Writing a Research Paper in the Humanities

The Research Process

N.B.: Research and writing aren't necessarily discrete stages—you will naturally find yourself coming up with new ideas while you research, and almost always continue to research while you write. But you won't discover new ideas in a vacuum; the more you read, and the more actively you do so, the more ideas you will generate for yourself and the sooner you will do so. Here are some suggestions about how to begin the process.

- **Think broadly**

  Think about *questions* and *problems* and *conversations* that interest you in your field. If you are writing a paper for a seminar, take notes every week on issues in your course discussion that you think have not been adequately resolved. Move beyond simply finding the material itself interesting—think about what questions you can raise about it that have not been answered.

- **Read the work of scholars on your topic both generously and critically**

  Get into the habit of trying to follow every step of an author's argument actively. As you read, think about the argument's underlying assumptions, its potential implications on a theoretical level, and its possible application to other areas of analysis. Ask yourself questions about the argument's logic. Does the evidence you are reading about always support the point the author is making? In what case might it not do so? Are other possible explanations for the evidence addressed? Is the main claim convincing? Why or why not? Try to start with the most large-scale issues so that your response is about the most significant underpinnings of the work. Ask yourself what the author is trying to do, and what conversations the author is entering into. To what scholars in what field is the author responding, and how? How would you respond to those same scholars? What parts do you agree with, and what parts do you not?

- **Write down interesting problems, questions, tensions, and gaps in the discourse**

  All of these provide an opportunity for you to contribute new ideas to the conversation. Keep track of them somewhere. Every problem is a gift.

- **Write out lists, questions, ideas that confuse you, and interesting problems**

  Whether or not you feel "ready" to write anything down, the more you can get on paper, the easier it is to see your ideas in relation to each other. You need not start with complete sentences at first. Try drawing arrows connecting words that represent different ideas. Make lists of opposing binaries. Jot down in one place topics or texts that have not been analyzed sufficiently. Brainstorm. Then zoom in on the areas you seem to be thinking the most about, and continue to develop those ideas. This will lead you to your topic. Once you have that, continue reading in a more focused way, looking for sources that speak directly to your areas of interest.

- **Follow the bibliographic threads**

  Look in the bibliographies and footnotes of the works you are reading. Try to find the most up-to-date discussions and the most cutting-edge responses to the topic in your field. Where is the conversation on this idea *right now*? Are people from other fields responding to it? Try to write a 1-paragraph synthetic summary of what scholars used to think of your topic and what they think about it now.

The Writing Process

N.B.: Frequently, the process of writing a research paper in the humanities does not follow a linear trajectory. Even changing just one piece might mean that the entire structure has shifted and needs to be adjusted. You might discover new pieces of evidence after you have written about others, or decide after two drafts that a counter-argument you have been thinking about actually undermines part of your main claim and that you therefore need to change the point you are making. You might not figure out what your main claim is until after you have written a place-holder introduction and a complete first draft. But in whatever order the pieces of the paper unfold for you, and however recursively you revisit sections and revise them, you will benefit from keeping in mind the following components, which are crucial to a humanistic argument.

- **Articulate a question or problem that is driving your paper**

  The question/problem may change throughout the writing process, but if that happens, just keep revising it. The more specific and complex you can make your question/problem, the more it will help you develop and refine your argument. It is useful for keeping you on track and can remind you of what ideas still need to be addressed when you are in the midst of the writing process.

- **Create a main claim**

  This is the most important part of your paper. A claim is a statement supported by REASONS based on EVIDENCE. It acknowledges and responds to other (opposing) views, and you can make a case for its significance (STAKES, or the "so what?"). A main claim should be specific (nuanced and detailed, not general), substantive (compelling and original), relevant to a scholarly conversation (something that would interest other professionals in your academic field), and contestable (something a reader in your field could doubt). The more contestable your main claim is, the higher the stakes your argument will have. But you never want to make a claim that is too big to be supported with the evidence you can supply within the scope of your paper. It is usually better to make a smaller claim that you can support well than a grand claim that you cannot. The main claim should be stated explicitly in your paper. This usually happens at the end of the introduction section. Revise your claim at any point in the process.

- **Craft an introduction**

  An introduction usually lays out the conversation you are entering into, and how you are doing it. It tells your reader the question or problem your paper is pursuing, and why this question or problem is important. It also offers your main claim as the answer to the question or the solution to the problem.

- **Craft a body**

  Most body paragraphs make one clear point that supports the main claim, and then discuss the reasons and evidence for that point. The main variation is that some paragraphs might address counter-arguments.

- **Craft a conclusion**

  Conclusions do more than restate the main claim. They can be thought of as a broadening-out, or opening-up, of your initial question in light of the work you have now presented. How does your interpretation help your field move forward? Now that the readers have read your analysis, what new questions might they pursue? What areas should we look at because of your new research? This is a good place to speculate about ideas that deserve further exploration.

References:

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. 3rd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.