

## The Writing Center

### A FREE Resource for Undergraduate Student Writers

Our friendly and enthusiastic peer tutors receive intensive training so that they can help you produce your best written work. Whether you're brainstorming ideas, outlining a paper, or proofreading a final draft, they can offer valuable suggestions and feedback. Tutors can help with:

- Essays
- Proposals
- Résumés
- Short Stories
- Abstracts
- Lab Reports
- Research Papers
- Newsletter Articles
- Cover Letters

and more!

To make an  
appointment,  
visit us at:

writingcenter@mst.edu



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## Taking the First Step: How to Get Started on Your Paper

*When asked what stage of the writing process is most difficult, many students say it's just getting started. Perhaps the assignment is intimidating, or maybe it's hard to think of something to say. In some cases, the problem is simply procrastination. Whatever the reason, putting those first words on paper can be tough. Here, three Writing Center tutors share their experiences and offer suggestions to help you meet this challenge.*

### Cortney Chapman

For a lot of writers, myself included, one of the hardest parts of writing a paper is defeating procrastination. I think everyone is familiar with the feelings of frustration that develop when sitting in front of a blank Word document wondering where to start. If this feeling is familiar, you may want to give my personal secret weapon a shot. It's called outlining, and it's powerful. It's also a lot simpler than you might think, and once you start, you'll find that you can quickly create the skeleton of your whole paper and organize your ideas.

Start off by coming up with a thesis. That may sound scary, but a thesis is really just the main point you're trying to make. Keep in mind that it's not set in stone; it can (and most likely will) change by the time you're done.

The next step is to come up with supporting points. Three to five is usually a good start, depending on the length of your paper. Below each point, jot down any specific details, examples, evidence, or explanations you want to include.

Next, take those supporting points and put them in a logical order by labeling them one, two, three, and so on. Do the same with any details you wrote down.

Check to be sure all of this information actually pertains to the point you're trying to make, and move or eliminate it if it's out of place.

That's really it. By the time you're done, it's just a matter of filling in the blanks. Now you know what you want to say and what order you want to say it in. This really is the best way I've found to get myself going, so next time you're stuck and can't seem to do more than stare anxiously at a blank page, give outlining a try and see if it works for you too.

### Kristen Crady

Like most students, I am guilty of procrastination. In fact, I'd say that I am the procrastination queen. No matter how long or short the paper, I usually find myself rushing to complete it the night before it's due. This is always extremely stressful, and I find myself wishing for more time. There is no doubt in my mind that many students can relate to my situation, so I have some tips that may be useful when dealing with procrastination.

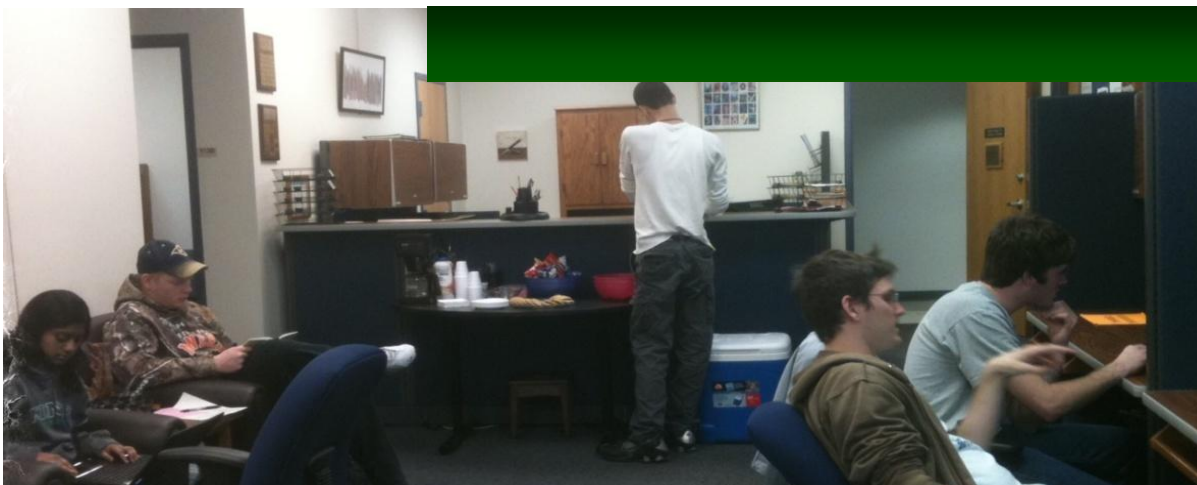
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*The easiest thing to do on  
earth is not write.*

