

# How to Write an Academic Paper Using Method Instead of Madness

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Writing papers is, for many students, a difficult 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:

- a. Develop the ability to express yourself and logical arguments clearly in words
- b. Learn how to gather information from a variety of academically-credible sources
- c. Learn how to select and present relevant nuggets of fact from those sources
- d. Figure out how to appropriately sprinkle in your own observations and conclusions
- e. Know how to document precisely where you obtained your facts.

Academic writing is **not** about expressing your own opinions alone, but involves expressing facts established by others and your reasoned observations and conclusions based on those facts.

What makes paper-writing a dread to many students? My observation, after two decades of college teaching, 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. I hope to make a small contribution to curing this deficiency in this brief document. I've arranged the method in numbered steps. For each paper, 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 typical "compare and contrast" paper with this requirement:

*Compare and contrast the role that Comiskey Park played in the lives of immigrants to Chicago between 1880 and 1920 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 to have a cover page and that the required page count does not include the cover, Endnotes, or 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:

½ 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
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½ page	<b>Definitions and facts</b> about Comiskey Park: where it is located, when it was built, who plays there, noteworthy events that happened there, what is played there: baseball.
½ page	<b>Definitions and facts</b> 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	<b>Definitions and facts about immigration to Chicago:</b> what immigrant groups and the Irish came and when, interesting facts related to each group and their relationship to sports in general and baseball in particular
5 pages	<b>The heart of the paper addressed to the topic:</b> 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?
½ page	<b>Summation and conclusion:</b> 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 information for instead of addressing 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, platitudes, generalities, or overly large type. 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.*** This is best done by printing a copy of the assignment for the paper and not just reading it on a computer screen and trying to remember what it says.

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 academically-credible 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, word processor table, or better yet, learn how to use the Endnote software product. 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 may give up on).

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

- For academic 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; you will need that to cite the source.
- 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 and dealing with that type of writing) you will generally find that 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 quickly 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 reading of your sources. In the example assignment above the following kind of core statement will probably form in your mind:

*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, was close to the Irish neighborhoods on the south side.*

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 the core statement you formulated based on your quick read of the material. On your own paper copies of material, mark each such potential quote with a yellow marker. For library books, mark them with removable post-it notes. 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 else the instructor has specified), insert the header with page numbers,

form the cover sheet or first page, name and title lines, insert a page break and label the page Endnotes. Then insert a page break and label the new page Bibliography. *The Endnotes and Bibliography pages?* YES! You won't actually enter things on these now. You will add items to it as you enter quotations from your sources (see step 8). So now you have three or four pages: your cover or starting page with your name and paper title, a blank page, a blank page labeled Endnotes, and a blank page labeled Bibliography. The sample paper attached provides a very clear example of this in the "Chicago" format of paper writing, endnotes and bibliography. This is an excellent format to follow. MLA is another popular standard, and APA is another; use what the instructor tells you to (different academic disciplines each have their own favorite). Keep these universally applicable points in mind:

- the purpose of your bibliography is to indicate whole books or articles or works once
- 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 a source listed in your bibliography
- more than one endnote can refer to the same bibliography item, usually to a different page within it.

While footnotes are more elegant, endnotes are preferred for college work because they don't detract from the number of words of actual writing that a given number of pages accounts for. Therefore, I'll refer to citations as endnotes from here on. Endnotes also provide a way for you to optionally express peripheral thoughts in connection with a citation. All we are doing here at step 7 is creating places to put endnote and bibliographic entries. Until step 8 you don't yet have anything to put into your Endnotes or Bibliography pages.

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 your selected sources. Just type them in to the body of your evolving paper, prefacing each with a note to yourself about what it is relevant to. Type it in indented a half-inch inward on each side from your normal margins, and cite it according to your required citation format (Chicago Manuscript, MLA, APA) using your word processor's "Insert / Reference / Endnote" feature. (This feature will manage your superscript number and Endnote sequence later on when you move quotations around). Before you start typing in the quotations from each different source, form and type its appropriate entry into your Bibliography page, keeping the entries in alphabetical sequence. As you type in each quote, form its citation endnote. You need citation endnotes 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. You can start on this work, stop it, and easily restart where you left off. It is fairly mindless work. But it does two very important things for you:

- builds the bulk of your paper with academically solid content: your quotations and endnotes
- completes your Endnotes and Bibliography page for you as you go.

