

How to Write an Academic Paper Using Method Instead of Madness

Jim Janossy 10/31/2005

Writing papers is, for many students, a difficult, trying, and intimidating task. This is truly unfortunate because typically at least half of the courses students take in college use paper-writing as a form of academic exercise. Expressing yourself well in writing is often a crucial skill in the professional world. Yet whereas being articulate and knowledgeable in written composition in the workplace is a prized skill, academic writing demands even more. To do academic writing you must not only develop the ability to express yourself in words but also the ability to gather information from a variety of sources and select and present relevant nuggets of fact from those sources. You must be able to appropriately sprinkle in your own observations, determinations and conclusions. And you must document precisely where you obtained your facts. Academic writing is not about expressing your own opinions alone but rather expressing facts established by others and your reasoned observations and conclusions based on them.

What makes paper-writing a dread to many students? My observation, after two decades of teaching at the college level, is that the answer to this question is simple. The dread comes from not knowing how to do it. No one teaches you a method for going about it! You'll find any number of references on how to format bibliographic entries, how to use search engines, how to create an outline, and how to use word processors. But you very likely won't find a short, simple description of a modern method to locate and extract information, build a paper in stages, and scale the effort to the rigor of the assignment. I have looked, and I haven't found such a thing. It took me a long while to realize that this was sorely needed. I hope to cure this deficiency in this brief document. I've arranged this method in numbered steps. Start with step 1 and continue to step 15.

1. **Start early.** If you're busy now but think that you'll have more time later, think again. The future only seems uncluttered because it hasn't arrived. **When** it arrives it will be as cluttered as the present. How does something get late? One day at a time! You won't have a clear block of time later so take the next step (below) no later than the day after you get the assignment. If you don't you will already be getting late. One day at a time.
2. **Start with a page budget.** Let's say the assignment you face is a descriptive essay or an equally typical "compare and contrast" paper. Let's say the assignment is:

Compare and contrast the role that Comiskey Park played in the lives of immigrants to Chicago between 1880 and 1980 with the role played by Wrigley Field in the lives of immigrants during the same period.

Let's say that the assignment is intended to be a paper of 2,000 words, which is about 8 pages in length (1" margins all around, double spaced). Let's further state that the paper is not to have a cover page, and that the required page count does not include the bibliography.

A page budget for a paper is a plan. You decide what parts the paper is going to have and

allocate a number of words or pages to each part. In the example assignment, a reasonable page budget would be:

.5 page	Opening statement; what the paper is about, what you are going to present in it, what you are going to explore or determine or prove
1 page	Facts about Comiskey Park – where it is located, when it was built, who plays there, noteworthy events that happened there, what is played there: baseball.
1 page	Facts about Wrigley Field – where it is located, when it was built, who plays there, noteworthy events that happened there, what is played there: baseball.
1 page	Immigration to Chicago in general, what immigrant groups came during the time period and when, interesting facts related to each group you cite and their relationship to sports in general and baseball in particular
4 pages	The heart of the paper addressed to the topic: what was the relationship of similar or contrasting groups to baseball and where did they have their major involvement with it (which ballpark), and why?
.5 page	Summation and conclusion; how you explored the topic and what you determined or proved

You need a page budget to guide you to give an appropriate amount of coverage to each part of the paper. Without a page budget it's very easy to write too much about something you already know about or is easy to locate instead of addressing the all of the issues intended. When you follow a page budget you focus on completing the pieces with the allocated coverage. You'll find that with a page budget (and the steps below) you'll actually have to edit down what you write for each point rather than trying to drag out the paper with redundancies or generalities! That is a great position to be in!

If the instructor structures the assignment to specify a page budget, follow it! More likely, the instructor will not specify this and it's up to you to plan it. So plan it! Writing is not about simply noodling out what comes to mind, then stretching out the words and phrases to meet the page length. Compare your page budget to specifically what the instructor said the paper must cover. Make sure you cover what is intended.

- 3. Gather your sources.** Start with your assigned text if there is one. An academic text will usually have a bibliography or footnote citations referring to other books or articles. Those are an excellent first set of materials to seek. If there is no assigned text related to the assignment start with an online library search or with Amazon.com and a subject search. You need one or a few academic sources that have bibliographies. The bibliographies in these first sources will have done much of your research for you.

Build a list of the works that the first source bibliographies point you to. If the research effort is small (less than a 25 page paper, less than 15 sources) a written or typed list is

adequate. If the research effort is more than this (few undergraduate papers will be) then consider building your list in a spreadsheet or word processor table. For a large search list you need to be able to sort the academic journal sources so that when you look for them you can look for all of the items in each journal at the same time and keep track of the ones you have already looked for but can't find (and hence give up on).

