

QUICK TIP**Work Through Procrastination and Writer's Block**

If you can't start writing or you struggle to draft even a few words, you may have writer's block. Some cases arise from anxieties about school and its pressures; if that might be you, see a counselor. But most cases have causes you can address:

- You feel so intimidated by the task that you don't know where to begin. If so, divide the process into small tasks; then focus on one step at a time.
- You have set no goals or goals that are too high. If so, create a routine that sets goals you can meet, then use devices such as a progress chart or regular meetings with a writing partner.
- You feel you must make every sentence or paragraph perfect before you move to the next one. You can avoid some obsession with perfection if you write informally along the way, telling yourself you are writing only to help you think on paper. In any event, know that every researcher compromises on perfection to get the job done.

If you have problems like these, go to the student learning center. Advisers there have worked with every kind of procrastinator and blocked writer and can give you advice tailored to your problem.

On the other hand, some cases of writer's block may really be opportunities to let your ideas simmer in your subconscious while they combine and recombine into something new and surprising. If you're stuck but have time (another reason to start early), let your unconscious work on the problem while you do something else for a day or two. Then return to the task to see if you can get back on track.

13 Organizing Your Argument

This chapter presents a procedure for organizing and revising your drafts so that your argument is as clear to your readers as it is to you. At first this procedure may seem a bit mechanical, but that's its virtue. If you follow it one step at a time, you can analyze and improve the organization of your draft efficiently and reliably.

Some new researchers think that once they've churned out a draft, they're done. The best writers know better. They write a first draft not to show to readers, but to discover what case they can actually make for their point and whether it stands up to their own scrutiny. Then they revise and revise until they think their readers will agree with their argument too. Revising for readers is hard, though, because we all know our own work too well to read it as others will. You must first know what readers look for, then determine whether your draft helps them find it. To do that, you have to analyze your draft objectively; otherwise, you'll just read into it what you want your readers to get out of it.

Some writers resist *any* revising for readers, fearing that if they accommodate their readers, they compromise their integrity. They think that the truth of their discovery should speak for itself, and if readers have a hard time understanding it, well, they just have to work harder. But revising for readers doesn't mean pandering to them. In fact, you only improve your ideas when you imagine drawing readers into an amiable conversation in which they engage your beliefs as you engage theirs.

In this chapter, we show you how to diagnose and revise your organization and argument so that readers get out of it what you think you put into it.

13.1 THINKING LIKE A READER

Readers do not read word by word, sentence by sentence, as if they were adding up beads on a string. They want to begin with a sense

of the whole, its structure, and, most important, why they should read your paper in the first place. Then they use that sense of the whole and its aims to interpret its parts. So when you revise, it makes sense to attend first to your overall organization, then to sections, then to the coherence of your paragraphs and the clarity of your sentences, and, finally, to matters of spelling and punctuation. In reality, of course, no one revises so neatly. We all revise as we go, correcting spelling as we rearrange our argument, clarifying evidence as we revise a paragraph. But when you systematically revise top-down, from global structure to local sentences and words, you are more likely to read as your readers will than if you start at the bottom, with words and sentences, and work up. You will also revise more efficiently, because you won't spend time fine-tuning whole sections that you later decide to rearrange or even cut.

13.2 REVISING YOUR FRAME

Readers must recognize three things instantly and unambiguously:

- where your introduction ends
- where your conclusion begins
- what sentence in one or both states your main point

To ensure that readers recognize these, do this:

1. **Put an extra space after your introduction and before your conclusion.** If your field approves, put headings at those joints so that readers can't miss them.
2. **State your main point at or close to the end of your introduction.** Then compare that point with the one in your conclusion. They should at least not contradict each other. Nor should they be identical: make the one in your conclusion more specific and contestable.
3. **Include in the point sentence of your introduction key terms that name concepts and themes that run through your paper.** Do this not only when your point sentence announces your main claim but also if it is just a launching point (see 12.1.1, 16.4.2).

For example, consider this introductory paragraph (much abbreviated). What does it imply about the point of the paper?

In the eleventh century, the Roman Catholic Church initiated several Crusades to recapture the Holy Land. In a letter to King Henry IV in the year 1074, Gregory VII urged a Crusade but failed to carry it out. In 1095 his successor, Pope Urban II, gave a speech at the Council of Clermont in which he also called for a Crusade, and in the next year, in 1096, he initiated the First Crusade. In this paper I will discuss the reasons for the Crusades.

The closest thing to a point sentence appears to be that vague last one. But it merely announces the Crusades as a topic.

Here are the first few sentences from the first paragraph of the conclusion (again, much abbreviated). What is its point?

As these documents show, popes Urban II and Gregory VII did urge the Crusades to restore the Holy Land to Christian rule. But their efforts were also shrewd political moves to unify the Roman and Greek churches and to prevent the breakup of the empire from internal forces threatening to tear it apart. In so doing, they . . .

