



A(NOTHER) PROCESS OF GROWTH: THE JOURNEY OF WRITING A THESIS-DRIVEN PAPER

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“The spirit of inquiry is the itch to know and learn and discover...it involves the ability to ask researchable questions, the instinct to look in the right place for answers, a willingness to suspend judgment, and an openness to changing one’s mind.”

- Bruce Ballenger, *The Curious Researcher*

Ballenger’s term “spirit of inquiry” nicely frames the attitude with which to approach a research paper. An unfortunately popular belief is that a thesis-driven research paper begins with the writer having an established thesis. From my experience, beginning the inquiry and initially having an established thesis is incongruent with how I understand the writing process.

My inquiry begins with my own curiosity. It could be a question, opinion, or idea brought up in seminar, books, or conversations with friends. I’ve found it helpful to begin with an idea that I can explore in a variety of contexts. Many aides assist my initial research process.

Some useful tools are brainstorming, mind mapping, and freewriting. For example, I was sitting in a coffee shop today writing this article, and a businesswoman with green glasses walked by the window. The sun was luminous and her glasses caught the light—just for an instant her frames glowed gold-green and sparkled.

I began with the word “green” and quickly generated all sorts of ideas about the color. What makes fireworks spark green? What does green represent on different country flags? Where did the word green originate? I also questioned how much I actually know about the role of modern businesswomen. There are many ways to generate questions and all of them are useful. I spoke with a writer who once said she did her best thinking when she was making her bed or moving around outside. Regardless, the key to writing any length of paper is having sustaining and interesting questions and also having resources (including time) available for investigating.

It is necessary to know what informational resources are accepted in a research paper. The sky's the limit, and professors all have different ideas about what types of information are valid. Are interviews okay? What about television and newspapers? Are personal anecdotes acceptable? When I gather information, I've found it helpful to use the "journalistic approach" asking who, what, when, where, why, and how the information works. I then have an initial method for addressing different angles of my hypothesis or question. Still, I don't write with the intent to prove or answer a thesis, but rather to expand my ideas and questions into coherent paragraphs that I can develop and strengthen. I organize my ideas into main topic sentences with supporting details, analyze quotations from my research, and start to think about how my ideas fit together.

After I finish the initial draft I take my writing process public, reading it out loud to friends and peers. I find it helpful to be able to talk about my ideas in the paper, checking for clarity. I review my rough drafts in paragraphs and write out my main idea of each paragraph in the margins. Creating this "reverse outline" aids me in determining the structure, so I can address how the paragraphs reinforce my central ideas. I remember having a memorable conversation with another writer about generalized learning processes. He told me that I would remember what was important to me, and forget the rest. When I write, I write about what I remember from researching, in reference to my initial inquiry.

Developing my thesis statement is a process. I wait to define my thesis until after I've written a first or maybe a few drafts because the main idea requires substantive content that is, in this context, the research paper. The keystone connection between the writer's personal and persuasive voice and the contextual artifacts such as quotes, cases, examples, and paraphrased research is the crux, the "this is what I believe about my subject because..." statement. The statement—the thesis—requires a bit of shaping throughout the writing process. It changes. Initially, it is the driving force of the inquiry, then it becomes the segmented subject of close scrutiny, and towards the end of the drafting, the thesis becomes the definitive explanation necessary to unify the whole. The initial researching process, writing and revising drafts, and developing the thesis all take time.

It is important for me to spend time not writing too. Celebrating my personal and academic voice and using academic language and research to translate big ideas both have the side effects of inducing myopia after prolonged exposure. I believe the research writing process is an investment in a time-centric event that has a twofold objective. Firstly, writing a research paper is an engaging learning process that helps me clarify and test the ideas that are important to me, and secondly, it's about gaining knowledge that helps me form connections in the world.

My research paper becomes the evidence of my inquiry, and I have a store of knowledge that I gathered along the way. Writing is a process of making meaning, sculpting knowledge into form, and making choices that inspire growth and understanding. Writing helps me contextualize my curiosity and gives me a way to speak about the world.

I begin with a question, and answer with my voice, all in the spirit of inquiry.

TIPS FOR EDITING THESIS-DRIVEN PAPERS

Once you have defined a thesis statement, you can look at your paper differently. Where before you were turning ideas into words, now you are using those words to support your main point as effectively as possible for the reader.

Your thesis should go at the end of your introduction. It is usually one long, complicated sentence. Restate the thesis in your conclusion referring to the main supporting ideas from the paper's body. Your reader will expect to find your thesis in these places. This will reinforce the idea that your thesis statement is constant and true.

Each paragraph should work toward proving your thesis. Topic sentences usually ought to have words from the thesis statement itself. This will help keep the thesis present throughout your piece.

Transition sentences should use the thesis-idea as a link between separate ideas.

Most research papers feature quotations. Use the thesis to test whether a particular quote is appropriate to include. Also, use your thesis to guide your analysis of the quote. You can generate a lot of writing by including, explaining, and interpreting quotations in the context of your thesis.

After your paper is drafted, read your paper and check to see if every part of the paper serves to help prove the thesis statement in a cogent, straightforward way. Go back and fill in the gaps and remove the excess language.

Come to the Writing Center and the academic writing workshops for support and for another set of eyes.

A thesis-driven paper is a tried and true format for conveying ideas in an academic setting. The format itself does most of the work because your reader will automatically identify your main argument and your supporting ideas. You have an opportunity to be very creative and unique with the topic you choose to write about and the evidence you present.

The thesis-driven paper is a vehicle for your voice and your ideas. Get into the driver's seat.

WORKS CITED

Ballenger, Bruce. *The Curious Researcher: A Guide to Writing Research Papers*. Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, 2001.