

The Writing Process

Writing a paper start to finish is a big undertaking for anyone; breaking down this task into specific, smaller steps—collectively called the *writing process*—makes it less intimidating and mysterious. At each step below, we explain what to do and how to get help if you get stuck.

Remember, [you can book a writing appointment](#) at any stage of the process with a professional writing consultant or a peer writing assistant (for all subjects, Science, or English as an additional language).

Pre-writing

Understand the assignment and make a plan

Understand the assignment and what you need to produce; make a **checklist**.

- Include the number and type of sources required, the word count, formatting requirements, etc.
- Highlight **verbs** in the assignment instructions (“explain,” “analyze,” “discuss,” etc.); these words tell you what to do.
- Don’t ignore **unfamiliar terms** in the assignment; find out what they mean (look them up, or ask your TA or prof).
- Think about how the assignment links to the course objectives in the **syllabus**. Why has the prof set this assignment, and what ideas/theories/methods should you demonstrate that you understand and can apply?

Make a plan

- The [SASS assignment planner](#) is your most useful tool for this stage. Its options include research essay, standard lab report, business/case report, and more.
- See our resources on [managing time](#), beating [procrastination](#), and staying [focused](#).
- **Give yourself time** to think and write well. Spread out the work over weeks, not days.

Choose a topic & start your research

Choose a topic

- Revisit your thinking about the links between the assignment and course objectives. Focus on what interests you.
- Don’t try to come up with a thesis statement or argument at this point; rather, think of a question or questions you’d like to explore within the parameters of the assignment instructions. Consider discussing them with your [TA or prof](#).
- Try free writing for fifteen minutes about the topic: what do you think you already know about this topic? What questions do you have about it? What angle is most interesting to you?

Research

- Use the library's [Getting Started](#) tool. You can book an appointment with a [librarian](#)—a subject specialist who knows their way around research in your topic.
- [Read](#) your research sources with three **purposes** in mind: to **answer your questions**, to see **connections/(dis)agreements among articles**, and to **develop your insight**.
- **Don't** try to [take notes](#) on every line, fact, and idea in every article you read.
- Now is the time to manage your [source citation](#) and ensure you practice [academic integrity](#).

Drafting

Start writing a draft

Draft body paragraphs

- Think of your main argument and its supporting points; write a body [paragraph](#) for each of the supporting points. Try the what / how / why structure.
- Try writing a paragraph each day for a week or two; your paper could be mostly done without having to write it in a single marathon session. Writing one paragraph is less daunting than writing a whole paper, so this approach is motivating.

Draft the introduction and conclusion

- Revisit your working thesis statement in the context of your body paragraphs; do they still align, or do you need to change something?
- Review the SASS resources on [introductions and conclusions](#).
- Think about why your argument matters:
 - Why should a scholarly reader be interested?
 - What is the broader significance of your finding?
 - How does it relate to scholarly work on similar or related themes or ideas?
- Go back to your research notes and assignment instructions to see if they prompt fresh insights.

Develop a working thesis and make an outline

Develop a working thesis statement

- The [thesis statement](#) is more focused than your topic and offers an argument that is supportable with evidence, not just opinion or fact. It consists of three parts:
 - **what** the main argument of your paper is
 - **how** you'll support it with academic evidence
 - **why** it matters to the scholarly conversation on your topic
- Consider how your research and the course have helped you understand the topic; identify key ideas and their connections, and how they might fit into an argument. Try a mind map to show your thinking.
- Freewriting can help at this stage: it may seem like extra work, but it's an efficient way to generate content.
- Expect that your thesis might change after you draft your paper and develop your ideas.

Make an [outline](#), if you prefer to outline before drafting. Include notes for the:

- Introduction: context for your topic; thesis statement
- Body paragraphs: one subtopic per paragraph (your thesis' "how" section); each paragraph must link to your main argument
- Conclusion: address the "why" of your thesis statement in detail; explore questions your conclusions raise.
- Note that some writers prefer not to outline their papers in advance, but rather to just start drafting, and then cut, add to, and rearrange their draft once they have explored their ideas. This approach is also effective; see our resource on the [reverse outline](#).

Revising

Focus on structure, organization, argument, etc.

Revise your paper

- We recommend that after you produce a first draft, you revise it substantially at least once.
- "Revising" means reviewing your paper's structure and organization (think [paragraphs](#) and [transitions](#) between them), its argument (think [thesis statement](#), supporting points and their evidence), and [introductions and conclusions](#) as frames for your argument. You should also check to make sure your [sources are well-integrated](#).
- Go back to the assignment instructions and make sure your paper answers the question and [follows the instructions](#).
- Once you've reviewed these aspects of your paper, make the improvements you think are needed. Use our [online writing resources](#) and, if you like, our [writing appointments](#) to guide your revisions or get feedback.

Consider a reverse outline

- [Reverse outlines](#) are helpful if you can't seem to see the big picture of your argument, and to make sure that all your points support your argument and are arranged in an effective order.

Editing

Edit, cite, proofread, and submit

Edit your paper

- Aim for clear, concise sentences. Refer to the [SASS editing checklist](#) and our advice on how to [write like a scholar](#).

Cite your sources

- Be meticulous; [cite sources properly](#) in the body of the paper, and in the reference list at the end.
- Refer to our academic integrity [checklist](#) at the end of our [online academic integrity course](#).



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Proofread your paper

- Proofread a **hard copy**, including your citations and reference list, preferably after you've had a break from working on it so you can see it with fresh eyes.
- Don't rely on online proofreading services or software; they are not reliable.

Submit your paper

- Enjoy the satisfaction of a job well done.
- Take a minute to think about what went well and what you might do differently next time you write a paper.
- Read your marker's feedback carefully and try to learn from it.

Notes on the writing process

Here's what the process should help you produce in a paper:

- your analytical response to others' ideas—not just your summary or opinion
- a well-researched, well-supported argument
- coherent and logical organization
- clarity and concision

Note that the writing process **isn't linear**; you might circle back at some point to an earlier step to do more research, or rework your thesis statement or research question, or restructure a draft. Don't be dismayed if you do circle back! It usually means that your thinking is becoming more complex and nuanced, and often results in a stronger paper.

Inexperienced writers often don't have a good understanding of how much *time* it takes to work through the writing process. **Do all the steps**, and **spend enough time** on each, to really see results in the quality of your work. Use [our time management tools](#) to help block off enough time in advance. As you write more papers, you will learn how long you need to spend on each stage of the writing process, and you will also become more efficient.