

**Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center
Hamilton College**

Writing Longer Papers

A multi-stage process:

Writing a longer paper involves research, writing, and revision. All stages are critical, and all take longer than you think. The good news is that the process gets easier the more you get into it.

Writing a longer paper is unlike any other writing process encountered in college. It's a more personal and a far more demanding intellectual process. Your advisor is there to help, but no one else can do the hard work demanded of you.

General suggestions:

Pick a topic that really interests you; you'll be working on it for the entire semester or year.

Check in with your advisor frequently. Make sure you are on the right track.

Don't get discouraged and stressed. A long paper is a big challenge. Find ways to keep going. Set daily goals and stick to them. Set aside big blocks of time. Put calendar dates next to each goal. Estimate about how long each section should be, based on the length of the entire project.

Start early and don't procrastinate!

Research

Research thoroughly and read widely. The more knowledgeable and comfortable you are with your topic, the easier it will be to write. To strengthen your argument, read sources that challenge your claims. Reading a range of sources will help you expand and orient your understanding of the topic.

Organize your notes. Write a summary of the important ideas in each source. Keep track of citation information. Create citations as you go.

Develop a coherent structure with clearly demarcated sections. A **thorough outline** will help tremendously, but don't be afraid to deviate from it when necessary.

Researching, reading, and thinking take great deal of time, but when done well, the writing is far easier.

Composing the initial draft

Composing a complete draft is a cyclical, not a linear process. It requires constant returning, revisiting, of your work.

A longer paper frees you from the tight format and burden of brevity of a short paper, but it also exposes you to the danger of rambling and disorganization. Keep your larger ideas in mind.

Keep writing. If you get stuck, go to another section that's easier. Don't get bogged down in minutiae. Don't worry about the **small stuff**, about polishing your writing right now.

Don't try to start at the beginning. Don't worry about the introduction or the final analysis—you won't know your final line of argument until you have completed most of the first draft.

Start with the sections for which you have the most information. Then you will know what you have enough information for and what gaps need filling. Expect that you will need additional resources.

Include **all** the information you think is relevant/interesting. In revision, you will reorganize, eliminate, and consolidate.

Be **realistic** about how much you can accomplish per day. Set a number of hours, a number of pages per day/per week. **Stick to the schedule.**

Try to get everything down in the first draft, then keep working with it. A skeleton of a coherent argument will begin to emerge.

Finding the line of argument is like excavating an archaeological dig. When you begin to see the shape of your specific argument, you will have to let some information go and bring in other information. Add transitions, connectors, when you know your final line of argument.

Consider adding informational footnotes to include information that doesn't fit into the body of the paper but enhances understanding of the topic.

Revision

Think of revision as two-stages: **the initial revision**, where you craft **a clear chain of argument** to connect all of the ideas, and **the final revision**, for you polishing your writing.

Initial revision

In the initial revision stage, your first draft might change a great deal. This process will take twice as much time as you think. You may fully revise the paper ten or twelve times.

Re-visit your ideas frequently, and challenge the earlier thinking you have done. Be **honest with yourself**. What you start out thinking will not be where you end up. Follow through with inconsistencies/contradictions/nuances; don't ignore them. They will create the most interesting parts of your argument.

Use **readers**— classmates, a Writing Center tutor, your advisor, A key question for your readers: Can you follow my line of argument?

You will need to do a lot of **cutting and pasting**. In doing so, you are likely to lose the line of argument. Revise the ideas surrounding the cut and paste for coherence.

Later revision

Don't worry about drawing all connections between ideas and sections until later in the revision process, when your ideas are fully formed. Review the Writing Center handout "Transitions."

As the final stage in revision, polish sentences, check citations, and do other detail work.

for sentence revisions: see Writing Center materials for advice on grammar and style.

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