-- Screenwriter William Goldman

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My first suggestion is to be realistic and quit convincing yourself that you do not need *all* of the time given to work on your assignment. The earlier you start, the better. Allow yourself enough time to gain a full, correct understanding of the assignment and to clarify any misunderstandings with your professor. With enough time, you'll also have a chance to take a step back after you've written the paper and determine whether your work accurately conveys your ideas and addresses the assignment. ([cont.](#))



## The First Step (cont.)

### Isaac Digennaro

I am never a writer by choice, only by necessity. Because of my dread of writing, I spend almost as much time avoiding the paper as I do actually writing it. I clean and organize my desk. I distract myself with the endless supply of entertainment on the Internet. I have even done homework to avoid the paper looming in my mind. Because of my skill in *not* writing, I have had to find ways to get started, to ease myself into the task.

One way I get started is through research. I search the Internet and relevant books or periodicals for all the information I can find on my topic. I find it immensely helpful to have an example of someone else's writing on the subject, to get ideas for structure and important points (and I take careful notes so that I can cite all my sources). After I learn everything I can about my topic, I have to find some way to put the information in my head onto paper. I usually start with a list of significant facts or details that I want to include, something like an outline.

Once I have a good idea what I want to talk about, I try to condense my idea into a sentence or two that will grab the reader's attention. Revised and expanded, these sentences will serve as my introductory paragraph. I have now accomplished the colossal task of starting the paper, and the rest of the process is usually somewhat easier. From here, it's just a matter of fleshing out my points, organizing them in paragraphs, and revising until my paper says what I want it to say.

## Words from the Wise

*Encouragement and humor from professional writers*

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*Writing is easy: All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.*

*--Gene Fowler*

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*A synonym is a word you use when you can't spell the other one.*

*--Baltasar Gracián*

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*The road to hell is paved with adverbs.*

*--Stephen King*

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*A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.*

*--Thomas Mann*

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*Writing is a way of talking without being interrupted.*

*--Jules Renard*

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*I hate writing. I love having written.*

*--Dorothy Parker*

## You know you should visit the Writing Center when...

### By Chance Franklin

***In many cases, students' only motivation for visiting the Writing Center is that an instructor has required it. But, as students quickly learn, there are many times when a visit to the Writing Center can be beneficial. Here is a list of a few such occasions:***

If...

- your assignment leaves you just as confused as you were during tests in Calc. 3
- the last paper you wrote was titled "What I Plan to do After High School"
- figuring out proper citation format makes you want to rage quit
- you feel confident about your thesis statement because, during peer editing, you read three others just like it
- you feel that you are "done" with your paper when you are still only half-way to meeting the length requirement
- your sitting there reading this and can't tell that it's grammatically incorrect
- the phrase, "What's black and white and red all over?" applies to the rough draft that your teacher just handed back to you
- or you just would like a second opinion on a document

**...then you should probably pay a visit to the Writing Center!**

## Beware the thesaurus!

By Elissa Brown

When it's 3 am and you're sitting in front of your computer writing a paper that's due the next day, the thesaurus probably looks like your best friend. You need to sound smart so that your professor will give you an A, but you can't think of the words you want. And it's so late! And your brain boycotted the whole affair two hours ago anyway. The thesaurus is there for you, though, with helpful hints and fun new words. You may not have heard these words before, and even if you have, you may not quite know what they mean. But, boy, these words will make your paper sound brilliant!

Ladies and gentlemen, a thesaurus is a fickle friend. It may give you long lists of words to choose from when the best string of letters your neurons can cobble together is "alskjflajdsf." If you don't know the full meaning of these words, though, you may end up making some unfortunate choices. Sure, sometimes the meaning of the word the thesaurus gives you will be close enough to your intended meaning, but this is a best-case scenario. The worst-case scenario can be pretty embarrassing.

