Advice on Writing

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Much advice on writing that you've been given is lore--that is, it is passed down from teacher to students (who go on to become teachers repeating the same lore) without being checked against reality. When people started doing real research on how people actually write, they found that effective writers break a lot of the rules that lore hands down. This discrepancy between the advice that teachers give and the practices that actually work puts students in several binds.

First, teachers sometimes require students to do things that are actively harmful to the effectiveness of a paper (e.g., requiring that the introduction end with a thesis--most teachers are perfectly satisfied with a thesis question or hypo-thesis). Second, teachers often mis-describe their own standards. So, for example, teachers *say* that correctness is tremendously important to them, but study after study shows that quality of argument is actually much more important than grammatical correctness (what happens is that readers don't notice errors in well-argued texts).

My advice on writing is grounded in what practices actually work for writers, so it may contradict much of what you have been told, but my point is that much of what you have been told is not very helpful. While the following is written with our paper assignments in mind, my hope is that it will be helpful in lots of writing situations you face. The short version is: when it comes to writing, be flexible in your writing processes, start early, make sure you understand your rhetorical situation, and set reasonable expectations.

A large part of the advice that follows is intended to make the writing experience more fun, more productive, and less prone to writing blocks--although the occasional writing block seems pretty much to come with the territory. I'll begin by talking about what creates writing blocks, just because those things typify the most painful things about writing in general.

In my experience (as a writer and teacher), people are headed for lots of writing blocks if they set unreasonable expectations for themselves, or if they make the writing process so painful that their natural instinct is to put it off.

There are several ways to set unreasonable expectations. The most common, and probably most destructive, is to try to write a perfect first draft. It's interesting that research on the subject suggests that people with writing blocks know too much about the writing process--they have too many rules in their heads about what the first sentence has to look like, how long every sentence should be, what to do, what not to do. It's all those rules that freeze them up. If they can let go of the rules, and just try to get their point across, they can get a good draft out--then they can worry about getting an effective first sentence and so on. That confirms my experience. So, much of what follows will emphasize that you need to get a first draft out. Just write. Then worry about revising.

But another kind of student often gets a writing block, and that's the student who is trying to write a paper that is much harder than the assignment requires. Of course, no one chooses to do this--it comes from the student misunderstanding the assignment. That happens if students miss a lot of class, when an assignment resembles a kind of assignment with which the student is

familiar, when a student has unintentionally gone about the assignment in a way s/he didn't know would be hard (as when the research for the student's topic is really difficult), and quite often from a vague assignment sheet. Sometimes, rereading the assignment will help you realize that's what you're doing; more often, the best solution is to talk to the instructor. If you run your argument by me, I can tell you if you're taking on more than you can really handle in these papers.

According to research, effective writers have a complicated and recursive writing process with lots of breaks. When they review their work, they make "global" changes. "Global" changes are changes to the entire piece. In other words, effective writers often change their whole argument, do additional research, drop or add pages (not just sentences), and reorganize the entire paper. Students, on the contrary (especially first year college students), tend to write the paper out in one sitting, review it once, and make only "lexical" changes. "Lexical" changes are changes at the sentence level--adding or deleting a few words here and there. If they get a submission back with comments, they will only make changes (of a few words) to places where the reader has made marginal comments.
You need to understand that minimal changes between versions of a paper will mean minimal--if any --change between grades on submissions. Teachers often do not remark on every instance of a problem, and generally expect students to make more changes than specified in margin comments. (In other words, if a teacher writes an end comment that says, "The assertions need more evidence," s/he expects the student to go back through the paper and support assertions everywhere, not just where there are margin comments.)

My personal hypothesis is that students have a truncated writing process because they are encouraged and often required to do so; students tell me that they have been told that they should not change their theses between submissions (which I think is bizarre advice). Follow the evidence--if your research shows that your thesis is wrong, then change your thesis.

There are lots of ways to make the writing process so painful that you put it off hoping that the paper fairy will magically write your paper for you. No one intentionally makes the process painful, of course, but we do so in lots of unintentional ways. The most common way is to procrastinate until guilt, anxiety, and sheer adrenaline force you to sit down and do the paper. While that sometimes works, it often doesn't. Although students often tell me that they write better under pressure, it generally turns out that's a false comparison, as they haven't figured out any other way to make themselves write at all! Try starting before the pressure is terrifying, and see what happens. The paper won't be any worse, and the process just might be less painful.

Sometimes students procrastinate because they think they will spend less time as a whole on the paper if they wait till the night before. On the contrary, because much of that time will be while you are brain-dead from lack of sleep, you will probably spend more time than if you had tried writing while awake. People have different rhythms, and you need to figure out yours. Some people are most alert late at night, some early in the morning, some in the middle of the day--once you've figured out your best times for writing, try to schedule your days so that is when you write.

If you procrastinate, you limit your research opportunities. While doing research from your home computer is wonderful, it isn't always adequate. There are times when you simply must go to the library, and, if you've waited till the last minute, that may not be possible. You cannot write a good paper without good evidence, so make sure that you give yourself time to get the evidence. Start early.

