to nail a perfectly clean and effective transition right out of the gate. Often times, we use transitions as placeholders or stop-gaps to get us from one set of concerns or readings to another. It is perfectly acceptable to use inelegant, awkward placeholder transitions in initial drafts, but you'll want to clean those transitions up as you move toward the final draft. After all, the persuasiveness of your argument depends mightily on how you bring the reader through your material, and transitions are the lifeblood of that movement. Here's a short exercise for analyzing and refining your transitions.

1. Analyze transitions by articulating the relationship between the two adjacent paragraphs or sections and how both relate to your main argument. You may find that this exercise produces language that can improve transition sentences at the beginning or end of paragraphs.
2. When the relationship between two adjacent paragraphs or sections is hard to articulate, you have probably identified a flaw in your paper's structure. If you are stuck, circle three key words in each of the two adjacent paragraphs. Now try to write a sentence with as many of these key words as possible, using at least two from each paragraph. If you still cannot find a way to make the transition work, you probably need to move, add, or delete material.

Tips for Academic Revision and Editing

Argument/Problem for Analysis/Thesis:

- Is it the right scope for writing project: too broad/general vs. too narrow/specific, concrete vs. abstract?
- Does it generate interesting debate, discussion, argument? Is it worthwhile? Are its contributions clear and forthrightly stated?
- Does it set up the argument, analysis and structure of paper?

Structure and Organization:

- How do the paragraphs support and develop the argument?
- Do paragraphs build on each other?
- Evaluate transitions between sections and between paragraphs.
- Evaluate the overall structure of the argument and the internal organization of your paragraphs.

Introduction & Conclusion:

- Does the introduction provide a clear context for the argument/analysis and appropriate background for the target audience?
- Does the conclusion contain information that should be in the introduction or vice versa?
- Does the conclusion contain a clearer statement of the main argument (or thesis) than the intro? (If yes, move to introduction, and revise accordingly.)
- Does the conclusion sufficiently address questions posed in the intro?
- Does the conclusion repeat the introduction or ideas that are clear from the rest of the paper? (Remove unnecessary repetition.)
- Does the conclusion make points that can only be made at the end of the paper, such as how to take the argument a step further, generalize, raise further questions, and/or speculate as appropriate for the field and audience?

Paragraph Trouble-shooting:

- Is the paragraph too long or too short?
- Does the paragraph have a topic sentence or does it cohere around a main idea or topic? (A paragraph does not have to have a topic sentence, but it should have an identifiable main point or topic.)
- Do all supporting sentences develop or cohere around the topic/main idea?
- Do the transitions before and after the paragraph work?
- Does each paragraph have a clear objective connected to a logical unfolding of your argument across the paper?

Use of Evidence & Data and Incorporation of Examples & Sources:

- Does the paper make sufficient and effective use of examples, sources and/or data?
- Is evidence appropriately incorporated and sufficiently analyzed in the development of the argument?
- Are there any mechanical problems with citation or presentation of data?