I learned this the hard way. When I was studying Russian, I decided to show off my mad new skills by writing a letter to my Russian friend, and I made liberal use of a Russian thesaurus. I told him how "excited" I was that I finally knew enough Russian to write him a letter. It was "hard" because of all the verb conjugations and noun declensions, but I was getting the hang of it, and I was "having so much fun." He wrote me back soon after, enclosing a translation of the letter I had written. It turns out the online Russian thesaurus I was using must have been a cruel joke on Americans, or meant for translating some naughty literature. For every word or phrase you see above in quotes, I had somehow managed to pick the Russian word with the strongest possible sexual connotation. Oops.

So, take it from me, the thesaurus should be used with caution. Use it to remind you of familiar words that have slipped your mind. Or, if you must use unfamiliar words, look them up in the dictionary first to be sure you understand their meaning and connotations. Granted, there is a only a slim chance that the thesaurus will ever trick you into writing dirty things about *No Impact Man* or *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. It could, however, make you sound like a fool nonetheless.



## Solving the Paragraph Puzzle

A Writing Center tutor takes the mystery out of paragraph construction and organization

By Natasha Stoneking

*How many paragraphs do I need? How long should they be? How do I know where to start a new paragraph? What makes a good paragraph? These are questions we hear often at the Writing Center. Here, one of our tutors takes some of the mystery out of using paragraphs effectively.*

No hard-and-fast rule exists to tell you how many paragraphs you need or how long they should be. The five-paragraph essay isn't suitable for all writing assignments. No one is counting to be sure you have 6.8 sentences in each paragraph. You'll find paragraphs easier to build if you remember that they exist not just to take up space or satisfy some random requirement, but to separate main ideas. The number of paragraphs you need, therefore, depends on the number of points you make in support of your thesis.

The first paragraph of an essay is the introduction. Typically, it ends with the thesis statement, which is a sentence that sums up the author's main point. This thesis should be precise and arguable. ("Turtles, particularly the green ones, are the fiercest reptiles known to humankind" is preferable to "Turtles are great.") Each subsequent paragraph should clearly support the thesis.

Between the introduction and the conclusion, body paragraphs make a series of points that support the thesis statement. The first statement in a body paragraph is generally the topic sentence ("In the wild, turtles are more aggressive toward humans than even alligators"). The sentences that follow should explain and support the topic sentence. They may include examples, definitions, and details, often from reference materials ("In North America, 90% surprise attacks by reptiles are perpetrated by turtles"). They may also refute potential counterarguments ("Although turtles seem docile, their diary entries clearly demonstrate their deceit and obsession with violence").

The final paragraph, or conclusion, should be related to the thesis, but it should not merely restate the thesis. A good conclusion addresses an important idea related to the topic but not necessary to support the thesis. Some approaches include forecasting ("If Americans ignore the turtle problem, mass chaos is imminent"), speculation ("If turtles were not so vicious, the Northwest would be a much safer place to travel, opening much-needed trade

routes"), and final thoughts ("Remember to be careful when you see a turtle: stop, drop, and roll to confuse it").

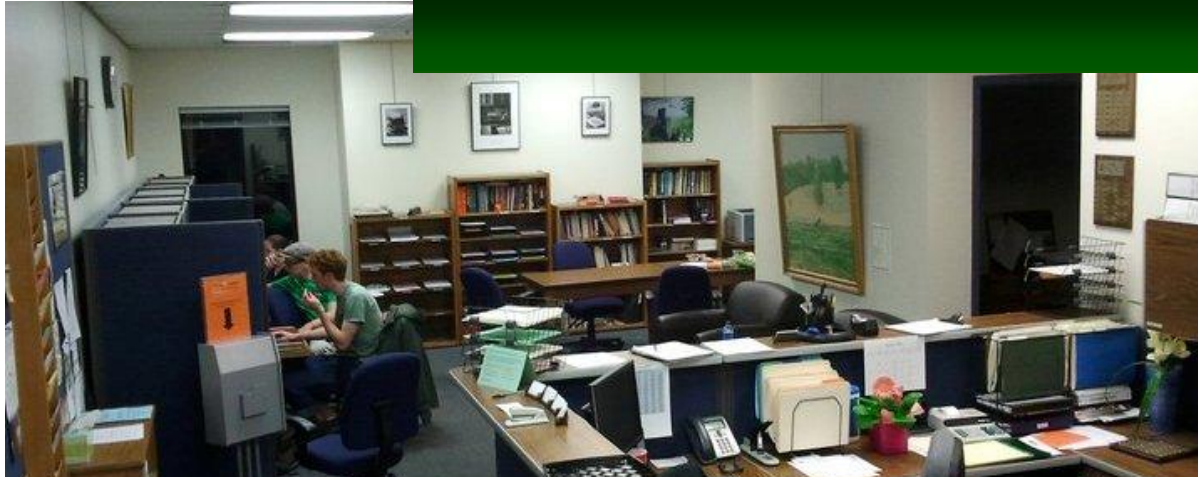
A couple of guidelines will help you construct effective paragraphs. First, transitions are critical. Each paragraph should be logically connected to the next ("Aggression in turtles is present not only in the wild—captive turtles are the most vicious reptilian house pets in both legal and illegal markets"). Second,