Setting reasonable expectations is a necessary part of starting early. Rather than expect that you'll write the whole paper at one sitting, set a goal of accomplishing one chunk of the writing process. For instance, you might set an initial goal of doing the necessary research by a certain time, or writing a rough outline, a preliminary thesis statement, or an introduction. Then, you get a break and do something fun.

When you review a paper, it's a good idea to separate the editing and the revising processes. By "editing" I mean the act of going through and noting where there are problems. "Revising" means trying to solve the problems. So, read the paper through (out loud usually works best) and just mark things that don't quite work or places you think need improvement. Don't try to make the changes; just indicate where you think changes need to be made. (This is particularly important if you're prone to any kind of anxiety problems.) After a break--ideally of a day or more--try to make some of therevisions. Writing is sort of like making bread--you need time to let the ideas rise.

Writing a Draft

A rough draft has your main arguments, a reasonable organization, and most of your evidence. It's generally about the length that the assignment requires, possibly on the short side of the page (or word) range. A good process for getting to a reasonable draft is:

Read the assignment several times. That may seem like silly advice--why read it more than once if you understood it the first time?--but it continually surprises me how many papers fail because they were perfectly fine papers for a different assignment. (This is, apparently, also true of exams--lots of students do badly on them because they only answer part of the question.)

Not all college papers are asking for the same kind of paper, and it gets even more complicated when you are writing outside of academia. It's helpful to know whether the assignment is asking you just to demonstrate your knowledge (e.g., an essay exam that is asking that you repeat back to the teacher what s/he has said in lectures), or make an argument/interpretation of your own (e.g., the papers for this class). Some people recommend that you mark up the assignment sheet to make sure that you are clear just what is required, recommended, or possible.

I've worked with a lot of writing teachers, and I've discovered that there is a confusion almost built into many writing assignments. Some teachers' assignment sheets describe the process you might use to do the paper, while other teachers' describe what the product must look like. Those two very different kinds of assignments can look very similar (I often have to ask instructors what they have in mind). Imagine an assignment that looks like this:

> First, describe Chester. Next, describe Hubert. Then, argue which one is bigger.

It isn't clear whether that assignment requires that the paper have that order--the first paragraph will describe Chester, the second will describe Hubert, and so on--, or if it is telling you the process in which you would think about the topic. In the latter case, your paper might have a different structure. I have found that the only way to know is to ask the teacher. In the case of this class, I describe what must happen in each paper (generally with the "must" in bold), but there's still a lot of flexibility in the questions. I am not describing the order in which ideas will appear in the final version, and you'll almost certainly have to narrow the paper quite a bit.

My point is that you often have to ask the teacher to clarify the assignment, and few teachers will mind that (the only question teachers really hate is, "Will this be on the exam?") It is also a good idea to be clear in your own mind just what is required and what is recommended and what is optional--some people say that marking up the assignment sheet (e.g., highlighting words like "must") will help keep that clear.

(Re)Formulate a clear and fairly narrow question. Some assignment sheets pose a very clear question, but some (such as the ones for this class) pose one that is broader in some way than what you'll use for your paper. Some teachers say that you have to have a clear thesis before writing the paper; that isn't true. It is true, though, that you should probably have a pretty clear sense of the question. (And you should have a pretty clear idea of just what your answer is when you've finished a paper.)

Set out a plan for writing the paper. I don't mean an outline--I mean a calendar. Some people find that this works very well for reducing anxiety about writing, but some people find it a waste of time. So, try it once, and if doesn't help, don't do it again. Block out a loose schedule for writing the paper, setting goals for yourself--that you'll do the research on a certain day, get a draft out another day, revise it another day, take it to the Writing Center the next day, and so on. Don't make it too detailed, and be reasonable about what a human being can do with limited time.

(Re)Read the necessary material. It's pretty hard to write a paper on material you haven't read at least twice, to write a good paper you should expect to have to read it three or four times, and many people read the material one more time between paper drafts. Thus, for instance, if you're writing a paper on John Locke's *Letter*, read the text several times. You won't necessarily understand it perfectly, but you ought to be able to articulate what you don't understand about it. If there are basic questions that you have that are keeping you from understanding the text--words you don't know, passages that don't make sense, unfamiliar references--ask someone.

If you're writing about material that you collect, be reasonable about what you can get read--so, for instance, if you're doing independent research, focus on articles rather than books.

As you read, take notes and mark up the text in whatever way works best for you. I have had one student in twenty years who found it helpful to use three by five cards (and I've used them exactly once in order to write something that never did get published). Some people use very complicated and intricate methods of marking texts--e.g., color-coded highlighters or post-its--while some people write out notes in long-hand or on the computer. Do whatever works for you.

Just make sure that you keep track of where you got your information--this is not only important for being able to do the Works Cited page, but also in case you want to retrace your research steps at some point.

