

A Guide to Writing Essays & Research Papers

Gordon Coggins



An easy way to better grades

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VAN NOSTRAND REINHOLD LTD., *Toronto,*
New York, Cincinnati, London, Melbourne

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ISBN paper 0-442-29862-5

Design by Brant Cowie/Artplus

Printed and bound in Canada by Webcom Limited

Cover and text illustrations by Roy Condy

78 79 80 81 82 83 84 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

I should like to acknowledge with thanks the help of Jim Clarkson, Dennis Malone, and other editors of the *Niagara College Style Guide*, Judy Gruarin, Gordon Brown, Carol Brown, and Margaret Coghill for information on high school topics, Joseph Interisano and Anthony Hozjan, who permitted their papers to appear as samples, and a generation of other students whose now forgotten slips provided most of the examples for the "Common Errors to be Avoided" section; in addition, W. & R. Chambers, Ltd., for permission to copy the excerpt from *Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary*; Louisiana State University Press for an excerpt reprinted by permission from *Education for Freedom* by Robert Hutchins, copyright © 1943, Louisiana State University Press; and finally, Sandy, who read the whole work through with a very helpful red pencil in hand.

Grateful acknowledgment is also made to Howard W. Sams & Co. for permission to reprint the chart on color receiver circuits from *Color TV Training Manual* by C.P. Oliphant and V.M. Ray.

G.C.

Preface

Once upon a time, three kings lived in three summer palaces on the side of a mountain. Each laid claim to a little sky-blue lake that glistened in a valley below, but each knew that the only way he could confirm his claim would be to bring the little lake up the mountain and place it beside his palace. One day, the first king sent an army of engineers and mechanics down to the lake. They walked around it for half a day, measuring and talking, and then tried to put a big net around the lake and pull it up the mountain with a great herd of oxen. For all their efforts the little lake stayed where it was. The second king was wiser. He knew that in the long run thinking is more productive than mere activity. So he gathered all his wise men around him, and for twenty-seven days they all concentrated on the little lake. They looked at it sparkling in its bed, and they imagined it, most intensely, lying beside the king's palace. The mental exertion quite tired them out. But the little lake was not moved. The third king looked down the mountain and said, "Simplify!" What he meant by that, nobody knew. But he issued an order that all his subjects were to make one trip to the lake every day and to carry back up the mountain one small bucket of water. It was a very simple action, and in a short while the little lake rippled happily beside the clever king's palace.

Writing an essay or research paper is a project something like that. It is too big a job to do all at once. It is too practical a job to do by good intentions alone. Yet if you reduce it to a series of small steps, and then do each of them, a big job can be done by even a small person (which is often the way a person feels when faced with a 2000-word assignment.) What this book tries to do is show you how by taking one step at a time you can write a long, accurate, clearly and correctly set up essay or research paper.

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1. Essay or Research Paper?

A student must be clear in his own mind what kind of a paper he is expected to write. The instructor may call it an essay, a research paper, a term paper, a theme—all these are terms referring to similar exercises. Two general categories, however, can be distinguished, the essay and the research paper. Each is an organized presentation of information and thought. The difference is a matter of emphasis. The research paper is chiefly concerned with the orderly presentation of information. The essay is more concerned with argument. A geography paper on the topic, “Neanderthal Man”, would clearly be a research paper. It would require the gathering of information from scholarly experts and organizing it into a logical form of the student’s own. The history topic, “Is Peaceful Co-existence with China Possible?”, on the other hand, calls for the student to develop an argument in essay form.

Argument, by the way, is not something you do before a fight. It is a kind of writing. Argument can be persuasion. You try to prove that peaceful co-existence with China is possible, or that the present consumer laws are not an adequate protection for the housewife, or that the success of a popular music star is due to the quality of his music rather than to the promotional skill of his agent. Or argument can be analysis; that is, describing the parts of a situation and how they fit together. For instance, you might describe and evaluate the comparative importance of the forces which led to Canadian Confederation, or describe and explain the effect on the audience of the comic scenes in *Hamlet*, or explain how *1984* (George Orwell) and *Fahrenheit 451* (Ray Bradbury) speak to present-day society using a vision of the future. These topics call for analysis. An argument often combines persuasion and analysis.