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 logical case, and your Endnotes and Bibliography pages are entirely complete! You are now free to link it all together

with your own original thoughts and are well prepared with academic ammunition to do precisely that!

9. **Develop your core thoughts and support them with quotations.** Insert several blank lines at the start of your paper, before your first source quotation, and start writing the core content of your paper. Note the introduction, but the CORE CONTENT. Ultimately this will fall in the middle of the document but you start writing with it because it's the most important part of your paper. Introduce a topic or concept or question such as *"Which sports stadium was most important to Irish immigrants?"* then move three quotations from different sources up that relate to the question. Then conclude the paragraph with a statement that sums up what the three quotations said, such as *"therefore it is reasonable to conclude that... ."*

**See?** You let the quotations clearly indicate what others have said before you and have published as fact in academically credible sources. Then you insert your own summation and/or conclusion to that stream of thought.

Or turn this around and introduce an original statement and then cut and paste quotations 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 three or more 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. And your word processor's "insert reference" function will manage the superscripts and Endnotes sequence for you!

10. **Write the "fact" pages that preface your core and describe/define its major elements** (the two ballparks and immigration to Chicago in general in this case). 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. *Don't exceed the page budget for these, they are not the most important part of the paper!*
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 here. 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 well-prepared mindset to write your conclusion and, lastly, your introductory statement.
12. **Write your conclusion.** 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 fresh in your mind. Make your conclusion pithy and concise. Very 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 sentence structure, a common mistake that high school 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 real content and length!

13. **Write your opening statement.** It may sound strange 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. Did you really think you write this first? Why? Your word processor lets you type in new material anywhere! This is also the time to write an abstract, or highly concise summary of the paper, if that is a requirement, as it often is in the case of academic papers submitted to an academic journal or conference.
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 a USB flash drive or CD-ROM. Don’t discard them for a few years. You may eventually be very 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 (once you graduate?).

***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 that’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 of cited facts.

If you have a method, you have the means to expend effort and get results:

$$\text{method} + \text{effort} = \text{results}$$

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, cram your paper writing into the night before, sweat bullets of anxiety over it, and get mediocre (or worse!) 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 that off 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.”

And by the way, 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 web sites and millions of other papers. Your plagiarism is almost certain to be found out. Write your own stuff and use this method to have fun doing it. You’ll be done days ahead of the deadline, but will see countless poor schlemiels laboring over poorly constructed last minute papers because they weren’t using a method.

## The Massacre at Fort Pillow:

### Holding Nathan Bedford Forrest Accountable

This is a part of an essay used as an example at the web site of Diana Hacker, at:

<http://dianahacker.com/pdfs/Hacker-Bish-CMS.pdf>

See that site for the full content of this essay. I have copied part of it and changed the font to 12 point Times New Roman, the margins to one inch all around, and eliminated the last name from the page numbering. **This is a formatting example you can follow for your DePaul Chicago Explore class.**

***Note that different academic disciplines use different writing guidelines!*** The format you see here is Chicago Manuscript format commonly used in History work (I was a history major as an undergrad). Other disciplines commonly use APA or MLA format. I like Chicago Manuscript format because citations are done with superscripts and do not clog up the body of the text with excess verbiage, so the page count is an accurate way of assessing the quantity of writing. In addition, endnotes provide room for the content of a citation and can include optional peripheral comments and explanations while not adding to the page count of the body. -- JJ

Ned Bishop

History 214

Professor Calculus

March 22, 1928

Although Northern newspapers of the time no doubt exaggerated some of the Confederate atrocities at Fort Pillow, most modern sources agree that a massacre of Union troops took place there on April 12, 1864. It seems clear that Union soldiers, particularly black soldiers, were killed after they had stopped fighting or had surrendered or were being held prisoner. Less clear is the role played by Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest in leading his troops. Although we will never know whether Forrest directly ordered the massacre, evidence suggests that he was responsible for it.

### What happened at Fort Pillow?

Fort Pillow, Tennessee, which sat on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, had been held by the Union for two years. It was garrisoned by 580 men, 292 of them from United States Colored Heavy and Light Artillery regiments, 285 from the white Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry. Nathan Bedford Forrest commanded about 1,500 men.<sup>1</sup>

The Confederates attacked Fort Pillow on April 12, 1864, and had virtually surrounded the fort by the time Forrest arrived on the battlefield. At 3:30 p.m., Forrest demanded the surrender of the Union forces, sending in a message of the sort he had used before: “The conduct of the officers and men garrisoning Fort Pillow has been such as to entitle them to being treated as prisoners of war. . . . Should my demand be refused, I cannot be responsible for the fate of your command.”<sup>2</sup> Union Major William Bradford, who had replaced Major Booth, killed earlier by sharpshooters, asked for an hour to consider the demand. Forrest, worried that vessels in the river were bringing in more troops, “shortened the time to twenty minutes.”<sup>3</sup> Bradford refused to surrender, and Forrest quickly ordered the attack.