I tend to recommend that you print up or photocopy your sources because then you can mark the text. Marking up the text helps you find things later, and it also keeps you in a critical frame of mind. Some textbooks have very complicated schema for marking texts; I really don't think it matters much what method you use, as long as it works for you. One thing I do recommend is that you note any places where the author speaks directly to the reader--saying things like "My point is" or "In conclusion." I also strongly recommend that you mark passages that are confusing. One of the best uses of class time and office hours is to go over those passages. (We'll generally begin class with the question, "Did you have any questions about the reading?"That's a great time to mention those passages you thought were confusing. And one of the functions of the microthemes is for you to ask exactly those kinds of questions.)

Start writing. Some people like to start with a clear idea of what they want to say, while some people find it more helpful just to start with a clear statement of the paper's question and no idea of their answer. That's fine. Some people use writing to discover the question and thesis, and that's fine, but they generally have a clear sense of audience (for instance, writing it as a journal entry to themselves, letter to a specific person such as a friend or an author, or article for a specific magazine).

There are lots of ways of getting a draft out--free-writing, brainstorming, letter-writing, answering certain questions (who/what/when/where/why), writing as though it's an exam situation. It doesn't much matter what you use; what does seem to matter is that you put your emphasis on getting your thoughts together, rather than making your sentences perfect.

One way to come up with ideas that students often don't know comes from Aristotle. You take the topic of your paper (e.g., "Chester's attitude toward the red ball") and then define it, divide it into different categories, describe a larger category of which it is a part, describe its opposite, come up with an analogy, and list its good and bad consequences [1]. Once you've written those things down, you'll probably have a clearer sense about your topic, as well as some possible ways to make your argument.

Some people need a clear outline before beginning a paper, but most people don't. A rough outline (a flow chart) suffices for lots of people; a clear statement of the thesis or thesis question will often imply, if not the order of topics, at least just what has to get covered at some point in the paper. It isn't uncommon to come up with a good organization at the first shot, but it's probably more common to discover the organization as one writes--my experience suggests that most people who write really good introductions write them as the very last thing.

Just to be clear: not everyone has to decide how to organize the paper before writing a first draft, but some people do. And, in my experience, that can vary from assignment to assignment. If you don't start with some kind of plan or outline (rough or not), then you need to be willing to do lots of revision.

If you're the sort of person who does need to have an organization in mind, then a rough outline can be helpful. (I've known a small number of students who used the formal outline method, and they were singularly prone to writing blocks, so I'm not a big fan of it.)

Organizing a Paper
Keep in mind that there are lots of ways to organize your argument: list (building or declining), comparison, chronological, syllogistic, ads/disads.

In a **list** structure (the kind with which you're almost certainly most familiar), you list your points. If your structure goes from your least to most important points, the list builds, and if it goes from most to least important (as in journalism), then it declines. There are other ways a list can build or decline--how familiar the audience is with each point (going from most to least familiar is often recommended for teachers), the relative strength of the points, how abstract they are, how persuasive they're likely to be. A list doesn't necessarily build or decline; in many circumstances (especially in speeches), it's a good idea to put your weakest argument in the middle. While the list structure is great for lots of circumstances, especially exams, you'll find it not tremendously helpful in this class.

You'll probably use a **comparison** structure in at least one paper in this class (but that is not a requirement). When you compare two things (Chester and Hubert), you do so in regard to several qualities (size, intelligence, attitude toward the red ball, age). An initial impulse that writers have is to discuss the first thing and then the second, so you have a structure like this:

Chester's size
Chester's intelligence
Chester's attitude toward the red ball
Chester's age
Hubert's size
Hubert's intelligence
Hubert's attitude toward the red ball
Hubert's age

That can work fine, but it can also mean a lot of backtracking along the way (as you remind your reader of the contrast) and a fairly long conclusion (for the same reason). It's often more effective to let the qualities organize the paper:

Size: Chester, Hubert
Intelligence: Chester, Hubert
Attitude toward the red ball: Chester, Hubert
Age: Chester, Hubert

This latter organization is even more helpful when you're comparing three or more things.

A **chronological** structure just follows time and goes from whatever happened first to whatever happened next. It's very helpful in lots of circumstances, but it's easy to let the chronology overtake one's argument. I've found that students who use a chronological structure will

sometimes include material that isn't necessary (just because it happened next), or will spend a lot of time on whatever happened first and then run out of energy for whatever happened later. If you use this structure in a literature class, you can sometimes fall into plot summary. Still and all, it's often a very sensible way to organize material[2].

The **syllogistic** structure is the least familiar and most useful for students. You begin with whatever is the main premise of your argument and move through the evidence to your conclusion. To write this structure, you need a pretty good sense of just what you're arguing and what your audience believes. It helps if you're able to state your thesis as "your main assertion because your main argument." A thesis statement like that will enable you to figure out what your main premise is. Another way to do it, though, is to figure out what is shared with your audience--what is the common ground on which your persuasion rests? The paper starts there. Because it moves from common ground through evidence, this structure is tremendously persuasive.

If you've done any debate, then the **ads/disads** structure will be very familiar to you. As implied by its name, this structure begins with the advantages and then the disadvantages of a proposed policy or (in this class) an interpretation. Obviously, you can reverse the order (going from disads to ads). It's very unusual for that structure to work in this kind of class, but it's a very common one in other writing situations.