In actual form the essay may be different from the research paper. Since the essay should be a smooth, coherent argument, it is written in paragraphs, normally *without* section titles or subsection headings. The research paper, on the other hand, since it is primarily an organization of information, may very profitably use section and subsection headings to make the organization clear. This book, for example, in its headings, “Essay or Research Paper”, “Why Write Essays and Research Papers”, is more like the latter than the former. A research paper is likely to have a Table of Contents at the front and perhaps even an Index at the back. The essay will have neither. Both, however, must have a booklist—the technical term is Bibliography—at the end of the paper.

A good research paper will, of course, have argument in it, and a good essay will certainly have a good deal of pure information in it. But it is wise to get clear in your own mind, by asking your teacher if you are in the slightest doubt, what

emphasis—information or argument—is expected, and what form is required, for the paper you are doing.

Why Write Essays and Research Papers?

Knowing why you are doing an assignment is halfway to getting a good grade. Why are teachers and professors so fond of assigning this kind of exercise?

1. To gather information.

Writing a research paper is a whole process by which you get your mind around information on a particular topic.

2. To develop skills.

If you want to learn to shoot a basketball, or a slingshot, or a rapids, you have to practise. Essays are assigned to give you practice in the skills of learning so that you may continue to use them when formal schooling is over. These are the skills of reading, thinking, and writing, to name the main ones only.

3. To demonstrate your achievements.

The essay or research paper is a kind of proof that you have achieved both of the first two aims. It shows your teacher or instructor that you have information on a particular topic, and that you have reading, thinking, and writing skills.

You should keep all of these objectives in mind when writing a paper.

Interest and Fright

Students often complain when looking at a list of assigned topics, “I can’t find anything that interests me,” as if it were the job of the topic to interest the student. It certainly helps to be fascinated by the topic from the start, but if you know nothing about it you can hardly expect to be fascinated by nothing. What usually happens is that the more you learn about the topic the more interested you become. So dive right in as though you have a job to do and are going to do it regardless. The interest will take care of itself.

Often a student who can organize a research paper for a shop course or a science course on, say, “Lumber Sources and Uses”, or “The Infra-red Spectrometer”, takes fright at being assigned an essay in English class on “Religious Symbolism in *Waiting for Godot*”. It seems so vague, so intangible. If this is you, remember the wise king. Simplify. Take it step by step.

2. Where to Start

There are three main stages in doing a paper:

1. collecting the material;
2. organizing the material into an orderly structure;
3. writing the paper.

If you are very brilliant, you may be able to do all three at once. If that is the case, you will not need this book (except, perhaps, the section on "Mechanics", which shows you the correct form for footnotes and booklist). No matter what method you use, if you can break the process down into separate stages, you can concentrate on one thing at a time and do a better job at each point. The next two sections of this book are instructions in two methods of researching and writing an essay or research paper: the Outline Method, and the Note-card Method. Read over both before deciding which you want to use on your next paper.



The Outline Method

Step 1. Get a clear idea of what your topic means and what you are expected to cover.

START EARLY

It is no use, for example, starting out to collect information on "World War II" for a 3000-word essay if you have not decided just what *your* essay on World War II is going to focus on. The topic is too large to start with. Think about it. Perhaps you will decide to do a geographical analysis of just where the war took place. Or an account of the development of weapons during the course of the war. Or a comparison of the leaders and their contributions. At this point it would be wise to consult with your teacher for approval of the approach you want to take.

START EARLY

Step 2. Make a First Outline

An outline might be compared to a chart on which you plot where you are going, or to the skeleton framework of a building you are going to construct. It might look something like this.

