

## Starting Out and Editing Papers

### Starting Out:

\*Pick a topic that interests you. This sounds basic, but it's amazing how many students begin with an "easy" topic or one that they find boring but think the professor might like. You'll write a better paper, and you'll learn much more, if you pick a topic that excites you. What aspect of the work did you find intriguing? What did you find most interesting? What did you find puzzling (in an exciting way)?

Once you have a topic, start asking yourself as many questions as you can. Then go through the novel again, and find examples and quotations that fit your topic.

\*Start to form a thesis. Remember, a topic is simply an area of study; a thesis is an argument. You want to prove something to your reader--not simply relate what happens in the work you are considering. Be sure your thesis is something that can be argued and is not obvious (e.g. few readers would argue that Conrad's novel concerns imperialism). Be sure, too, that your thesis is not too large for a short paper--concentrate on what you can prove in the space you have. The next document describes the specific characteristics of successful arguments.

When writing a draft, don't get too anxious about your opening. Many students spend hours staring at the empty screen before writing a sentence. You don't know what you want to say yet (at least not fully), so it's best not to spend lots of time "perfecting" an opening that you'll have to change later anyway. Feel free to write a "bad" opening just to get yourself started. As you write, your thesis is likely to change--and that's good. Writing helps you think, and your ideas should evolve as you write. When you're done with your paper, go back and rework your thesis.

### The First Draft:

For *short* papers, it's often best to write the first draft at one sitting. You'll have an easier time making transitions and focusing your argument.

Once you have a first draft, print it out and leave it alone (a few days is best, but even a few hours are better than nothing). Without some distance from your writing, you won't be able to see gaps, leaps of logic, confused ideas, etc. You should print out your draft in a different font than what you will use later, or in a bigger font size--the idea is to unsettle your picture of a "final" version; it's easier to edit and change a draft that looks "different" than a finished product (and remember, a draft IS different than a finished product).

Edit your draft carefully. First, look at global issues: organization, focus, argument, etc. Most drafts require massive re-arranging. Smaller problems (run-on sentences, awkward phrasing, etc.) can be addressed once you have fixed the big problems.

**Remember, most of the writing techniques discuss in these handouts are best considered AFTER you have a draft.** If you try to keep all the rules in mind as you write, you are likely to feel overwhelmed and anxious, and these are not good ways to call the muse to your side. **The key to good writing is re-writing.** Even professional writers produce many drafts to achieve a readable product.