Revising a Draft

As I said, not everyone needs to have a clear organization before writing the paper, but that's pretty much the first place to start in thinking about revising. Once you have a written draft, a formal outline can be helpful for some people, especially if your argument is complicated, but it is not required. Slightly more helpful is this process:

Loosely, paragraphs will function as **introductions**, **conclusions**, **transitions**, **narrations**, or **proof**.

The **introduction** lets your reader know what the paper will be about, and (ideally) raises interest. It may be anywhere from one to four paragraphs (depending upon the length of your paper). The **conclusion** provides closure. That's the most common place for a clear statement of your thesis. It's also where you might tell your reader what you are not saying ("I am not saying that we should outlaw all small dogs, but simply that we should bark at them constantly.") It's not uncommon to have a "double" conclusion--one paragraph concludes your argument, and the next paragraph goes on to speculate, call for further research, or draw out implications. With that second part of the double conclusion, you have to be careful to be clear that you are speculating ("This suggests..." "One might wonder if...") or your reader will accuse you of "bringing up new arguments in the conclusion." **Transition** paragraphs are common in complicated arguments, as in a comparison/contrast. You might have a two part argument, and you might need a paragraph to conclude that first part and signal the move to the second part (this will become clearer when we talk about sample papers). Some kinds of arguments require sections that give a **narration** of events--Supreme Court decisions always narrate what has happened with the case in the lower courts, a paper on a literary text might have a paragraph that summarizes the book, a paper on a proposed law might either summarize the incidents that led up to the law or give the legislative

history. **Proof** paragraphs are the ones where you really make your argument. In argumentation, most of your paragraphs should be **proof** paragraphs.

> This raises the question of just what the relation is between squirrels and small dogs, and one might pose that question in terms of how small dogs behave with big dogs. Small dogs always attack Chester. Small dogs sometimes think about attacking Hubert, but often end up playing with him. Abilene, a large cat, whaps small dogs on the nose, usually drawing blood. Keek, a small cat, runs away from small dogs.

Once you have a good draft, go through the paper and decide what each paragraph is doing. Mark every **major claim** in the **proof** paragraphs. You might even number (or color code, if you're using highlighters) each different kind of claim (e.g., pink for ones that have to do with Hubert, yellow for ones that have to do with Chester, orange for ones that have to do with Abilene, and blue for ones that have to do with Keek). It's generally pretty shaky to have more than one major claim per proof paragraph, so notice any paragraphs that have more than one sentence marked--you'll probably need to break those paragraphs up. Make each claim the main claim of its own paragraph.

In my experience, a first draft often has paragraphs in which every point is reasserted--ones that would have sentences highlighted in pink, and some in yellow, and others in orange, and others in blue--so you'll know you want to reorganize the paper and regroup those various sentences together. That is, instead of having four paragraphs that each talk about every topic in your paper, you want four paragraphs that each talk about one of the topics.

So, if you mark up the above sample paragraph that way, you'll notice that the topic sentence suggests the topic of the paragraph will be the relation of squirrels and small dogs, but the rest of the paragraph has to do with other topics. The paper should be revised so that those examples are elsewhere, or so that the paragraph has a better topic sentence.
In your first draft, you will almost certainly find that you have a fair number of major claims standing alone without any supporting evidence. One of the big differences between a first and second draft is that the latter one has evidence. Getting that evidence often requires going back to the material and re-reading (again) or doing additional research. (Remember that "doing research" doesn't necessarily mean finding quotes from famous people that support your point--one of the best kinds of research to do can be finding out what people say who disagree with you; doing research can mean doing original research, thinking carefully and critically about your own experience, or any one of a variety of things.)

I don't want you to think that I'm telling you that there is always a one-to-one correspondence between a point and a paragraph. Sometimes it takes two paragraphs to support one major claim, and famous authors often get away with a ridiculous number of assertions in a single paragraph. But, as a very, very loose rule of thumb, you probably want to ensure that every claim is supported by evidence.

What is **evidence**? Another very loose rule of thumb is that **analogies**, **arguments from**

authority (quotes), arguments from consequences, examples, reasoning from the rules of logic, and **syllogisms** are pieces of evidence. These are not mutually exclusive categories--they generally work together.

Analogies are very helpful, as long as you compare things that are genuinely similar, and as long as you compare to something your reader knows.

> Small dogs irritate big dogs in the same way that squirrels do.

This analogy only works with an audience that believes that squirrels irritate big dogs. For this argument to work, the audience would either have to grant immediately that small dogs do irritate big dogs in the same way, or the author would have to provide evidence to that effect (quotes or examples, for instance).

Arguments from authority are very audience-bound--don't quote Scripture at an atheist. And don't cite someone about whom you know nothing--make sure you are citing reliable authorities. When you are convinced that someone is authority (and that your audience will respect the credentials), you can credential them in different ways.

> Bufford says, "Small dogs are in the squirrel conspiracy."
>
> Bufford, a one hundred pound bloodhound, says, "Small dogs are in the squirrel conspiracy."
>
> Bufford, in his article in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, says "Small dogs are in the squirrel conspiracy."
>
> Bufford, when he was on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, said, "Small dogs are in the squirrel conspiracy."

