Writing is a way of showing others what you’re thinking: not only are you communicating your ideas and opinions about a particular topic, but you’re also demonstrating that you can string those ideas together in a smooth, logical way.

This means that there are two questions that you need to ask yourself when you’re planning, writing, and editing any piece of writing:

**WHAT AM I TRYING TO COMMUNICATE?**

**AM I COMMUNICATING MY IDEAS IN A WAY THAT MAKES SENSE TO SOMEONE BESIDES ME?**

These two questions might seem simple, but they’re powerful: they can be applied to any form of writing, from a magazine article to an academic paper, and can mean the difference between scattered writing and tight, persuasive writing.

**WHAT AM I EXPECTED TO WRITE?**

Even if you write a brilliant eight-page response to bell hooks’s book *Teaching to Transgress*, if you were asked by your professor to write a six-page essay on engaged pedagogy that uses *Teaching to Transgress* and other books as support, you’ll have wasted your time (and your professor’s time when it comes to correct your work).

Make sure that you are 100% clear about the instructions for the assignment. Does this sound obvious to you? Probably, but you would be shocked by how often students hand in writing that isn’t an exact match to the assignment they were given.

When you receive an assignment, be sure that you can answer the following questions:

**CONTENT:** Is the topic assigned or can I choose my topic? Did the professor give any instructions in terms of what I can or can’t write about?

**FORMAT:** How long should my paper be? Is that double- or single-spaced pages? Does that include my references, or not? What is my deadline for handing in my writing? Are there any specifications about how I should present my work? (Stapled, in a folder, don’t/do use the word “I,” etc.)

If you don’t have crystal-clear answers to these questions, you need to talk to your professor or teacher’s assistant as soon as possible.

**WHERE DO I START?**

At this point, some students feel overwhelmed. If you suspect (or know) that this stress is caused by a learning disability, talk to your professor about support services offered at your university. These services are designed to work with or around obstacles that stand between you and your academic work.
Another common source of stress is a misunderstanding about university papers: some students think that they have to write essays that are bursting with bold new ideas and long, academic-sounding words. This could not be further from the truth.

When your professor reads your work, s/he wants to see that you have established one main idea and supported that main idea using established scholars' work. Flowery “academic” writing doesn’t make you seem smarter—it makes you seem shy about what you’re saying. “At the present time, we are witnessing a dramatic decrease in students’ achievement scores in many geographic areas.” Cut the crap: “Our students are failing.”

Don’t worry too much about breaking new ground in your essay—find a topic that interests you and create a thesis that fits the assignment. And don’t worry about using la-di-da language—just write. You can always edit later.

**WHAT IS MY TOPIC?**

If your topic is assigned, that’s one less thing to think about. Nice.

If you have the option of selecting your own topic, try to choose something that grabs you—maybe because it’s completely new to you or because it’s somehow relevant to your experiences. There are tons of ways to generate ideas, including doing a quick search online and talking it over with classmates.

**WHAT IS MY THESIS?**

Once you know your topic, you need to find one aspect about your topic that you can write about in a way that fits the requirements of your assignment.

First, open up a new Word document and write down the following questions:

**WHO:** Who are the main players in my topic? Who has the most power? Who has the least amount of power?

**WHAT:** What are the most interesting or controversial parts of this topic?

**WHEN:** When did this issue become important (and what conditions led to this)?

**WHERE:** Where is this issue particularly relevant? In which country/countries? Which region(s)? Which city/cities? Which school(s)?

**WHY:** Why is this issue important—to me? to the main players? to the study of education? to our society?

**WHAT DO YOU KNOW?**

You likely already know the answers to some of these questions, either because of experiences that you’ve had or information you’ve read, heard, or seen before. This is great. Write down all of these ideas in your research Word document (but keep in mind that your subsequent research findings might prove you wrong!).

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FILL IN THE GAPS

In order to fill in the gaps, do some online research—a great place to start is Google Scholar, but a general web search can be useful too (just remember that the resources you find in a general search will not necessarily be valid for your academic paper). Make note of any scholars’ names that appear frequently in your search. Find at least three books that deal with your topic. As you go, make note of as much reference information as possible— websites, authors’ names, journal volume and issue numbers, page numbers, etc.

MESSY RESEARCH

As you do your research, you will likely be jumping from one question to the next and back again. That’s expected here—in fact, I call this stage of planning “messy research.” Don’t be concerned at this point about your spelling, paragraphs, or any other conventions of academic writing. The important thing is that you come up with at least two pieces of information that answer each question and that you keep track of where you got the information in each answer. I can almost guarantee that you will use all of the answers that you generate in your paper.

NAILING IT

As you move through your messy research, there might be one question or one answer that you find particularly interesting—you’ll notice that you’re spending more time on this question or answer and that you find yourself asking even more questions and digging deeper into that part of your paper.

You need to take that question or answer and write one clear, declarative statement about it. This is going to be your thesis—the main point that you are going to make throughout your paper.

Your thesis has to be broad enough that you can break it down into smaller parts and discuss it over several pages of your writing, but it has to be just specific enough so that you’re not writing a complete history of your topic or dealing with how your topic plays out all over the world.

DOES MY THESIS MAKE SENSE TO SOMEONE BESIDES ME?

Let’s say that your professor gives you an assignment to write an eight-page paper on an issue that is having a profound impact on American education. Because of your personal politics and experiences that you’ve had, you want to explore racism in education. You spend some time doing messy research and you feel like you’ve got enough information to write your thesis.

