

Step 5 - Formulating a thesis and outlining

In writing a research paper, one of the greatest mistakes a student makes is trying to write the paper while trying to think of what to say. Most people can walk and chew gum at the same time, but no one we know can write and outline simultaneously. An instructor can tell at a glance that a paper was not outlined before it was written. The writer's thoughts follow no logical order; the reader stumbles from point to disjointed point. Outlining before you write is the only way to avoid this muddle. You might be surprised to learn that you should spend more time outlining than writing your paper. The process of organizing your thoughts takes time. If you adequately put your research in some order, then the writing of your paper will be simple.

To begin an outline, you need a thesis. Simply put, a thesis answers the question you framed in the beginning of your project. A thesis must be something you can argue either for or against. A good thesis can be understood on its own without reference to the rest of your paper. If your question was "What were the causes for the United States' rejection of the Treaty of Versailles?," your answer -- or thesis -- might be "Woodrow Wilson's refusal to compromise any of the terms of the Versailles Treaty led to its rejection by the United States Senate." Or you might have asked, "What were the causes of the American Civil War?" Your thesis could be "Although there were many causes for the American Civil War, the primary cause was slavery." As you write and look more carefully at your evidence, you may modify your thesis, but you cannot begin to organize your material unless you have some idea of what you intend to prove.

Once you have a thesis, you can begin to organize the evidence to support it. Think of it as a court trial. You are the prosecutor, and you have something you must

prove to a jury -- that Woodrow Wilson's recalcitrance was the cause for the United States' rejection of the Versailles Treaty or that slavery was the primary cause for the American Civil War. As prosecutor, you must decide what evidence you are going to put before the jury and, almost as important, the *order* of introducing your evidence. The object is to present to the jury as persuasive a case as possible. That is not all. You are also required at the same time to function as defense counsel, for you must present all evidence you have found that might contradict your thesis. You should *never* deliberately omit evidence which contradicts your thesis. Almost all historical argument is based on the *weight* of the evidence. You will be arguing that the *weight* of the evidence (as opposed to *all* the evidence) supports your thesis.

Organizing your evidence requires you to understand its relevancy. As in court, you must not offer irrelevant evidence. For each bit of evidence you have collected, you must ask the question, "Does this evidence make it more or less likely that the thesis is true or false?" If it doesn't make it more or less likely, then don't include it in your paper. Suppose you have a note card from a source that says one of President Wilson's great concerns in asking for a declaration of war against Germany was freedom of the seas. Does this statement tend to make it more or less likely that Wilson's stubborn attitude during the Versailles treaty ratification process was the cause of the Senate's rejection of the treaty? It doesn't, and you should not use it. Does a quotation from an antebellum Southern Senator declaring the importance of slavery to the Southern economy make it more or less likely that slavery was the primary cause of the Civil War? It does, because it shows that some Southerners considered slavery critical to the survival of their economy. Remember, one piece of evidence does not have to be so weighty

as to *prove* your thesis all at once. If that is the case, you have chosen a simplistic thesis. In order to be relevant--and therefore be included in your paper--all the evidence has to do is to make it a little more likely that your thesis is true or not. Keep in mind: relevant evidence may tend to make your thesis *less* likely to be true. You must not ignore such evidence. For almost any bona fide thesis posed, some evidence does not support it. A good historian always recognizes the existence of evidence that does not support his or her thesis and argues persuasively that the *weight* of the evidence *does* support the thesis. The proof of a thesis lies in gaining a greater *weight* of evidence, not in finding an absolute answer. After you have sifted through your evidence to determine whether it is relevant, you must then decide how to present the relevant evidence both for and against your thesis.

With most research papers, the first step in organizing your evidence is to decide how you are going to present it. The most common organizations group evidence by topic or in chronological order. Are you going to present the evidence according to certain topics, regardless of when the events occurred, or will you stick to the sequence in which events happened? There are advantages and disadvantages to each method. Usually, when your thesis deals with causes, such as the causes of the Industrial Revolution, it makes more sense to use a topical order. The reader will be less confused if you discuss one cause at a time, even though this will probably mean jumping back and forth in time. If you are proposing an "over-time" thesis, such as the changes in the American middle class in the early twentieth century, it makes more sense to stick to a chronological order. The focus of the answer is to describe the change, a difficult job to do if the chronological order is lost. For a thesis that describes effects, such as the effects

of the Great Depression, either organization might be appropriate. It might be important to show that one effect led to another, and in such a case a chronological format would be the most appropriate. If the sequence of the effects was insignificant, you could effectively use a topical format.

Keep your eye on the order of your evidence. Ask yourself, "Why am I putting these topics in this particular order?" If you have a good reason, the chances are you have a logic to your order. It may be that one topic cannot be fully understood without first discussing another topic. Or it could be that you will avoid repeating material if one topic is discussed before another. The bottom line is that you should have a good reason for your order. Finally, it is a good idea to determine what you consider to be your strongest evidence and get this evidence before the reader as early as possible. Mark Twain's adage about church could apply here: "Few sinners are saved after the first twenty minutes of a sermon."

The actual outlining should be done at a large table like the ones in the library. You will need your research note cards and paper. First, go through your note cards and formulate your thesis. This will take some time, and you will have to work at it. Write the thesis down and go back through the cards, pulling out those you believe are relevant to the thesis. Take these cards, lay them out on the table, and see if you can place them in any kind of order. What topics show up when you go through this process? Which cards seem to deal with a particular topic? This too takes time, but before long, you should begin to discover a way in which your cards can be organized. At this point, you can begin to write down an outline. It is a good idea to mark your cards, so that you can keep them in order. You might just put "Intro 3" or "Ic" on a card to remind you that it should

be used in the third part of your introduction. At the end of the process, you should have an outline and the cards you are going to use stacked in the order you intend to use them.

One word of caution. Don't try to use all the research note cards you have gathered. You will be tempted to use them to show your instructor how extensive your research has been. Don't worry. Many will be irrelevant. If you have done your research thoroughly, it will be readily apparent. In fact, a well-prepared historian never uses all the research amassed. Your instructor is looking for you to demonstrate your judgment. Use it - in judging the order and relevance of what you have to say.

Name: _____

CHECKLIST

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_____ 1. Review note cards to search for thesis

_____ 2. State thesis

Thesis: _____

_____ 3. Thesis answers question framed

If it does not, then rephrase the thesis so that it does, or consider re-framing the question.

_____ 4. Thesis can be understood without reference to the paper.

_____ 5. Determined whether to introduce evidence by topic _____ or time _____.

_____ 6. Reviewed note cards, separating those relevant to thesis

_____ 7. Reviewed relevant note cards and organized them in the order they will be used

_____ 8. Outline (use additional sheets):