

Writing with Purpose

Start as early as you can, and give yourself as much time as possible to generate ideas and ruminate about your topic and insights. However, if you wait for the perfect writing conditions to arrive before beginning your work, you will likely run out of time. No matter what your apprehensions are regarding the assignment, start writing. Improvement can only come when you have something to improve.¹

Your **topic** is the general subject of your paper; for example: women's leadership in the early churches

Your **thesis** is the claim that you want to make about that topic; for example: Women had significant leadership roles in the earliest churches, but as churches moved from houses to public buildings, women could no longer serve as leaders because of social and cultural opposition.

Answer the "So what?" question. What is significant or important about the claim you are making?

Although *you* are making claims throughout your paper, avoid writing "I think..." or "I believe" in research papers. Balance your sentence lengths, and watch out for wordiness and repetition.

Body Paragraphs

Construct your entire paper to support your thesis. Each paragraph should have one focus, and your aim is to structure paragraphs to build on one another. In a longer paper, several paragraphs may be needed to support the same point, but each paragraph should still have its own distinct focus. Connect each point you are making to the others around it, and organize all of the material in a logical and cohesive way. You can use transitional words to help signal the relationship between your ideas and supporting points (for example: first, second, additionally, however, thus, nonetheless, etc.)

Using Sources

Think of using research material in your paper as having a conversation with an interesting person who expresses him/herself particularly memorably or beautifully, is an authority on your topic, provides a different viewpoint with which you might disagree, or says something that needs to be analyzed in detail. An effective research paper does not simply copy and paste lots of research about your topic into one document. You need to provide context and analysis for the research you incorporate into your paper, and you need to help your reader make connections between what the research sources say and what you are saying.

Keep track of your sources carefully, and decide whether to quote directly or paraphrase. Put

¹ Adapted from "How to Write a Paper: An Overview" from the Center for Theological Writing at Duke Divinity School

their words and ideas in conversation with your analysis, as well as in conversation with each other. Even when you are paraphrasing another person's words or ideas, you need to cite them. Failure to do this constitutes plagiarism!

Introductions and Conclusions

Many people find that writing the introduction can be the most difficult aspect of the paper writing process. You may find it easier to outline your paper and write the body paragraphs, then go back and write the introduction so that you can "introduce" your reader to what you will discuss in your paper in a helpful way. Introductions typically provide some background for the topic before signaling what the focus of the paper will be. You can also discuss the importance or significance of your thesis.

The conclusion is your opportunity to provide a brief summary of what you have discussed in your paper in a way that helps your reader make the connection to your thesis. Emphasize the significance of what you have argued and why/for whom it matters.

Revising

Take a break and then look over what you have written with "new eyes." Consider making a reverse outline of your paper to check its coherence and organization. As you read over your paper, mark or highlight the topic sentence of each paragraph, or write a sentence that summarizes each paragraph. Then read these sentences in order to see if they follow each other logically and if they move consistently toward your conclusion. If things feel out of order, something is missing, or something seems unrelated to your thesis and conclusion, work to revise, rewrite, move paragraphs around or delete unnecessary sentences or paragraphs.