The point sentence in the conclusion seems to be the second one ("But their efforts . . . apart"). That point is specific, substantive, and plausibly contestable. We could add a shortened version of that point to the end of the introduction, or we could write a new sentence for the introduction that, while not revealing the full point, would at least introduce the key concepts of the paper more clearly:

In a series of documents, the popes proposed their Crusades to restore Jerusalem to Christendom, but their words suggest other issues involving **political concerns** about European and Christian **unity** in the face of **internal forces** that were **dividing** them.

13.3 REVISING YOUR ARGUMENT

Once you determine that the outer frame of your paper will work for readers, analyze its argument section by section. We know

this seems to repeat earlier steps, but once drafted, your argument may look different from the way it did in your storyboard or outline.

13.3.1 Identify the Substance of Your Argument

Does the structure of your argument match the structure of your paper?

1. **Is each reason supporting your main claim the point of a section of its own?** If not, the organizing points of your paper may conflict with the structure of your argument.
2. **Do you strike the right balance between reasons and evidence?** In each section, identify everything that counts as evidence, all the summaries, paraphrases, quotations, facts, figures, graphs, tables—whatever you report from a primary or secondary source. If what you identify as evidence and its explanation are less than a third or so of a section, you may not have enough evidence to support your reasons. If you have lots of evidence but few or no reasons, you may have just a data dump.

13.3.2 Evaluate the Quality of Your Argument

What might cause your readers to reject your argument?

1. **Is your evidence reliable?** In chapter 9, we said that evidence should be accurate and precise, sufficient and representative, and authoritative (see 9.4). If you are close to a final draft, it may be too late to find more or better evidence. But you can check other matters:
 - Check your data and quotations against your notes.
 - Make sure your readers see how quotations and data relate to your claim.
 - Be sure you haven't skipped intermediate subreasons between a major reason and its supporting evidence.
2. **Have you appropriately qualified your argument?** Can you drop in a few appropriate hedges like *probably*, *most*, *often*, *may*, and so on?

3. **Does your paper read like a conversation with peers or colleagues asking hard but friendly questions?** If it reads like a contest between competitors or if you haven't acknowledged alternative views or objections, go back through your argument and imagine a sympathetic but skeptical reader asking, *Why do you believe that? Are you really making that strong a point? Could you explain how this evidence relates to your point? But what about . . . ?* (Review 10.1–2.) Then answer the most important ones.
4. **Have you expressed all the warrants you should?** There is no easy test for this question. Once you identify each section and subsection of your argument, write in the margin its most important unstated warrant. Then ask whether readers will accept it. If not, you have to state and support it.

13.4 REVISING THE ORGANIZATION OF YOUR PAPER

Once you are confident about the outer frame of your paper and the substance of its argument, make sure that readers will find the whole paper coherent. To ensure that they do, check the following:

1. Do key terms run through your whole paper?

- Circle key terms in the main point in your introduction and conclusion.
- Circle those same terms in the body of your paper.
- Underline other words related to concepts named by those circled terms.

Here again is that concluding paragraph about the Crusades, with its keywords circled:

As these documents show, popes Urban II and Gregory VII did urge the Crusades to restore the Holy Land to Christian rule. But their efforts were also shrewd political moves to unify the Roman and Greek churches and to prevent the breakup of the empire from internal forces threatening to tear it apart.

If readers don't see at least one of those key terms in most paragraphs, they may think your paper wanders.

If you find a passage that lacks key terms, you might shoehorn a few in. If that's difficult, you may have gotten off track and need to rewrite or even discard that passage.

2. Is the beginning of each section and subsection clearly signaled?

Could you quickly and confidently insert headings to mark where your major sections begin? If you can't, your readers probably won't recognize your organization. If you don't use headings, add an extra space at the major joints.

3. Does each major section begin with words that signal how that section relates to the one before it? Readers must not only recognize where sections begin and end, but understand why they are ordered as they are. Have you signaled the logic of your order with phrases such as *More important . . .*, *The other side of this issue is . . .*, *Some have objected that . . .*, *One complication is . . .*, or even just *First, . . . Second, . . .*?

4. Is it clear how each section relates to the whole? For each section ask: *What question does this section answer?* If it doesn't answer one of the five questions whose answers constitute an argument (7.1), does it create a context, explain a background concept or issue, or help readers in some other way? If you can't explain how a section relates to your point, consider cutting it.

5. Is the point of each section stated in a brief introduction (preferably) or in its conclusion? If you have a choice, state the point of a section at the end of its introduction. Never bury it in the middle. If a section is longer than four or five pages, you might conclude by restating your point and summarizing your argument, especially if your argument is fact-heavy with names, dates, or numbers.

6. Do terms that unify each section run through it? Each section needs its own key terms to unify and uniquely distinguish it from the others. To test that, create a heading that uniquely distinguishes that section from all the others. Repeat step 1 for each section: find the point sentence and circle in it the key terms for that section (do not circle terms you circled in the main point

of the whole paper). Check whether those terms run through that section. If you find no terms that differ from those running through the whole, then your readers may not see what new ideas that section contributes. If you find that some of the terms also run through another section, the two sections may only repeat each another. If so, consider combining them.