Theatres of War: A Geographical Analysis of World War II

A. Western European Theatre

1. German conquest, 1940
 - (a) Denmark and Norway
 - (b) Holland and Belgium
 - (c) France
2. Operation Overlord, the bombing of Germany, 1943-44
3. Invasion of Normandy, 1944
4. Advance to Berlin, 1944-45

B. Mediterranean Theatre

1. Axis expansion, 1940-41
 - (a) Greece
 - (b) Crete
 - (c) North Africa
2. Axis retreat from North Africa, 1942
3. Invasion of Sicily, 1943
4. Italian campaign, 1943-45

C. Battle of Britain and the Atlantic submarine war, 1940-43

D. Eastern European Theatre

1. German advance into Russia, 1941
2. Turning-point: Stalingrad, 1942
3. Russian advance, 1944-45

E. Pacific Theatre

1. Japanese expansion, 1941-42
 - (a) Pearl Harbour
 - (b) Malaya
 - (c) Phillipines
 - (d) Burma
 - (e) Java
 - (f) Threat to Australia
2. Turning-point: Guadalcanal, 1942
3. Island-hopping towards Japan
 - (a) Solomon Islands
 - (b) Aleutians
 - (c) Iwo Jima and Okinawa
4. The last blow: bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

- F. Conclusion:** -a truly global war
-a process of expansion and contraction
-“terrible and useless destruction on a global scale”

Some points about outline making

1. If you do not know much about the topic you have picked, you will have to do some general reading before you are able to make up the first outline. At this stage read with one purpose in mind, to make up the outline.
2. Notice that the main part of the outline consists of nouns or noun constructions, not sentences. This is natural because each item is a kind of title which tells what a section of the paper is to be about. So don't write, "The Germans lost the battle of El Alamein." Write, "German defeat at El Alamein."
3. Notice the use of numbering, lettering, and indentation to help keep the headings in order. There are six main divisions planned for this essay. They are lettered A to F. Under Division E. Pacific Theatre, four sub-sections are planned; they are numbered 1 to 4. Some sub-sections are further broken down into sub-sub-sections, and these are lettered (a) to (f). Items with the same numbering or lettering or with the same amount of indentation are of roughly equal value.
4. Notice Division F, Conclusion. This one consists of *ideas* about the topic. These may be written in statement form. Even if you have no conclusions at this stage, still put a section headed "Conclusion" in your First Outline. It will remind you later that you should make some comment or conclusion to finish off the paper.
5. The better planned your first outline is, the easier it will be at the next stage to find the information to fill it out.

Step 3. Collect information that will fill out your outline.

START EARLY

This may come from many sources—encyclopedias, books, magazines, tapes, records, film, and interviews are the common ones—but there is one source that even a conscientious student sometimes overlooks. That is *your own mind*. You may feel that the sources you are pursuing are much better informed than you are. If you find yourself behaving like a mere recording machine, taking down exactly what your source says, stop. Go back over the last three items you have written down and think about them. Be sceptical; ask questions; be alert to your own reactions to what you are reading, and record them. Just because you are feeling that your mind is not a very good one, that is no reason to turn it off. Your source reports matter-of-factly, "The Germans attempted to break the British morale in 1944 with a V-2," (a predecessor of the ICBM). If you are alert to your own mind, you might ask, "Why did it not work?" and perhaps get an answer that the British national character is such that it does not respond to threats. At that point, you would write in your notes, "The V-2 attack failed because the British character does not yield to threats." Don't worry whether your idea is right or wrong. The main thing is to get it down. Later on you can verify it or scrap it. A good set of notes, even on a research paper, will contain a generous sprinkling of the student's own ideas. In the final essay it is just these individual thoughts which might make the difference between a mediocre grade and a good one. (Read the Section, "About Note taking", page 28.)

Step 4. Revise your outline

Read over all the information you have collected. Then take a fresh page and draft a new outline. It does not have to be substantially different from your preliminary outline, but it may be. You may have discovered that a point you thought central in the preliminary outline really does not have much significance, while another point may now appear worth spending half the essay on. There is nothing sacred about the original outline; draw up a new one that fits the facts. It should be a great deal fuller because you now have a clearer idea of the whole range of your topic. A section of it might look like this.

C. Battle of Britain and the Atlantic submarine war

1. Battle of Britain

(a)—a continent against an island

(b)—bombing planes against anti-aircraft defenses

i guns

ii balloons

iii R.A.F.

(c)—civilian involvement

2. Battle of the Atlantic

(a) key issue, supplies from America

(b) the convoy system

(c) routes and tactics

If your teacher or adviser had to approve your first outline, take this one in for a quick check now.