**"Turtles, particularly the green ones, are the fiercest reptiles known to humankind"**

although the exact number of sentences in a paragraph is not important, paragraph length does matter. If a paragraph has fewer than three sentences,

the main idea may not be important, or it may not have enough support. If a paragraph is a page long, it probably contains more than one point, and these should be separated into two or more paragraphs.

The bottom line is this: A paragraph should be composed of a main idea and its support. Writers present their ideas in multiple paragraphs to make the structure of an argument clear ("Oh, these points are all related to why the *green* ones are the most brutal of all). Create as many or as few as needed.



## THE ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

By Erica McFarland

The annotated bibliography is one of those helpful tools that is often praised by writing instructors and ignored by students. Whether or not your instructor requires one, an annotated bibliography can be a valuable prewriting tool, helping you organize information from multiple sources. In particular, it can be a time-saver later during the outlining process, permitting you to identify and compare different lines of reasoning and suggesting approaches to your topic.

Like a standard bibliographical entry, each entry in an annotated bibliography should contain publication information for the source. An annotated bibliography, however, also includes a few sentences or paragraphs describing the main points covered by each source. The length of each entry will depend on the purpose of the information. For example, a summary of the main argument may take only a sentence or two, but a critical analysis of the structure, themes, and connections to other topics will be longer. Usually, the best strategy is to paraphrase rather than quote your sources because the task of paraphrasing helps you understand the author's ideas and thus form your own interpretation or argument.

To get the most out of an annotated bibliography, include an annotation for every source you consult, even if, ultimately, you don't use all the sources in preparing your final draft. After all, too much information is always better than not enough, especially in academic writing and research.

## Want to be a better writer? Read!

By Sarah Padgett

The hardest part of writing is writing. This is true for every single person on the entire planet. Trust me. I've asked. Textbooks, manuals, and exercises are great tools for learning some of the basics of writing; they give tips and tricks for overcoming obstacles and avoiding errors. But they won't write your essay. In the end, a writer must put words on a page, and even a firm grasp of grammar concepts will not make those words magically appear. So, where do the words come from? How do you transition from an intimidating blank page to a page covered with beautiful prose?

The secret? Read. Read anything!

Even the best authors and writers in the world struggle with writers' block. The blinding impotence in the fight to

harness language can be overwhelming. Reading is the best tool available. Your brain picks up on the subtleties of language when it reads. It sees many ways to put sentences together. It encounters examples of intriguing introductions, strong thesis statements, smooth transitions. Published writers have a wealth of knowledge about language that they share in every single document they publish. By reading the work of experienced writers, you'll learn how to use new vocabulary words, where to put commas, and how to vary your sentence structure. The best part is that you don't need to do any "activities" to reap the benefits of reading—no exercises, no worksheets. Your brain is learning subconsciously how to write by

seeing excellent examples. And you can read anything. Read *USA Today*, which is available all over campus. Go online to take advantage of the wealth of articles available on the web. Read books—classics, mystery, romance, fantasy. Read magazines, like my personal favorite, the *New Yorker* (because those writers KNOW what they're doing). It's liquid magic when you read prose that flows across your eyes and saturates your mind with no effort whatsoever. You can write like that too. Every single act of focused reading teaches you something. You'll learn your tastes and find your style—what works for you and what doesn't. So put down the remote or the controller, lose yourself in another world, and be amazed at what you learn along the way.

