Pretty Good Advice about Planning, Organizing, and Writing College-level Essays

Preparation

*Know the assignment:* Since every paper is written to accomplish a specific purpose, you need to know what your instructor requires. If you don’t understand the assignment, ask questions until you do.

*Start early:* Good papers are often written in stages, and each stage is easier if you do it separately, with time before and after to relax or work on other things.

You might follow a schedule like this:

- Reading the assignment and thinking about it: 15%
- Research, making notes, planning: 15%
- Writing the first draft: 20%
- Revising: 45%
- Proofreading: 5%

These %’s are just a guide. Some writers spend more time revising as they write the first draft. Some writers create a very rough draft and spend most of their time revising it.

It’s always a good idea to give yourself at least a day between finishing the first draft and beginning the revision.

*Write Everything Down:* If you write it down, you don’t have to worry about forgetting it later. Make a list of ideas or points and check them off as you either use them or reject them.

*Do your own work:* Unless you are required to use secondary sources, you should write about your own understanding of the subject. If you use a secondary source, document it according to MLA format (this class uses MLA—see *Holt* page 179 ff., other classes will use other documentation systems—see *Holt* 223 ff.).
Planning and Organizing

*Put some work into your thesis (see thesis handout):* Your thesis provides a focus for the essay—it should narrow the field of the discussion from a broad topic to a specific aspect of that topic. Your thesis should be an arguable statement about the subject; in a short paper, it can be expressed in one sentence or two.

It’s best to have a thesis before you begin writing or outlining (it is fine for your thesis to change as you go along).

*Work with a rough outline:* Once you have a thesis, make a list of the points necessary to prove it. Next to each point, make a note of where textual or visual evidence for it can be found. Don’t be afraid to mark up your book or to watch the movie or particular scenes from it more than twice.

*Arrange your points in a logical order:* Think of your points as a series of steps: you want your reader to be able to follow your lead, and you will have to prove one point before you can move onto another.

In your rough draft, it’s usually a good idea to cover only one topic per paragraph. Sometimes an extended point will require more to cover completely, but if you find yourself trying to do too much in one paragraph, you risk confusing your readers and not supporting and developing your ideas effectively.

**Using Evidence**

*Support every claim you make with specific evidence from the text, film, and/or song.* For texts, quotations are most convincing; accurate paraphrases or clear references to specific events also work well. Don’t toss in a page or line reference and expect your reader to go look it up.

**Instead of this……**
Romero worries about the effect
That loving Juliet has on him (3.1.115)

**Try this:**
Romeo blames his perceived lack of masculine valor on his love for Juliet: “Thy beauty hath made me effeminate” (3.1.115)
Writing Your Draft

Don’t feel like you have to start your paper with big generalities. Get to the point of your essay right away.

**Instead of this:**
Many movie versions of Romeo and Juliet have been made.

**Try this:**
Baz Lurhman’s *Romeo + Juliet*
Throws the renaissance couple into
Into a post-modern world.

Somewhere early in the first paragraph, usually in the first sentence, you should identify the work you are writing about.

Try not to use the conclusion to restate your thesis.

*It’s not a bad idea to write the first draft in one sitting.* Unless you know that you must revise as you go because that is how you write, try not to revise as you go even when you’re thinking: “this is really awful.” It’s ok for your first draft to be bad because you’re going to fix it! It’s usually easier to improve something already written than to create something new.

**Revise, Revise, Revise**

Yep—at least 3 times. Revision means “seeing again,” looking at the whole structure of your paper, the order of paragraphs, the quality of your evidence, the clarity of your sentences. This is not the same as proofreading. It is about rethinking your ideas and making them shaper and clearer.