

# Dinosaurs: Writing a Term paper

*Adapted from Laura Holder*

## **Start Early... getting a bit late for this one...**

I've heard it all before – “I work best under pressure,” or “I have it all planned in my head, so writing it won't be a problem.” Do you know the kind of papers I get from that? They're not A-papers. Sometimes, they're doing good to be C-papers. Start working on papers early.

Spend time developing your argument and making sure it fits within the parameters of the assignment. Read any material or assignment sheets the professor has given you about the assignment to make sure you've planned for all the requirements – sources, citation style, length, topic, etc.

## **Outlines and Drafts**

Do them. You don't have to do the traditional outline with Roman numerals and little letters, nor do you have to write a draft in correct order, but I advise you to get into the habit of doing some form of written pre-planning and draft work. Write the body of the essay first and then worry about the introduction and conclusion. Write the conclusion (what you want people to take away from the essay) and then work on the body to be sure you get there. Work on it in any order you want, but give yourself time to have a draft ready before the final version is due so that you can edit it.

## **Write a Thesis Statement**

This is the place where you identify your argument, the stance you're taking in the paper. The basic five-paragraph essay we're all taught in high school tells us that the thesis should be a single sentence at the end of the introduction paragraph.

That's not necessarily true once you get to college. You're writing about more complex topics, so it stands to reason your thesis will be more complex. It may take more than one paragraph to introduce the topic. You may need more than one sentence to identify and outline your argument.

A good way to start forming a thesis is to take the main question or topic assignment of the essay and reword it into a sentence. This way, you're guaranteed that the essay will at least be addressing the assignment. Once you have this basic thesis in place, you can work to make it more specific or sophisticated to match the direction of your essay.

## **Introduction, Body, Conclusion, the Whole Shebang**

One of the most common mistakes Freshmen writers make is to look at the minimum required limit, reach it and then stop. One of the reasons we require minimum lengths, either in words or pages, is because professors have learned that just saying “write until you’ve answered the assignment” will almost always get us at least one student who, either out of arrogance or obnoxiousness, will write a paragraph and feel they have handled the assignment.

But just because you’ve reached the bottom of the fourth page (a free tip, if the assignment says at least 4pgs, that doesn’t mean three full pages and a paragraph on page 4 – go to the bottom of the page), as required, does not mean you’re done. You need to introduce the topic, discuss it, and then include a conclusion. You need to fully deal with the assignment. The introduction is the first few paragraphs where you outline and introduce the topic.

The body is where you handle the discussion – examples, research, opinions, arguments.

The conclusion isn’t a two line paragraph that you wrote when you realized you were at the base limit. It’s where you wrap up the argument. If you leave out any of these, your essay will feel as if it’s missing something.

## **Edit and Proofread**

When we read our own work, we automatically fill in gaps or holes in the logic because we know what we’re trying to say or we know they’ll be addressed later – an outsider won’t have that knowledge and will only be able to tell you what they read, not what you intended to be on the page. Look for basic grammar errors – the little red or green squiggly lines in a word processing program help you identify those. Read the essay out loud – it’s easier to fix grammatical errors when we read silently, but when we read out loud, we’ll stumble over errors.

Obvious grammatical or spelling errors (or even format errors such as spacing and margins) automatically set your essay off on a bad note. It tells your professor that you don’t care enough about the assignment to take care of the little things. If that’s the case, why should your professor care enough about the assignment to take the time to grade it?

All of these are small, basic steps you can take. Yes, the actual writing of the paper will have many other issues to deal with in how you address the topic and present it, but these tips show that you at least care enough about the assignment to have the basics done right. And that will make your essay something of a rare commodity.