Step 5. Research the gaps in your second outline.

START EARLY

Resist the temptation at this point to start writing too soon. Too soon means before you have gathered all the information you need to complete the paper you have outlined. This is true research; you are looking for very specific information to answer very specific questions; for example, How far is it from Halifax to Liverpool? Where exactly is Stalingrad? At what point did the German army cross into France?

Step 6. Write the paper.

Take great care with each sentence and each paragraph. The order you have in your outline. The facts and ideas are all there in your notes. So concentrate on the writing, one paragraph at a time, paying attention to how you are expressing your ideas. Keep writing. Resist the temptation to stop and re-write a part of the paper until you have worked your way through the whole outline. This completes the first draft of what promises to be a good paper.

While many students use the outline method quite successfully, another method, used by professional scholars and yet simple enough for junior high school students, is the note-card method. It provides for more flexible organizing and an

even more complete separation of the three stages of collecting, organizing, and writing.

The Note-card Method

START EARLY

Step 1. Get a clear idea of what your topic means and what you are expected to cover.

It is no use, for example, starting out to collect information on "Satire" for a 1500-word essay. It is just too big a topic. Think about it. Perhaps you will decide that *your* essay should focus on developing a definition of satire with specific illustrations; or that it should be an analysis of a particular piece of satiric writing, say Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*; or that it is to be an argument for the encouragement of satiric writing in Canada today. At this point, play it safe; consult your teacher for approval of the approach you want to take.

Step 2. Collect the ideas.

Get a supply of small index cards or note pads. These are the heart of the method. Write your notes on these cards, **one idea per card**. On each card put just **one idea**. Whether the ideas come from encyclopedias, other books, magazines, tapes, records, films, interviews, or — a very important source which even a conscientious student often overlooks — your own mind — whatever the source, write them down on the cards, one idea only on a card. Resist the temptation to write a long series of related thoughts on one card. It should not look like this:

Twentieth century society has lots to satirize: governments spend money carelessly, advertising dupes the public, and people who thoughtlessly pollute the environment.

p.21

but like this:

Target for C20 satire: governments
that waste money.

p.21

Target for C20 satire:
advertising which dupes
the public.

p.21

Target for C20 satire; people who thoughtlessly pollute the environment.

p.21

It may require a little more writing (you are repeating the key phrases), but in the long run it is worth it. When you get really skillful at using the note-cards, you won't even write one like this:

Swift's Proposal was intended to shock the landlords and government into having some compassion on the oppressed poor.

p.147.

but three like this,

The aim of Swift's Proposal
was to get better treatment
for the poor.

p.147

The target of Swift's Proposal
was the hard-hearted, oppressive
landlords and government.

p.147

Swift's method in the Proposal is shock. He states his case in such terms that the reader is horrified.

p.147

You can always re-combine ideas, and you may well end up with the original statement in your essay, but you are just as likely to have the first statement above as the topic sentence of a paragraph on the conditions of the poor in Ireland, the second statement in a paragraph describing the attitude of government and landlords, and the third in a section on Swift's techniques of satire. Putting one idea on a slip keeps you flexible.

What kind of ideas do you write down? Anything which you think may be relevant to the topic. It is important at Step 1 that you have a clear idea of what the topic means. If you are writing an analysis of *A Modest Proposal*, the fact that Swift became Dean of St. Patrick's in 1713 is not likely to be relevant. If you are writing on the topic, "The Need for Satire in the Twentieth Century," the fact that the word *satire* comes from a Latin phrase meaning "a full dish", though interesting, is not relevant. So you would not write those ideas down. But don't worry too much about what not to write; there will be another chance to reject notes you have taken and to pick up others you have rejected, at Steps 3 and 4. (Read the section "About Note taking", page 28.)

Step 3. Organize, using the note-cards.

How many note-cards should you have before starting to organize? This will depend on your style, the subject, and your personal approach to note taking. If you have followed carefully the procedure above—putting only one idea on a card, and testing each for relevance before starting to write—you can probably divide the number of words in your paper by fifteen to arrive at the number of cards you need.