



How I Write by Cait

Research

Research, research, research. This is my mantra whenever I begin the writing process. Albert Einstein said, “The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know.” It is always important to keep this in mind when acting as the authority on a topic. Writing about any issue puts me in the position of authority from the perspective of readers. Therefore, it is my responsibility as a writer to learn as much as I can about a topic when I write.

Every teacher I have ever had would admonish me for saying this, but I always start with Wikipedia. I never use information from the site, but I always start reading there. Wikipedia is by no means a reliable source, but it is a good place to learn enough information and keywords related to a topic to know which questions to ask. This is key: a quality paper is written by answering questions. In fact, a thesis is really a question reworded as a statement, and it is this question I seek to answer in each paper.

Reading, talking to experts and watching relevant videos can all help to develop my understanding of a topic. I need to be able to argue my perspective — or assigned perspective (even if I don't agree with it) — with a factual basis. I always set aside a week after reading about my topic before I start my outline. An important part of my process is to let information reflect off of my day-to-day life, contorting my understanding of it so I can gain a new perspective. I will often make connections between ideas while staring into my coffee — or something similarly ordinary — that lead to a whole new argument. Once I have several of these ideas inspiring me to put pen-to-paper, I begin working on an outline.

Structure

I like to think of a piece of writing like the human body. Statistics, facts, findings from research, quotes from experts, and objective observations are all valuable for building strong bones for a piece of writing. The spine is the thesis; it needs to be referred to throughout the paper because it holds everything together. The flesh of any essay, article or report is the way in which you deliver this information — how you engage the reader to make them want to learn what you discovered and the conclusions you made.

Once I've done preliminary research, and given myself time to reflect on the knowledge I've gained, I'm usually ready to begin constructing an outline. I write a draft of a thesis, and list the arguments (also known as subtopics) I want to

make to prove that the thesis is true. Under each argument, I list all of the points I'm going to make, the sources I'm going to use to support my ideas, and notes about how the subtopic ties into one another. The order in which arguments should appear in the paper becomes obvious when rereading notes about their connections.

If I have the opportunity to stare into my coffee again, then I'll do so. After writing a point-form outline of everything I want to argue, I usually find gaps in my ideas, or a need for more research. Once I've filled these holes, I always feel equipped to start writing.

Writing

Clear and concise writing gives my readers the opportunity to understand the arguments that I spent so much time developing. It is important that I set a deadline for my first draft a few days — or weeks, if possible — before the writing assignment is due to ensure that my writing is understandable to my readers. I find it much easier to spot the areas of my writing that might be unclear to others if I can set it aside for several days and reread it with fresh eyes with time to make any necessary edits. Often, I'll hand my writing to a friend or family member to gauge their understanding of my writing.

I always use the outline I create to ensure that each paragraph I write addresses one sub-argument. I write headings for each of the major arguments I plan to make to support my thesis. Each paragraph that falls under a heading will present a different sub-argument that supports both the argument of the heading it falls under, and, inherently, my thesis.

I always begin writing with the first body paragraph of my paper; it is easier for me to write the introduction and conclusion last, and I'll explain why in a moment. Like any muscle, my brain needs to be warmed up before exercising. I find that the first hour of writing an essay may produce nothing but a few low-quality sentences before I start forming paragraphs that coherently reflect the ideas that I strive to convey.

When I finally get into a steady pace of writing, I follow the pattern of writing a paragraph, then editing the previous paragraph. The pattern goes as follows: write paragraph one, write paragraph two, edit paragraph one, write paragraph three, edit paragraph two, write paragraph four, edit paragraph three, and so on. This way, I maintain an awareness of what I have already written as I progress, and I have edited the entire body of the paper by the time I am finished writing. This also helps motivate me to set the paper aside and edit the essay again at a later time because I know I've already done a preliminary edit.

The introduction and conclusion are always the last two sections that I write. Writing in this order helps me to read through the body of my writing to understand how to tackle the introduction. The introduction to any paper should begin by generally outlining the background of the issue that is going to be discussed in the paper. I provide the reader with increasingly specific information about the issue until the last sentence, which is the thesis. The thesis, as I mentioned already, is the question I plan to answer throughout my essay, but worded as a statement. I also include brief descriptions of the arguments I will make to support the viewpoint I propose.

I write my conclusions using a simple formula. The first sentence of my conclusion is my thesis statement, but reworded. I then will make one point form note for each paragraph of my essay that describes the argument I made. I then rework these jot notes into sentences, and I end up with a summary of my arguments. Finally, I make brief suggestions for future research on the topic, or potential solutions to the problem at hand.

In Summary

My writing sessions are like snowflakes because no two are the same. How I write depends on the length of the piece, my knowledge of the topic, the number of sources required, and the format. However, the way I approach a piece is consistent — I do an extensive amount of research. It is always easier to write a coherent paper (especially the long ones) when I have mapped out everything I want to say and the sources I can quote to support my arguments. Writing is a time-consuming process, but the more time I invest in good writing habits, the more I master the art