13.5 CHECKING YOUR PARAGRAPHS

You may have learned that every paragraph should begin with a topic sentence and be directly relevant to the section in which it appears. Those are good rules of thumb, but applied too strictly they can make your writing seem stiff. The important thing is to structure and arrange your paragraphs so that they lead your readers through the conversation you are orchestrating. Open each paragraph with a sentence or two that signal its key concepts. Doing that will help readers better understand what follows. If your opening doesn't also state the paragraph's point, then your last sentence should. Never bury the point in the middle.

Paragraphs vary in length depending on the type of writing in which they appear. For example, they tend to be shorter in brief research reports and longer in, say, critical essays or book chapters. Paragraphs should be long enough to develop their points but not so long that readers lose focus, which is simply to say they should be "just right" (another Goldilocks moment). If you find yourself stringing together choppy paragraphs of just a few lines, it may mean your points are not well developed. If you find yourself rolling out very long paragraphs of more than a page, it may mean that you are digressing. You can sometimes vary the lengths of your paragraphs for effect: use short paragraphs to highlight transitions or statements that you want to emphasize.

Some writers find it more natural to think not about their paragraphs but about their paragraph breaks. Use your paragraph breaks as you would the pauses in a conversation, for example, to rest after you make a strong point, to give your reader a moment to process a complex passage, or to signal a transition to a new idea.

13.6 LETTING YOUR DRAFT COOL, THEN PARAPHRASING IT

If you start your project early, you'll have time to let your revised draft cool. What seems good one day often looks different the next. When you return to it, don't read straight through; skim its top-level parts: its introduction, the first paragraph of each major section, and its conclusion. Then, based only on what you've read, paraphrase it for someone who hasn't read it. Does the paraphrase hang together? Does it accurately sum up your argument? Even better, ask someone else to skim your paper and summarize it: how well that reader summarizes your argument will predict how well your final readers will understand it. Finally, always consider your reader's advice, even if you do not follow every suggestion.

QUICK TIP Abstracts

An abstract is a paragraph that tells readers what they will find in a paper, an article, or a report. It should be shorter than an introduction but do three things that an introduction does:

- state the research problem
- announce key themes
- state the main point or a launching point that anticipates the main point

Abstracts differ from field to field, and some fields don't use them at all. But most abstracts follow one of three patterns. To determine which suits your field, ask your teacher or look in a standard journal. Here are examples of these patterns, adapted from the abstract to a recent article in political science (the third is the original).

1. Context + Problem + Main Point

This kind of abstract is an abbreviated introduction. It begins with a sentence or two to establish the context of previous research, continues with a sentence or two to state the problem, and concludes with the main result of the research.

Scholars have long assumed that democracy improves the quality of life for its citizens.*context* But recent research has called this orthodoxy into question, suggesting that there is little or no relationship between a country's regime type and its level of human development.*problem* In this article, we argue that democracy can be shown to advance human development, but only when considered as a historical phenomenon.*main point*

2. Context + Problem + Launching Point

This pattern is the same as the previous one, except that the abstract states not specific results, only their general nature (see 12.1.1).

Scholars have long assumed that democracy improves the quality of life for its citizens.*context* but recent research has called this orthodoxy into question, suggesting that there is little or no relationship between a

country's regime type and its level of human development.*problem* In this article, we review this body of work, develop a series of causal pathways through which democracy might improve social welfare, and test two hypotheses: (a) that a country's level of democracy in a given year affects its level of human development and (b) that its stock of democracy over the past century affects its level of human development.*launching point*

3. Summary

A summary also states the context and the problem; but before reporting the result, it summarizes the rest of the argument, focusing either on the evidence supporting the result or on the procedures and methods used to achieve it. Here is the abstract as it was published:

Does democracy improve the quality of life for its citizens? Scholars have long assumed that it does,*context* but recent research has called this orthodoxy into question.*problem* This article reviews this body of work, develops a series of causal pathways through which democracy might improve social welfare, and tests two hypotheses: (a) that a country's level of democracy in a given year affects its level of human development and (b) that its stock of democracy over the past century affects its level of human development. Using infant mortality rates as a core measure of human development, we conduct a series of time-series—cross-national statistical tests of these two hypotheses. We find only slight evidence for the first proposition, but substantial support for the second.*summary* Thus, we argue that the best way to think about the relationship between democracy and development is as a time-dependent, historical phenomenon.*main point*

Since this version includes a summary, the statement of the problem is slightly abbreviated. Notice, too, the opening sentence. Rather than stating the context in standard fashion, this version begins with what seems to be a rhetorical question—“Does democracy improve the quality of life for its citizens?”—just so it can then upend the implied answer. Even as compressed a form as an abstract allows for the occasional stylistic flourish.

A final tip: if you publish your research, some researcher down the line may want to find it, using a search engine that looks for keywords. So imagine searching for your paper yourself. What keywords would you look for? Put them in your title and the first sentence of your abstract.