

How to Get Started

Before you begin

Different people have different ways of starting a long research paper. Some people start browsing the literature right away, others decide on a topic first. Some people write an incredibly detailed outline before ever getting near a word processing system, while others write the entire paper first and force all of the paragraphs into an outline later (sometimes using scissors). Choose the style that works best for you, but make sure that you have left time for editing and that your paper is organized and complete before you turn it in.

An example of the paper writing process

First I decide on a general topic. (For example, I will decide to compare and contrast the economic growth of Japan with the economic growth of the United States.) Then I will check out a bunch of books on Japan and the US using Barton. I will use Jstore and Econlit to find any articles germane to my topic of choice (probably using the keywords, “Japan” and “growth” or “Japan” and “economic growth” or even “Japan” and “growth” and “United States” and “comparison”). Next I will carefully pick through the books and articles, starting with whichever ones look like literature reviews or as if they address my topic directly. While I am reading the articles, I will mark them up as to what I think is important. After a couple of articles, an idea of what the main issues are should come into my mind. At that point, I start an outline. (See below for more details on outlining). I get a sheet of scratch paper (or for long papers I will use a new word document) and write down what the main topics are. Then underneath each main topic, I will begin to put cites down of good quotes and facts that have something to do with each topic. I will generally not put down the actual quote, just the name of the author, the date and the page number. As I continue reading, the outline solidifies more and more in my head. I find new topics, and put them into my nascent mental outline. When I’m almost done with my reading, I will generally take each of the topics and force them into an outline form complete with major headings and subheadings. If any topic paragraphs look like they don’t have enough information, I will go back to Barton or Econlit and see if I can find more specifics on that particular topic. After I have all of the citations up in an imposed order, it’s just a matter of turning all of the facts and citations into sentences. The actual writing of the paper does not take much time for me (though proofreading to make the paper perfect generally takes a day or so, including at least an hour of a friend’s time). Finally during the first part of my proofreading, I make sure that I can make a good outline out of what I have written, and I move paragraphs around if I can’t. The entire process takes me 40-80 hours.

Benefits of turning in a rough draft

If you use my method, you probably want to have a rough draft of your paper ready when you turn in your outline. Having a rough draft ready at that point has additional benefits. First, you will be (mostly) done with your paper before you have to worry about finals or final projects or any other end-of-the-semester stresses. Second, you can give the paper to one of your TAs and have him or her look it over long before it’s due. Giving your graders a chance to read the paper before you turn it in will most

likely result in a higher grade. Your graders will have their own prejudices about what should or should not be in the paper and can let you know about them. Additionally, graders who see a paper more than once generally give higher grades than those who have only seen a paper once. Third, you can proofread the paper at your own leisure stress-free, perhaps in 20-minute intervals or maybe on some Friday night when all your friends are busy. Proofreading long after you have written something also makes you much more likely to catch mistakes and to see which sentences are awkward. For example, coming back to this instructional sheet after not looking at it for a month, I found three typographical errors.

The next page details how to make an outline. It does not really matter when you make the outline, but in order to be sure that your paper is organized in a way that makes sense to the reader, it must have a logical outline before you turn it in.

How to Outline

Outlines look like this:

- I. MAIN IDEA
 - A. Subsidiary idea or supporting idea to I
 - B. Subsidiary idea or supporting idea to I
 - 1. Subsidiary idea to I.B
 - 2. Subsidiary idea to I.B
 - a. Subsidiary idea to B.2
 - i. Subsidiary idea to B.2.a
 - b. Subsidiary idea to B.2
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- II MAIN IDEA
 - A. Subsidiary or supporting idea to II
 - B. Subsidiary idea to II
 - C. Subsidiary idea to II

etc.

You can have as many main ideas and supporting ideas as you want (though for a 20 page paper you really should get down at least to the Arabic numbers, that is, you should at the very least have 1, 2, etc. in your outline). Note for good formatting that if there is a I in the outline, there should be a II; if there is an A, there should be a B; if there is a 1, there should be a 2, and so forth. (Otherwise you would just put what you were going to say for A in with I., what you were going to say in 1. in with A etc.).

Within each main idea section, all of the subsidiary sections should be related to each other, and they should back up (or refute) the main idea. For example, I.A and I. B should both back up I. Similarly, I.B.1 and I.B.2 should both be evidence supporting I.B.

Depending on how detailed your outline is and how long your paper is, you should pick a subheading category and make that equivalent to a paragraph in your paper. In a one to three page paper, you probably want three main ideas, and each one of those will correspond to your paragraphs. In a 20-page paper, you will probably want the Arabic numbers (1, 2, etc.) or the lower-case letters (a, b, c) to each correspond to a paragraph, though this choice will depend upon your own preferences. Each paragraph should start with the topic sentence for that paragraph; this sentence should correspond directly to the label on your outline. Note: you can have A, B, etc. correspond to paragraphs in one section (say II) and 1, 2, etc. correspond to paragraphs in another section (say III).

Even though some online sources will disagree, for your purposes, it is ok for you to label the first main idea: I. INTRODUCTION, and to not have any subheadings on that. Similarly your last main idea can be called VII. CONCLUSION.

So what does all of this mean for your paper? Well, here's an example. Suppose I am comparing the history of economic growth between Grand Fenwick and Ruritania. Note that there are many options for what order you put your outline in. It does not have to be like the one following (and might be better if it isn't, since your countries will have

different pertinent facts, and I didn't spend much time making this one). You will, of course, have statements in place of "blah" and "Etc."

- I. INTRODUCTION
- II. BACKGROUND OF TWO COUNTRIES
 - A. Current Facts
 - 1. Grand Fenwick
 - a. Smallest country in world
 - b. Bladdeblah
 - i. Blah etc.
 - 2. Ruritania
 - a. Blah blah
 - B. History
 - 1. Grand Fenwick
 - a. Founded by Sir Roger Fenwick in 1430
 - b. Saw enormous growth in the 1960s
 - i. Took over the United States
 - ii. Had successful manned lunar landing
 - iii. Became a major player in the US stock market
 - 2. Ruritania
 - a. Founded blah blah
 - b. War-torn blah blah
 - c. Etc.
- III. SMALL COUNTRY FORGOTTEN THEORY OF WIBBERLEY
 - A. Statement of theory
 - B. How theory pertains to Grand Fenwick
 - C. How theory pertains to Ruritania
 - D. Disputations of theory
 - 1. Smith's Luxemborg counter-example
 - a. Wibberley's comment to counter-example
 - b. Luxemborg is different
 - i. Funny hats
 - ii. Blah blah
 - 2. Jones' "not enough data points" dispute
- IV. BENEVOLENT COLONIZATION THEORY
 - A. Blah blah
 - B. Blah blah
 - 1. Etc.
- V. SINGLE BAD RULER THEORY [note: You usually put the one you really believe last after disputing the other theories, or else you come to a compromise with some subset of the theories. In general, dispute first, support later. You can also do the opposite, but make sure that you present your theories in some logical order.]
 - A. Etc.
- VI. CONCLUSION