

# Starting Your Paper

## Tips:

- Take a break from your paper and re-read later to check for flow, clarity of ideas, and proper formatting/grammar.
- Have a friend, TA, or the Writing Center read your paper and provide feedback!
- Make necessary revisions; few papers are perfect on their first draft.
- Different writers have different preferences: it's possible you may function better by writing a stream of thoughts onto a document first and then revising afterwards to organize those ideas. Some writers even work better by writing their paper out of order (e.g., writing body paragraphs before writing the intro).

Starting a paper is often the most daunting part of the writing process. You may have ideas for what you want to write about, but how do you go about turning those ideas into a fully fleshed-out paper? While every writer's process is different, the following steps may help you begin the writing process through research and planning.

1. **Identify the prompt.** Make sure that you fully understand what the prompt is asking. In most papers, you will be asked to provide an original argument. If you are writing a research paper, your prompt may ask you to conduct research on any topic of your interest. A literary analysis paper, meanwhile, may ask you to interpret a reading. Knowing what your professor expects from your paper is a vital first step in the writing process.
2. **Brainstorm what you already know about your topic.** First, ask yourself this question: what is the topic, and what have you already learned about it? Are there any similar topics that may be beneficial to look into as well? If you're writing an analysis paper (visual, rhetorical, literary, etc.), consider these questions: are you familiar with the text or work you are analyzing? What do you know about rhetorical and figurative devices? What do you know about literary or visual elements?

Once you've identified what you know, you then have to ask yourself a different question: what *don't* you know about the topic? Research! (But only if necessary; some essay prompts don't ask for research.) You may want to write down specific ideas to look for or ask yourself questions to get started with the research. What do you need to learn more about? Do you have a general knowledge of the topic but want to focus on a subtopic?

Make sure to use databases for scholarly research. The McDermott Library provides access to scholarly databases ([library.utdallas.edu](http://library.utdallas.edu)). If you have no idea where to start your research, input the broad keywords related to your topic. You can skim the first few articles that interest you and gain a general idea of the topic. Then, start thinking about a subset of that topic that you may want to focus your argument on. Think about what scholars are saying about your topic. Do they have a positive view? Are they critiquing ideas? Are they giving recommendations? Are they simply providing information?

*A note about research:* when crafting your paper's argument, try to research with an objective and open mind. When we have a preconceived argument in mind, we may cherry pick our research or get tunnel vision regarding the topic at hand. This may limit the articles we are reading—we will gravitate toward articles that will agree with our argument. While this may be a good starting point for some writers, try to approach the research with a broader mind. It's good to look at research that will disagree with your views; articles that disagree with your argument can function as counterarguments that you can address to help strengthen your own argument. Alternatively, you may change your mind about your argument. Or, you may not know what stance you take on the topic and may formulate your own opinion as you read a variety of sources.

3. **Create a tentative outline.** Start with the thesis; this is your main argument that will guide your paper. Then, you may categorize the ideas found in your research (whether from close reading your text or from searching articles in databases). These categories of ideas can make good body paragraphs, so make sure each category correlates with your thesis.
4. **Put the pieces together.** If applicable, you can start integrating the research into your outline. Provide specific quotes or just paraphrase or summarize your research. (Go ahead and provide in-text citations and full citations now instead of waiting until the end—this will save a lot of time.) Adding this research into the outline will help you organize both your research and your paper. From there, you can flesh out ideas into full sentences with proper formatting, giving you pieces you can add into your final essay. Writing from an outline can help guide your writing and keep you on track as you write.

Following these steps should help you begin the process of planning, researching, and writing an academic paper. While these steps provide a good general guideline to follow when writing a paper, some papers may pose additional challenges, as every paper is unique. If you're having trouble starting your particular paper, try reaching out to your professor or TA, or make an appointment with the Writing Center!