The Confederates charged to the fort, scaled the parapet, and fired on the forces within. Victory came quickly, with the Union forces running toward the river or surrendering. The

Union soldiers were sitting ducks, given the constrained area within the fort, and we quickly overcome. Shelby Foote describes the scene like this:

Some kept going, right on into the river, where a number drowned and the swimmers became targets for marksmen on the bluff. Others, dropping their guns in terror, ran back toward the Confederates with their hands up, and of these some were spared as prisoners, while others were shot down in the act of surrender.<sup>4</sup>

In his own official report, Forrest makes no mention of the massacre. He does make much of the fact that the Union flag was not lowered by the Union forces, saying that if his men had not taken down the flag, “few, if any, would have survived unhurt another volley.” However, as Jack Hurst points out and Forrest must have known, in this twenty-minute battle “Federals running for their lives had little time to concern themselves with a flag.”<sup>6</sup>

This quotation is lengthy and since it is explicitly introduced set off in a paragraph of its own, no quotation marks are used.

This quotation is short enough to be quoted within the text.

The federal congressional report on Fort Pillow, which charged the Confederates with appalling atrocities, was strongly criticized by Southerners. Respected writer Shelby Foote, while agreeing that the report was “largely” fabrication, points out that the “casualty figures . . . indicated strongly that unnecessary killing had occurred.”<sup>7</sup> In an important article, John Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort Jr. argue that the most trustworthy evidence is that written within about ten days of the battle, before word of the congressional hearings circulated and Southerners realized the extent of Northern outrage. The article reprints a group of letters and newspaper sources written before April 22 and thus “untainted by the political overtones the controversy later assumed.”<sup>8</sup> Cimprich and Mainfort conclude that these sources “support the case for the occurrence of a massacre” but that Forrest’s role remains “clouded” because of inconsistencies in testimony.<sup>9</sup>

The original example continues beyond this point. I have only included the above as an example. See the online example for the full paper. -- JJ

End notes match superscripts. Entries here explicitly identify the location of each fact or quotation by page number. **More than one endnotes can refer to the same bibliography item.**

Notes

1. John Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort Jr., eds., "Fort Pillow Revisited: New Evidence about an Old Controversy," *Civil War History* 28, no. 4 (1982): 293-94.
2. Quoted in Brian Steel Wills, *A Battle from the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 182.
3. *Ibid.*, 183.
4. Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, a Narrative: Red River to Appomattox* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 110.
5. Nathan Bedford Forrest, "Report of Maj. Gen. Nathan B. Forrest, C. S. Army, Commanding Cavalry, of the Capture of Fort Pillow," *Shotgun's Home of the American Civil War*, [http:// www.civilwarhome.com/forrest.htm](http://www.civilwarhome.com/forrest.htm).
6. Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 174.
7. Foote, *Civil War*, 111.
8. Cimprich and Mainfort, "Fort Pillow," 295.
9. *Ibid.*, 305.
10. *Ibid.*, 299.
11. Foote, *Civil War*, 110.
12. Quoted in Wills, *Battle from the Start*, 187.
13. Albert Castel, "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence," *Civil War History* 4, no. 1 (1958): 44-45.
14. Cimprich and Mainfort, "Fort Pillow," 300.
15. Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest*, 177.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 175.
18. Foote, *Civil War*, 111.
19. Cimprich and Mainfort, "Fort Pillow," 304.
20. Quoted in Wills, *Battle from the Start*, 189.

21. Ibid., 215.
22. Quoted in Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest*, 177.
23. Quoted in James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 402.
24. Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest*, 74.
25. Quoted in Foote, *Civil War*, 106.

The bibliography is the last page in the essay. It contains one entry for every source used, in alphabetical sequence by author.

## Bibliography

Castel, Albert. "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence." *Civil War History* 4, no. 1 (1958): 37-50.

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Hurst, Jack. *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1993.

McPherson, James M. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Wills, Brian Steel. *A Battle from the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.