## Tips for Technical Writing

### Programming Documentation: A Best-Practice Technique for Engineers

By Joseph A. Steurer

Engineering majors are often required to complete programming assignments for class. Even if you haven't had these courses yet, if you study engineering, chances are you will. You will likely be asked to use MATLAB, Fortran, or C++. If you go several semesters between such classes, you can easily forget most of what you learn about such languages. Resourceful students will refresh their memory by reviewing old code they've written in the past. Unfortunately, this code may be entirely useless if it isn't well documented. Although documenting your code as you write can seem tedious, without such documentation, you won't remember how the program

works when you go back to look at it later. If you've ever coded before, you may be familiar with the option of adding comments to your program. Comments are statements, usually prefixed by a '%' or '//,' used to describe what the program is doing. They should be complete and descriptive sentences. Your comments don't have to cover every detail, but they should explain context and eliminate ambiguity. Ideally, to ensure the appropriate level of detail, they should make the code comprehensible to another reader. If you are ever required to prepare a technical document on your code, you can refer to your comments to generate content for your report. Although adding comments to your code may take some time, it can save you headaches in the long run.

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Brandi Washburn  
Senior Secretary



Writing  
Center

# Getting the Most from a Writing Center Visit

By Kari Ward & Nathan Tramel

*Most Writing Center visits are just 30 minutes long because we want to help as many students as possible throughout the semester. If you have a substantial paper, this can seem like a very short time, but you may be surprised at how much difference a half hour can make! And there are steps you can take to ensure that you get as much as possible out of your appointment. Here, our tutors offer 5 suggestions that can make a big difference.*

### 1. Don't wait till the last minute.

Scheduling an appointment a half hour before the class in which the paper is due doesn't leave time to make improvements to your paper. Remember to leave time between your appointment and your due date so that you can make changes. Otherwise, your half hour will have been wasted!

### 2. Schedule an appointment.

Although walk-ins are always welcome, appointments

take priority. And at some times during the semester, we can get very busy! Whenever possible, make an appointment ahead of time. Our online scheduling tool makes it easy; just visit [writingcenter.mst.edu](http://writingcenter.mst.edu) and click on the link!

### 3. Be on time.

If tutors have back-to-back appointments and one appointment starts late, every subsequent session can suffer from that time crunch. So if you arrive late, we may not be able to give you the full 30 minutes. Do your best to arrive on time!

### 4. Bring paperwork.

If you have a copy of the prompt or instructions, we'll be better able to ensure that your paper meets requirements. If you have any feedback from previous assignments or your current work, we can use that to provide more focused guidance. And if you have a hard copy of any work you've already done, you won't have

to waste time logging in to the computer and opening your file.

### 5. Ask questions.

Review your work before you arrive and be prepared to ask about specific concerns such as thesis statement or citation format. If you know what kind of help you're looking for, you'll find that your session will be more productive.



# A New Tutor's Perspective

By Laura Welsh

This semester I began working as a tutor at the Writing Center. I have always excelled at writing, and tutoring appeared to be simple matter of correcting papers. Initially, I assumed that tutoring sessions would involve little more than a good deal of red ink and a sympathetic smile. I quickly learned, however, that my ideas about tutoring did not match the true job description.

My training has taught me that tutoring focuses on developing not just better papers, but better writers. I can mark up papers from top to bottom, but if students don't understand the corrections, they won't be able to apply them to future writing assignments. In fact, I now know that, in most cases, I should avoid picking up a pen at all because students will learn most from corrections they make themselves.

So what is my role as a tutor? Often, my most important role is that of motivator or counselor. I can also advise students on organization or be a partner in brainstorming. I can help students who see the weaknesses in their own work but who have trouble making the necessary adjustments. In many cases, I can be most helpful if I concentrate on issues such as thesis statements and supporting evidence that will have the greatest impact on a paper. And, sure, I can help with grammar and punctuation, too, but improper use of commas rarely affects a grade as much as a nonexistent thesis!

So, in my first semester at the Writing Center, I've found that tutors focus on a student's overall writing skills instead of just spilling red ink. And it's this approach that makes the Writing Center a valuable resource for students of all majors at every step of the writing process.