Plan of Attack: 9 Simple Steps for a Successful Paper

Intimidated by the writing process? Not sure how to begin your first-year seminar essay, or your 10-page research paper? Here is a simple set of steps that can help you put together a successful paper, no matter what the topic. Use this list to combat procrastination, revise a draft, or just to get started!

1. Read the prompt carefully:
   a. Break down each section of the prompt, and find those signifying words that tell you what you’re actually doing in this paper (i.e. “analyze,” “critique,” “review”).

2. Choose a topic:
   a. Whether the prompt gives you a list of options or is more open-ended, choose one topic that sounds the most interesting to you. What have you always wanted to know more about? What do you think you could successfully write an argument about? Take some time to mull over the question(s), and really decide what you are interested in. (Note: you are not coming up with an argument or thesis here, just narrowing down the scope.)

3. Do the research:
   a. Even if you don’t have a research paper per say, you will most likely have to go back to the source material and read (and reread) it more thoroughly. For research papers, this is when you will find pertinent articles or books, read them, and take notes. Don’t be afraid to write down anything that seems relevant or interesting. This is where the topic you chose can help you find pertinent material, but don’t feel too constrained by the subject you picked. You can always go back and change your topic, as long as you give yourself enough time to do so.

4. Organize your notes:
   a. Now that you have a solid background in the topic, go through your notes and try to organize them by topic. What major issues came up in your research? Were there conflicting opinions or findings? These will eventually become your subtopics for the paper, so keep in mind the ways in which each idea might relate to the others. Is there a natural flow to the sections? You might want to organize these ideas into a general outline as you try to make sense of the information.

5. Come up with a thesis:
   a. Now that you have organized your background information, what argument can you make about what you found? Is there a point of conflict or controversy that you could take a stand on? Do you see an overarching connection between different perspectives that others failed to mention? Whatever it is, make sure that your thesis goes beyond the bare facts and makes an argument, something that you can defend. For more, see the handout on “The Thesis.”

6. Create an outline:
   a. This shouldn’t be too hard, since you already organized your notes and have a thesis ready to go. Make sure your subtopics all relate back to your central argument, and
think of the most logical way to organize each section? Try out a few different formats, and see what seems to make the strongest point!

7. Write a draft:
   a. It doesn’t have to be perfect, but essentially you now have to convert your outline into paragraph form. Feel free to utilize your research notes, make sure to include transitions, and relate each paragraph back to your thesis.

8. Revise, revise, revise:
   a. See the handout on “Revising Your Paper.”

9. Finalize and polish:
   a. Don’t forget to leave time to edit your paper for grammar, typos, and formatting. These small things can make for a more polished and complete paper.

That’s it! Don’t forget that you can make an appointment at the Writing Center to get help at any stage of the writing process. Just call us at (253)879-3404, or fill out an appointment form online: http://www.pugetsound.edu/academics/academic-resources/cwlt/writing/writing-appointment-request/