When you locate sources get as many as you can as paper copies that you can later mark up:

- For journal articles, make a copy at the library for markup. Don't forget to copy the cover or front page of the journal too since that is where the citation information as to article location will be found!
- For web sources print out the pages for markup making sure your browser is printing the URL (web site address) in the header or footer.
- For sources that are books, check out the books if you can. You can't mark up library books but you can flag pages with removable post-it notes.

Look for sources that have their own bibliographies. These will be located in journals rather than common magazines and will be considered more academically credible. Unless an article or a book is a recognized classic (or unless your paper topic is intentionally historical) you will generally find that more recent sources are more credible than older sources, especially in the science and technology fields.

4. **Do a first read of your gathered sources.** A first read is a quick reading through the article or a quick browse of the relevant parts of a book. You want to get a general sense of the subject matter to help you form an idea of the subject matter and major issues in the field. Mark up the article with pencil or use post-it notes to mark pages that seem to be about important concepts or facts. Do not hope to get an in-depth knowledge of any particular source at this time, but do form a specific judgment about the source as a whole.

You can and should start your first reads even before all of your sources have been gathered. Put your time to good use! Carry a few journal article copies with you at all times. When you have a few minutes between classes, on a bus or train ride, at lunch, or even on the porcelain throne, turn off your Ipod and instead quick read a few more pages. Use a pencil to circle important concepts or mark relevant topics. Always mark where you left off reading so you can pick up there the next time with no wasted time.

You may at this stage find that some sources are not as good as you need. If so, set those aside. You want the best sources you can find, not just any old "editorial" tripe. The sources you decide to keep are your selected sources. Checkmark each item you have finished reading on your list or on the upper right corner of its first page.

5. **Draft a core statement.** This is a simple statement of what specific points the heart of your paper will cover. This is just a paragraph of a few sentences; three or four sentences are ideal. You will have formed this idea once you have done the first read of your sources. In the example assignment above the following kind of core statement will probably have come to you:

The Irish were one of the first major immigrant groups to come to Chicago, followed by the Swedes, Germans, Italians, eastern Europeans, Chinese, Greeks, Koreans and others. The first generation of many groups often used sports they brought with them to build national identity and self esteem, while the second generation adopted "American" sports like baseball. Groups with access to playing fields were more likely to develop the skills needed to move into professional baseball. Ethnic crowds usually attended games at the closest and least expensive major ballpark, Comiskey, which was operated by Irishman Charles Comiskey.

6. **Now do a second read of your selected sources.** Having formed your core statement, read each of your selected sources a second time, this time in-depth. In particular, look for quotable things that support or deal with your core statement. Mark each such potential quote with a yellow marker. As you complete the second read of each source note on your list or each first page corner that you have completed its second read.
7. **Create your document "infrastructure" using your word processor.** Set the margins to 1" all around (or whatever the instructor has specified), insert the header with page numbers and the footer with filename and path, form the first page, name and title lines, insert a page break and label the page Bibliography. The bibliography page? YES! You won't actually enter things in the bibliography now. You will add items to it as you enter quotes from the item (see step 8). So now you have two pages: your starting page with your name and paper title and a blank page labeled **Bibliography**.

The web site at <http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/history/footnotes.html> provides very clear examples of the "Chicago" form of paper writing, notes and bibliography. This is an excellent format to follow. The MLA style sheet, published in book form, is another popular standard. Keep these points in mind:

- the purpose of your bibliography is to document whole books or articles
- the purpose of notes (either footnotes at each page bottom or endnotes at the end of the paper) is to link a quoted phrase or sentence or idea in the paper to a specific page in an item in your bibliography.

Footnotes or endnotes also provide a way for you to optionally express peripheral thoughts in connection with a citation. What is a footnote? This is the form of a footnote.¹ Footnotes are especially easy to create with Word using the menu bar Insert > Reference > Footnote; explore how to use this with Word's online help! All we are doing here at step 7 is creating places to put bibliographic entries. Until step 8 you don't yet have anything to put into your Bibliography page. Here is another footnote.²

8. **Type in your marked quotes, each with a typed-in comment to yourself on how it relates to your core statement.** This is a truly modern part! Your job at this step is pure typing and not much thinking. You have already marked all of your quotes in

¹ See? The little superscript number in the text refers to a small bunch of words at the bottom of the page with the same number. Word manages these numbers for you automatically! You are a real nutcake if you don't explore this feature in Word for your academic work! It is as easy as pie to create these and Word changes the numbers for you (again, automatically) as you move quotes around! You never have to touch these once you type them!

² I just wanted to show you what happens when you have two footnotes on the same page.

your selected sources. Just type them in, indented a half-inch inward on each side from your normal margins. As you start the quotes from each different source, form and type its entry into your Bibliography page, keeping the entries in alphabetical sequence. As you type in each quote, form its citation footnote. You need citation footnotes that are page-specific to the work you are citing. With this method, this is a snap to accomplish. This is academically credible. Less precise citations are highly suspect because they are ambiguous.