For these arguments to be effective, the authority has to be one that your audience will grant is an authority on that issue. So, either use a source your audience will immediately grant is an authority, or demonstrate that s/he is. This is one of the functions of citing sources (and one of the reasons you should always be suspicious of arguments that don't cite sources).

It's unusual to use **arguments from consequences** in college papers, but they're very common in policy papers and business writing. They're generally fairly straightforward--the author argues that something should be done because it will have good consequences, or it should not be done because it will have bad consequences.

> Barking at all small dogs will show them we know what they're up to.
>
> Failing to bark at small dogs will let them get away with their evil plot.

For this line of argument to work, the audience has to assess the consequences the same way as the author. For instance, imagine the different reactions to "Lowering the drinking age will result in wild orgies in the streets."

A slightly more complicated version is one that argues that two things with the same consequences should be categorized together.

> Small dogs make big dogs miserable; squirrels make big dogs miserable; therefore, small dogs and squirrels are both anti-big dog.

This line of argument is common in legal writing (since A and B both have the consequences of inhibiting free speech, they should be treated the same way). [Notice that we're now edging on analogy--as I said, these categories blend into one another in the real world of actual arguments.]

Examples are very, very helpful. They clarify, help to define important terms, and are persuasive, especially if they are vivid. The examples might be incidents or people with which the audience is already familiar or not. If the latter, then the source of the example needs to be reliable (this is where personal experience is relevant).

Reasoning from the rules of logic is a kind of catchall category. Aristotle noticed that there are certain recurrent ways that people argue, and various philosophers and logicians have made different lists over the years. These rules vary from discipline to discipline (in a paper heavily reliant on statistics, for instance, the rules of statistics apply in ways that might never come up in a legal argument) and culture to culture (some cultures find etymological arguments persuasive, for example). That variation is one thing that makes reading in different cultures and disciplines challenging (my head always starts to get foggy when I try to follow Aquinas on issues of substance). To be persuasive, you need to use rules that your audience will grant are valid, or you need to persuade them that they should.

One logical form of argument is the **syllogism**. (All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal.) While it's very rare for you to use a true syllogism with a universally valid major premise in your writing, it's very, very effective to begin with whatever your audience will grant. This is sometimes called "moving from known to new." You start with the "common ground" with your audience, which should be the premise to your argument, and then move through the evidence to your conclusion.

Within proof paragraphs, sentences tend to function as **evidence, claims (major claims or sub-claims), analysis, topic sentences, and/or transition sentences** (it's very common for a sentence to serve more than one function at once). In class, we'll talk more about what these kinds of sentences are and how to arrange them effectively in a paragraph. In my experience, a first draft lacks evidence, and a second draft lacks analysis. So, checking to see that you have evidence and analysis is another good thing to do when revising.

Once you think you have things fairly well organized, then go through and write a word or two in the margin of each paragraph saying what that paragraph is about. Make sure that you're spending most of the time on whatever really needs to be shown--sometimes writers will spend a lot of time going over material that's already familiar to the reader and then assert exactly what is in question. That's never persuasive. Spend the most time on the points that most need proving, that are most controversial.

Writing the Introduction

A good introduction establishes certain clear expectations with the reader--specifically the topic and genre of the piece and your ethos. When the reader finishes the introduction (which may or may not be one paragraph) s/he should be clear just what the paper will be about, what kind of paper it will be (e.g., a policy proposal, a history, a literary interpretation, a comparison of various theories), and your ethos (well-read, fair-minded, closed-minded, sloppy, careful, dishonest).

Some teachers insist that you have your thesis in your introduction as one way to ensure that the

topic, genre, and ethos are clearly established. I discourage you from doing that, as it's bad preparation for most kinds of writing (in which putting your thesis in the introduction is a serious misstep). It tends to lock you into an ethos of someone who is closed-minded on the subject--you're announcing the answer to a question that's only barely been posed.

And that raises what is really the best way to think about an introduction. **The introduction should persuade your reader that there is a real question that the reader should want answered, and that you are the person to answer it.**

I generally recommend that you write the introduction after you have a good draft--that is, the introduction that will really be the first paragraph or three of the paper--but some very effective writers swear by writing a perfect introduction first. They say the rest of the paper then zips along. Try both ways, and see what works for you.

Despite what you have probably been told, there are many different kinds of introductions. The most common for student purposes are: **summary, funnel, focussing incident, thesis, history of controversy, some say (prolepsis**).

Summary:

> There is considerable controversy about whether small dogs are implicated in the squirrel controversy, but a comparison between squirrels and small dogs suggests that they are. Squirrels and small dogs are both about the same size. Squirrels and small dogs all have "Napoleonic" complexes. This complex causes them to hate larger dogs, and try to attack them at every opportunity. Although squirrels do not yip like small dogs, they do make sounds that are equally irritating. It is, therefore, clear that small dogs are conspiring with squirrels to get the red ball.

In my experience, students are very good at the summary introduction. That introduction tells 'em what you're gonna tell 'em. It summarizes the whole argument of the paper. While this kind of introduction has its uses, I cannot figure out why teachers put so much emphasis on it; it's just one of many ways to begin a paper, and generally not the most effective.

