

Planning Your Paper & Creating an Outline

Your academic paper is a summary of what you've learned through a process of research. Your audience—the reader—wants to know what you know. Your task is to guide them down the path you took from the spark of interest that generated a question or observation through your research and ultimately to the conclusion that answers your initial question or supports your observation.

Your paper is the story of how you know what you know.

An outline guides the writing of your paper, thesis, or dissertation, keeps you focused, and keeps you from falling prey to information-gathering-paralysis.

To create your working thesis statement for your paper, decide on the goal of the paper – what is it that you want to know? Consider using the journalist's tool of the 5W's + H to focus your academic papers.

Answering *Who, What, Where, Why, When, and How* create the structure for any narrative. These questions can also be used to create a final thesis or hypothesis.

- What is the problem/issue?
- Why is it a problem/issue?
- Who is involved?
- Where does it happen
- When does it happen?
- How often does it manifest?

Answering these questions will guide your thinking and focus your attention so you can gather the articles and interviews necessary to create a fully fleshed-out argument or hypothesis. (See more on the Creating a Thesis Statement handout). All of the questions may not always be necessary in every paper under every circumstance but most likely they are.

Once you have a working thesis statement or hypothesis define your research questions, then create an outline, begin your research, and write the paper.

Your working thesis and research questions guide the writing of your introduction. Explaining the consequences of your thesis/hypothesis becomes the logic that is the body of your paper. Answering why any of it matters becomes your conclusion.

Step-by-step process for planning your paper:

- 1) Choose the goal for the paper. What issue/observation do you want to prove or what question do you want to answer?
- 2) Create a working thesis statement or hypothesis that reflects the goal.
- 3) Answer the 5W+H; decide the specific focus of the paper.
- 4) Create the outline:
 - a) The introduction: state the thesis or hypothesis that will guide the paper & focus the reader
 - b) First major thesis statement issue
 - i) Supporting evidence & relevant interviews
 - ii) Transition statement that relates to next big issue
 - c) Second major thesis statement issue
 - i) Supporting evidence & relevant interviews
 - ii) Transition statement that relates to next big issue
 - d) Third major thesis statement issue
 - i) Supporting evidence & relevant interviews
 - ii) Transition statement that begins to point to the summary
 - e) The conclusion: summary of your overall thesis statement that accurately reflects your goal for the paper and your research
- 5) Write the paper in the proper style (MLA, APA, Chicago):
 - a) Introduce the issue, problem, or premise; frame the thesis or hypothesis
 - b) Examine major issues; support the thesis or hypothesis with only relevant research (stay focused and on task)
 - c) State your conclusion ensuring that you have answered the all the thesis questions or proved the hypothesis
 - d) Cite research accurately; avoid plagiarism because software programs will find it