FIRST ATTEMPT AT A THESIS: Racism causes many problems in schools.

PROBLEM: This thesis is too broad.

As a reader, I would be left asking a lot of questions: Who is involved in this racism—are you going to talk about students? Teachers? Parents? Which schools are you going to write about—American schools? Schools in Ohio? Elementary schools, high schools, or universities?
What kind of problems are you going to address—personal, academic, social? Notice that my questions cover “Who,” “What,” and “Where” issues.

SECOND ATTEMPT AT A THESIS: The dress code policy at John Smith High School in Pittsburg is negatively affecting all students’ test scores and social interactions.

PROBLEM: The topic is not clear and the focus is too specific.

If I read this thesis, I would have absolutely no idea that you intended to talk about racism. I would have thought that your essay would be about the negative effects of dress codes. Is this dress code racist? If so, how? Perhaps this is one of those instances when your idea makes sense in your head, but it’s not yet clear on paper. Even if you had first told me that you were writing about racism and then I read your thesis, I would still be left wondering how you would stretch that very specific statement into eight pages of discussion.

THIRD ATTEMPT AT A THESIS: The American education system has racist policies and procedures that affect all high school students.

PROBLEM: There are too many main ideas in this thesis.

As a reader, I can see that you’re going to have to prove two points in your paper: you must first provide evidence that the American education system has policies and practices that are racist; and you must also show how all present-day high school students are affected by this racism (students who are affluent and poor, rural and urban, students who identify as white, black, Native American, etc.). This is too much information to cover in an eight-page research paper.

FOURTH ATTEMPT AT A THESIS: Parts of the American education system are clearly racist.

PROBLEM: Nothing—this thesis sounds like it can work.

As a reader, I can see that you are going to talk about the racism that is built in to the American education system (i.e. not racism at the individual level). This means that I’m only left with one question: Which parts of the education system are racist? And this is what you want—after reading your thesis, you want your reader asking only one question that you will answer in your paper.

WHAT IS MY STRUCTURE?

Once you have your thesis, you need to figure out which chunks of information will prove that your thesis is true.

If your thesis statement is “Parts of the American education system are clearly racist,” then you know that early on, you’re going to have to briefly describe the American education system (and perhaps show that racism has been a problem in the American education system for a while). Then, in the main part of your text, you’ll need to discuss three or four aspects of the education system and explain how they are racist and what effects they have. You may have already generated a list of racist policies and procedures when you were doing your preliminary research, or you may need to do more research to ensure that you have a complete list.

INTRODUCTION WITH THESIS: Parts of the American education system are clearly racist.

BIG CHUNK #1: Federally-funded curricula are biased in terms of the representation of race.
Popular textbooks put white culture in the centre and “other” cultures at the margins.. Standardized tests rely on knowledge of white hegemonic culture.

These racist elements need to be corrected if we want to have an effective education system.

Notice that each chunk of information directly links back to your thesis in the same way as the other chunks. In this case, they are all parts of the education system.

**DOES MY STRUCTURE MAKE SENSE TO SOMEONE BESIDES ME?**

Once you have your structure written out, double check that each chunk relates back to your thesis in exactly the same way.

Here is another attempt at creating a structure:

**INTRODUCTION WITH THESIS:** Parts of the American education system are clearly racist.

**BIG CHUNK #1:** Federally-funded curricula are biased in terms of the representation of race.

**BIG CHUNK #2:** Curricula whitewash history and ignore people who are Native American.

**BIG CHUNK #3:** Black students have the highest dropout rate of all students.

**CONCLUSION:** These racist elements need to be fixed if we want to have an effective education system.

Notice here that chunk #1 is a part of the education system—good stuff.

Chunk #2 only deals specifically with the textbook representation of people who are Native American (does that mean that people who are black are given fair coverage in textbooks?).

Chunk #3 doesn’t deal with a particular part of the educational system—it’s a result of racism in the educational system.

**GETTING FEEDBACK**

A lot of students have trouble with the logic and structure of their ideas at this stage of planning. If you have trouble assessing your proposed structure to see if it works for your assignment, ask your professor or teacher’s assistant for help (they are there to help you with this stuff). You could also ask a peer for help, but make sure that this friend actually gives you specific, constructive feedback. A general comment like “It’s great!” doesn’t really help you understand why your work is already strong or why (and how) you can make it stronger.
WHAT IS MY PAGE BUDGET?

When you have a clear idea of which chunks of information are needed to prove your thesis, you need to calculate your page budget. If you know that you need to submit an eight-page paper, your page budget might look something like this:

**INTRODUCTION WITH THESIS:**  1 page

**CHUNK #1:**  2 pages

**CHUNK #2:**  2 pages

**CHUNK #3:**  2 pages

**CONCLUSION:**  1 page

**TOTAL:**  8 pages + References (references aren’t usually included in your page count, but check this with your professor)

Notice that each chunk is given the same amount of page space because each chunk of information should be given equal treatment. Also notice that each chunk is given more page space than either the introduction or the conclusion.

It’s easy to get carried away during the writing process. This page budget will help keep you on track and enable you to manage your writing time effectively.

Now you’re ready to start writing.

See also:  “Writing an Academic Paper”  “Using APA Style in an Academic Paper”
“Editing an Academic Paper”