Students who are good at this kind of introduction usually write them last. Lots of students try to write them first, but it often doesn't work for one of two reasons. First, most of us figure out what we think by trying to write it down, so trying to write a summary introduction first is trying to summarize an argument you haven't yet figured out. You can't summarize it because you don't know what it is. That first shot at a summary introduction is, therefore, often a summary of a much more simplistic argument than a later version would be. The second problem is that it tends to be very unpersuasive to an informed and intelligent opposition audience. They are alienated by the list of arguments, more often than not.

Having said what's wrong with a summary introduction, I'll say what's good about it. It's a great kind of introduction for circumstances in which the reader is not open to persuasion--an essay exam, for instance, in which the reader just wants to see that you've given the correct answer. (My personal suspicion is that teachers who teach this kind of introduction exclusively treat all student writing as exam answers.) In such writing circumstances (e.g., exams), the summary

introduction can serve as a blueprint. Just as a blueprint keeps the builder from doing something unplanned and therefore potentially dangerous, so a summary introduction will keep you to the plan that you've already figured out. Also, there are circumstances in which you are expected to summarize your argument--in an abstract or precis, for instance--so knowing how to write a brief summary of a complicated argument is a good skill to develop. Finally, if you're good at writing summary introductions and bad at conclusions, one solution is to take your summary introduction and make it your conclusion, then write a different kind of introduction.

Just to be clear: the summary introduction is good in some writing situations, and far from forbidden in this class, but you'll probably find other forms more useful. Thus, it is not so much that the summary introduction is forbidden, as it is that you are required to use the history of controversy and prolepsis on at least one paper.

Funnel:

> There are many animosities in nature. In the animal kingdom, these take several forms. Orb spiders hate sea lions, koalas hate Canadian Geese, and, perhaps most important of all, squirrels hate big dogs, and are in a conspiracy to get the red ball. Small dogs are also involved in the squirrel conspiracy.

The summary introduction has some merits, but that can't be said for the funnel, the second most common kind of introduction that students are taught. The funnel introduction moves from abstract generalizations to the most specific statement, which is assumed to be the thesis statement [3]. This is very much "student" writing--while it is very common in school (and even required by many teachers)--it's very unusual to see any non-student writing that uses this kind of introduction. It is very, very unpersuasive.

It's also potentially damaging for students. The funnel is often far too broad, so the student is invited to ramble off into generalizations. If this kind of paragraph is the first one you write, then you will re-read it every time you get stuck writing. If the first paragraph raises what are, ultimately, abstract generalizations, the paper can end up talking about them.

Focussing incident:

> On March 22, 2002, Hubert Sumlin was at Anderson Mill Park when a Pomeranian ran away from its owner and bit Hubert on the nose. This was simply one example of innumerable incidents of small dogs brutally attacking big dogs. There are at least one thousand every year of such horrific acts. Why? What is the goal of such behavior on the part of small dogs?

Much published writing, especially journalism, relies on the focussing incident , a real or hypothetical example of the paper's issue. While it can be cloying, and too much of it gets irritating (almost every article in Newsweek and Time begins this way), it's so widespread in journalism because it is effective. It focuses the attention of the reader and writer on something specific; if well done, it means that the reader has a vivid image of the issue.

Thesis:

> Small dogs are conspiring with squirrels. Embittered by their small size,

permanently embarrassed by their foolish yippiness, and hoping to get their owners to stop putting ribbons in the hair, small dogs have chosen to join the squirrel conspiracy to get the red ball.

Editorials sometimes use the thesis introduction, in which the first sentence is the author's thesis. It is generally not appropriate in academic writing (except exams), and it is usually not very persuasive. If the thesis is quirky or unexpected (were George Will to begin an editorial "I love liberals!", for instance) then it can be attention-getting, but that's about the limits of its merits. It's mostly used in writing where the author is not trying to persuade an informed and intelligent opposition audience, but entertain an "in" audience.

History of controversy:

In 1988, Hoover wrote his famous muckraking article, "Chihuahuas Look Like Squirrels--Coincidence?" in which he argued that Chihuahuas are implicated in several important acts in the squirrel conspiracy. The next year, Charlie published his three volume work, *The Squirrel Conspiracy, 1876-1985*, in which he demonstrated squirrel collaboration on the part of Boston Terriers, Corgis, and Westmorelands, raising the issue of whether small dogs in general are implicated. Jet responded with three studies showing consistent hostility between Cockapoos and squirrels ("I Hate Squirrels" 1989, "My Friends Hate Squirrels" 1990, and "All Cockapoos Hate Squirrels" 1991), while Daisy pointed to several memoirs of famous Miniature Schnauzers that emphasized their barking at squirrels ("Their Lives as Dogs: A Review Essay" 1992). The question remains: is it a question of a few small dog breeds, or are all small dogs involved in the squirrel conspiracy?

Probably the most common kind of introduction in academia is one that gives the history of the controversy. Scientific papers, for instance, begin by relating other studies on the same topic, philosophical essays begin by discussing the history of the issue, and even literary essays often begin by discussing the recent scholarship on the specific piece or topic. This is a very useful model for students to use, and probably one of the two most useful kinds of introductions for papers in this class, but students should keep two things in mind.