This typing step is mostly mechanical. It can be started, stopped, and restarted easily. It is fairly mindless work. But it does two very important things for you: it builds the bulk of your paper with academically solid content, and it completes your bibliography for you. When you have completed this step for all your selected sources you are 80% done with your paper, although you haven't yet written your original part of it! Think about it. Your quotes are all present, ready for you to move around with cut and paste to build your case, and your footnotes and bibliography are entirely complete!

9. **Develop your core thoughts and support them with quotes.** Insert several blank lines at the start of your paper, before the first quote, and start writing the core content of your paper. Ultimately this will fall in the middle of the document but you start writing with it because it's the most important content of your paper. Introduce a point then cut and paste quotes from the collection you already typed in to explore, support or illustrate it. In some cases you'll find it advantageous to just lead into a subject area by asking a question that essentially says "What do major researchers have to say about this point?" Then cite two or three powerful quotations from different sources. Then restate and sum them up adding your own thoughts on the issue. Follow this pattern to address all of the content of your core statement. You will find that you are building the heart of your paper with content that really makes sense and is supported by documented facts and the quotes of others. Having the quotes already available for insertion, and already properly cited as to the bibliographic source and page number, frees you completely at this point from that minutia and detail. At this stage you are assembling your logical argument methodically and productively. Here, articulating your thinking is fun, and you see an almost finished product emerge in sections.
10. **Write the pages that preface your core.** In the example, these would be the pages that talk about the location, building, and interesting historical facts about Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field. These are not the heart of your paper but you will still use a few quotations to anchor this content with facts.
11. **Read over and closely edit your nearly-completed paper.** Never call a paper complete until you have edited it multiple times. Correct or adjust your word usage, grammar, and spelling using the spelling checker in the word processor. This does two things for you. Obviously, it cleans up your paper, and at this point you delete any typed-in but unused quotes from the body of the paper. But it also gives you a great mindset to write your conclusion and, lastly, your introductory statement.
12. **Write your conclusion page.** At this point you understand the scope of your arguments and the facts you have cited, and the edit you just did puts it all in mind. Make your conclusion pithy—that is, concise. Briefly restate the major points you explored and

what you have “proven” with your quotes and facts. Do not be redundant in terms of actual word usage and sentenced structure, a common mistake that “amateur” students use to try to lengthen a paper to meet a page count requirement. If you have followed the method above you will have no need to insert redundant fluff—you will have more than enough length!

13. **Write your opening statement.** It may sound funny to write your opening statement last, but what better time is there for you to introduce what you are going to write about and prove, than after you have done it? At this point you very clearly know what you are going to present since you have already presented it. This is also the time to write an abstract, or highly concise summary of the paper, if that is a requirement.³
14. **Give your paper a final editing.** This is your last opportunity to eliminate any spelling, grammar, or “connection” errors where the parts of your paper join. I personally have written more than 12 books that have been published. Each one of them was edited multiple times by a copyeditor and by me. Is your grade important? Do a final edit!
15. **Crate and store your source material copied pages; return your library books.** You may discover in a subsequent research effort that some of the sources you used would be useful for new work. Get a cardboard box and store your materials there. Include a copy of the paper on diskette or CD-ROM. Don’t discard them for a year or more. You will eventually be grateful that you have saved these materials with your markings. You can always toss them later if you decide they will serve no useful future purpose.

This method works! It works for undergraduate papers and it works for graduate papers. You may think you can do faster work with the informal “pile of open books” non-method you often see undergrads trying, but it’s simply not true. And that pile of books non-method is absolutely hopeless for graduate work, where you need a level of rigor in your written products that demands organized extraction of prior knowledge, rigorous logical arguments, and precise indication of the origin or cited facts.

If you have a method, you have the means to expend effort and get results. If you have no method you can expend huge amounts of labor and have little of value to show for it. Are you here in college to repeat high school practices, have little consistency in your results, and get mediocre college grades? Or are you prepared to exercise a bit of discipline with a definite method that lays out step-by-step how to create a quality piece of academic writing? Ultimately the decision of approach is up to you. If you want to settle for poor results, stick with your pile of open books non-method; to really ensure a horrible outcome, put even that off until the last minute and pull an all-nighter! On the other hand, if you want to actually learn something that can make you a consistent producer of original high quality academic writing, with the benefit of knowing how far along you are on a given paper at any point and how much effort remains, try my 15-step method. You will be truly amazed at the results! As that bearded guy from the clothing store says at the end of every commercial, “I guarantee it.”

Don’t even think of buying a paper or cutting and pasting writing from the web into a paper without citing it. The same folks who sell papers on the web have built web-based checkers that instructors use to compare your papers to millions of others. Write your own stuff!

³ In formal academic publishing it usually is a requirement, but usually is not for student class papers.