First, it's possible (at least in this class) to discuss the history of the controversy for you personally or for the class--to begin by describing how the class discussion went, or how your own views evolved (in fact, that can be a useful structure for a paper).

WhenI was a young puppy, I was attacked by a Pekingese for no particular reason. In obedience school, a Basset Hound kept trying to steal my treats. There were two Scotties who kept peeing on my mailbox, and who snarled at me on walks. At parks I've been attacked by Cocker Spaniels, Chihuahuas, Dauschunds, Miniature Dobermans, and various small mutts. After this had happened more times than I could count, I started to wonder--why are small dogs always attacking me?

Second, given that you have limited time, don't try to start too far back on the history of the controversy. When this kind of introduction goes wrong, it turns into the "dawn of time" introduction. ("Since the dawn of time, people have been discussing Chester's obsession with the

red ball.") Start your history with where your audience and argument need it to start.

Some say

> According to Jet, small dogs, especially Cockapoos, hate squirrels as much as the big breeds. As he says,
>
> > We hate them. WE HATE THEM. We think they're evil. We want to eat them. All. ("All Cockapoos Hate Squirrels" 1991)
>
> Jet's main evidence is the tendency Cockapoos have to bark at squirrels in trees, for hours on end, if necessary. At the end of his article, he suggests that this evidence applies to many other breeds of small dogs, who also bark at squirrels. He concludes that this loathing demonstrates that small dogs could not possibly be involved in the squirrel conspiracy. Does this demonstrate that small dogs hate squirrels? If they do hate squirrels, does that mean that they could not be part of the conspiracy?

The some say or prolepsis introduction is a lot like the history of controversy introduction, except you only discuss one side of the controversy--the side with which you will take issue. That is, it is the opposite point of view from yours. This is very, very effective when you have a hostile audience that you are trying to persuade. It generates a tremendous amount of goodwill with your opposition readers to begin by summarizing their argument. It shows that you are fair-minded and that you have listened. (If you take any management or interpersonal communications courses, you'll find that scholars in those fields make a big point about beginning a discussion, especially a potentially heated one, by confirming what the other person has said.) In other words, it's virtually the opposite of the summary introduction. Rather than begin by summarizing your argument, you begin by summarizing the opposition. For this to work, however, it has to be genuinely fair-minded--beginning by summarizing a stupid version of your audience's argument just persuades them you're too much of a dork to get their point.

There are also some gimmicks you can use in your introduction, such as beginning with a quote, a definition, or a personal narrative. Those are perfectly fine (although general usage dictionary definitions are of limited utility in college--discipline specific ones are better), but they're not different kind of introductions because they can be used with any of the above. (That is, a some say introduction might begin with a quote, definition, or personal narrative, as might a history of controversy or a funnel.)

Sentence Level Revision

When the organization and evidence seem strong (and that may take four or five drafts) you can look at sentence level problems. Personally, I've disabled most of the "rules" on the grammar checker in my word processing program, but I do find it helpful for catching spelling errors and fragment sentences. More helpful for catching grammar and style problems is reading the piece out loud, and even more helpful is listening to someone else read it out loud (as with the above, don¹t try to correct the problems as you listen--just note where there are problems). Some people suggest that you read the paper out loud one sentence at a time starting with the last sentence. That way, you don't get caught up in the ideas (and mentally correct errors).

Unless you have dialect or second language interference, one of the best ways to revise your sentences is simply to ask yourself: what am I really trying to say here? Errors in usage and

grammar often pop up when writers are unclear in their own minds about what they're trying to say.

I've given you a sheet that shows my marks and has some quick examples. Make sure that you understand my marks. If you don't understand my marks or the explanations, come see me, consult a handbook, or go to the Writing Center.

If there is some recurrent grammar and usage problem on which I or other readers have remarked, once you have a second or third draft is the time to try to identify instances of that problem. I don't recommend worrying about them very much on a first draft, as you're likely to be dropping entire chunks of that version--why worry about the correctness of language you won't even end up using?

If people have complained that your writing is choppy, count your sentence length. If your sentences are almost all under eleven words, you'll want to "embed" some sentences together[4]. Effective writing tends to have variation in sentence length, as well as sentence structure (something we'll talk about in class).

Another way to check for choppiness is to see how often you're using subordination rather than coordination. Subordinate conjunctions often tell the logical relations between clauses (when, how, or why), so using more subordination can actually make your argument much more powerful. (We'll also talk about this more in class.)

In some disciplines (e.g., the social sciences), passive voice and passive agency are absolutely required [5]. In most circumstances, passive voice and passive agency are confusing; it takes considerable writing skill not to fall into various errors when using them. In this class, you should avoid passive voice and passive agency--the handbook has some excellent advice as to how to go about that task.

Polishing the Paper

Once you've got a good paper done, with a strong argument, good organization, and a lots of evidence, then take the time to polish it. (People prone to writing blocks usually begin by trying to have every sentence perfect.) You always need to know your audience (although sometimes it's very difficult, as when writing a job application letter), and your knowledge of your audience should determine how much time you spend polishing. For instance, some audiences care a huge amount about getting every detail right on citation format. Some don't. (But I do have to say that almost every college instructor--and especially me--cares that you use some format. Whether or not you get the comma in the right place, you must give the necessary citation information, or you're in the land of plagiarism.) Using a huge font or wide margins in order to lengthen the paper won't fool anyone, and some teachers will grade students down for varying from the established format. With some teachers and in some classes, it is worth your time and money to fuss over PowerPoint presentations and what should be in bold versus italics; with other teachers and classes (e.g., me and this one) that's a waste of time.

Because it's so easy to check spelling, teachers expect it, and readers get actively irritated by a lot of spelling errors. It's very difficult to catch your own errors, as you tend to see what you meant

to write rather than you actually did write. I depend heavily on other people for proofreading (but do not expect the Writing Center to proofread!) While the spell checkers on most word processing programs are pretty good, the grammar checkers tend to be pretty bad. So, run spell check. If you run grammar check, just make sure to disregard certain kinds of advice it gives (such as the rule regarding long sentences.)

The most important kind of proofreading involves the Works Cited material. Make sure that everything you cite is on your Works Cited page and everything on your Works Cited page is in your paper somewhere. (Some computer programs will do that for you, but I have no idea how well.) **In this class, you can use MLA, APA, or Chicago (all are in the handbook), but you must use one of them.** American Chemistry Society and various other methods are neither appropriate or acceptable, so do not simply rely on what some other teacher told you. GET A HANDBOOK IF YOU DO NOT ALREADY OWN ONE. Citation methods change all the time, so do not rely on what another teacher told you to do--rely on a recent handbook.

Once your paper is written and proofread, then reread the assignment sheet. You should have reread it several times while writing the paper, so there should not be any big surprises at this point. Some instructors have very specific requirements for presentation--e.g., I ask that you mark your thesis statement, and I ask that you include all your previous papers in your packet--, and this is the moment to get them right. Make sure your name and your instructor's name are on the paper; the class and section number are also a good idea. I strongly advise against putting your social security number on the paper--that's very private information--but I know some instructors require it.

And, last but not least, get a virus protector and back up often. Use the university-provided webspace--it's a life saver. College campuses are to computer viruses what 1660's London was to the bubonic plague--a very amenable host. Never give your college teachers your only copy of a paper.

Conclusion

Writing isn't especially easy, at least not for me and most people I know, but it is rewarding. If you've had trouble with writing in the past, that doesn't necessarily mean that you are a Bad Writer--some of the best writers struggle very, very hard--but it may mean that you're trying to use a writing process that doesn't work for you. Experiment with different ways of writing papers (even different places can sometimes help), and come see me if you need help. But, mainly, just try to think rhetorically about your writing--what are you trying to do? Who is your audience? What is the context? How is this like or unlike other writing situations? And, how can you make this writing assignment enjoyable?

NOTES

[1] Define it: "How he thinks about the red ball, what he thinks it is like, how important he thinks it is relative to other balls." Divide it into different categories: "When a squirrel is nearby, in the snow, at night, when Hubert is chasing the ball." Describe a larger category of which it is a part:

"His attitude toward important things." Describe its opposite: "Chester's attitude to the blue ball." Come up with an analogy: "His attitude toward the red ball is like Hubert's attitude toward the stuffed monkey." List its good and bad consequences: "Good--it's very entertaining, chasing the ball and carrying it around gives him exercise, he doesn't get bored, he feels more comfortable at the vet or on trips if it is around. Bad--he knocks it into things, it gets covered in mud and then he brings it in the house, he is mournful if it breaks."

[2] One version of the chronological structure with which students are not always familiar is the research version of a lab report. That is, the author narrates the development of his/her thinking on the topic.

[3] Here you're in a bind. American writing instructors, and many textbooks, mis-use the term "thesis statement." The thesis statement is a summary of the main point of the paper; it is not the same as the topic statement. Empirical research shows that most paragraphs end with a statement of topic, not the thesis. But, our students are taught to mis-identify the topic sentence as the thesis statement (e.g., so they think that "What are the consequences of small dogs conspiring with squirrels?" is a thesis statement). This is not a trivial problem, and I would suggest is one reason that students have so much trouble with reasoning and critical reading. I'm not kidding when I say that I also think it contributes significantly to how bad public argument is. You can insist on the correct usage (which is pretty nearly spitting into the wind), or you can come up with other terms--proposal statement, main claim, main point.

[4] Chester is a big dog. Chester chases the red ball. The squirrels want the red ball. Squirrels are evil. Squirrels desire world domination. Getting the red ball will enable squirrels to dominate the world. Chester, a big dog, chases the red ball that the squirrels want because it will enable them to dominate the world.

[5]Active voice: Chester chased the red ball. Passive voice: The red ball was chased by Chester. Active agency: Chester chased the red ball. Passive agency: Chasing happened between the red ball and Chester. Notice that the last sentence is active voice, but passive agency. (Agency and voice are not the same thing.)