



Writing is a dialectical process. As we write and revise, we shift perspective, question sources and ourselves, and develop our thinking. Here are some common issues with first and early drafts, and tips and strategies for how to address them.

1. I'm not sure what my purpose is, why I am writing this. My question is unclear, too broad or narrow, includes several questions in one. My essay seems to answer a different question.

Explicitly state a clear, question focused on one specific topic early on in the essay. Refocus or revise your initial question by looking again at what drew you to this topic in the beginning (personal experience?), evaluating what you have learned in research, what you find most interesting, and what you think now. See: *CW* "Problems with Purpose," pgs. 551-556; Narrowing the Question worksheet.

2. I'm not sure what I want to say about my question and research. My essay doesn't answer my question or the way it does is muddy, convoluted, confusing.

Take five minutes to tell someone about your topic. Have you done enough academic research? If not, see Problem 4. Go back to your notes and review for what stands out as important and interesting. Look for patterns and relationships. Review Synthesizing Sources in the BEAM handout, *EW* 176-179, and see *CW*, "Problems with Meaning," pgs. 557-564.

3. I know what I want to say but am not sure how to say it. I get overwhelmed and confused once I start writing. My essay doesn't "flow."

Start with a clear focus question (see no. 1) and lead your readers to the answer (even if it's tentative or if it's more questions) you have found through research. Try a question-to-answer structure to organize your research and ideas around the focus question. Try using narrative to incorporate personal experience relevant to the ideas you are presenting. See *CW* "Methods for Development," pgs. 428-429, "Multiple Leads," pgs. 573-4; "PowerPoint Outline," 576-577. Also, see no. 8, "Transitions"

4. My essay reads like a research paper. I don't have enough personal experience or "voice" in it.

Go through paragraph by paragraph. In the margins, note personal connections-- experience, memories, thoughts, feelings, or ideas of your own—for each one. Write sections that discuss your experience or ideas in first-person voice, using pronouns "I," "me," "we," and "us." Also, check out the example PAEs on the class site/docs/PersAcaEss. They exemplify two main ways you can integrate personal experience:

- Share your story. MuColloch's "Humans vs Animals" show very clearly how to tie personal experiences into your essay. He alternates personal experience narratives with academic paragraphs. You don't have to follow such an explicit structure.
- Insert your opinions. The "Green Advertising" essay shows how to integrate personal voice with academic by stating your opinion on a topic or source. If you don't have a strong personal association with the topic, this may be a good strategy.
- Include yourself or your reader in transitions. When starting a new paragraph or introducing an example, craft phrases with "I" or "We." Examples from the "Humans vs Animals" sample: examples: "Let's look at an environmental advertising agency" (2), "So, I have to wonder what good, if any, can come of the green ad blitz?" (4), and "That brings us back to the original question, doesn't it?" (7). This technique is a good tactic but you shouldn't rely on it exclusively; there should be other elements of the personal in your PAE.
- Use a memory as an opener to engage your reader. Start by recalling some event, scene, person. Then, transition to your idea.
- See the "Voice and Rhetorical Distance" handout on class site/docs/PersAcaEss

5. I can't hit the word count. The essay is mostly my opinions and thinking. I don't have enough information for a complete draft, or information isn't expert or relevant.

If your draft is too short, vague, or heavy on your own opinions, you may need to do more research by returning to the library, Academic Search Complete, or Google Scholar with better keywords and questions. (See Problem 1). Use the evaluating Sources Rubric and Synthesizing Sources (BEAM) handouts. Do *not* resort to repeating ideas or messing with the margins or any of those ridiculous tricks. Research often continues through many drafts..

6. I have enough information and sources are strong but the essay is still too short or doesn't "flow."

If you have enough information but it isn't making it into the draft:

- Are you using quotes, paraphrases, and summaries from a source? See *EW* pgs. 180-186, and "When to Q, P, S" on pg. 186
- Put yourself in your reader's shoes and pretend you know nothing about the topic. How can you use your sources to help your reader understand what you've learned? Use your sources for: Background, Exhibits, or Arguments. (*EW*, pgs. 180 – 188).
- Look at how you are putting it all together, synthesizing your sources. See no. 4.
- Are you using signal verbs? Check out p. 187-8 in *EW* for a list and examples.

Continued...

**6. I have enough information and sources are strong but the essay is still too short or doesn't "flow." *Continued.***

- Do you give the author's credentials? Giving credentials is a way to show the source's credibility and transition smoothly.
 - Ex: Changing levels affect the reproduction of several fish species; according to Missouri Department of Conservation's Fisheries Division chief Bill Turner, desirable levels are from 658-660 feet above sea level, and anything lower or higher could leave fish eggs "high and dry" (qtd. in Lowry 152).
- Do you introduce the quote *before* you give it, or just plop it in? Give the context for the quote or paraphrase *before* you use it; otherwise you are not fully engaging with it.
 - Ex: But though the Lake is sustainable in terms of energy production and economics, it has had some questionable impacts on the environment, from shoreline and downstream erosion to effects on local fish populations. As Lowry explains, shifting lake levels—which fluctuate—because of changes in inflows from waters upstream and from dam operations—have concerned both stakeholders and conservationists alike (152).
- Do you explain the quote, evaluate it, or connect it to your claim or point *after* placing it in your paper? It's important not just to insert the quote but to explain how it connects to your idea. Consider: why did you select this quote for your paper? How did it add to your understanding of the topic? Why is it important?
 - Ex: According to the National Hydropower Association, "this energy negates the need for coal-fired power plants that would produce hundreds of thousands of tons of carbon emissions," and thus replaces unclean energy sources with more green ones (Lowry 152). In terms of "green" energy output created by the construction of the dam, then, the reservoir can be seen as a very sustainable project.
- MLA concerns. If you are having trouble with in-text citations or formatting Works Cited, consult the MLA documentation tab of *EW*, p. 369-419. Also visit the Resources page of the class web site for links, such as Purdue's Online Writing Lab.

7. I have enough information, sources are strong and integrated, but my essay is still too short.

What may be missing is you. Fastwrite (generate ideas) about:

- What do you think? Adding your opinion—qualified by your research—inserts personal experience into your essay and adds interesting information that engages readers.
- Do you complicate the question? Maybe you need to revise your initial question because it has changed. Reread each paragraph. If an idea jumps out as something to explore further, try it.
- Talk about why people think what they think. You're exploring advantages/disadvantages of different aspects of sustainability. Share reasons why people would or would not support sustainable living, etc. In addition to stating why people should/should not support your main ideas, take a step further to consider why people would/would *not* support it.

8. My essay's choppy or confusing. It doesn't "flow."

As you move from one paragraph to the next, or one idea to another, be sure your reader can follow along. Topic sentences should introduce the main idea/question/subject/point your paragraph will be exploring. Last sentences in paragraphs should recap the main concept of the paragraph. Transitions into different points within paragraphs should show how the first point is similar to, different from, or complicated by the second. See, "Methods of Development" (*CW*, pg. 429) and "Voice and Rhetorical Distance" handout in class site/docs. Try reading your draft out loud. Think about:

- Synthesizing Sources. See nos. 5, 6, 7, above.
- Topic sentences. What is the main point I want to explain or explore in this paragraph? How are all of these ideas/sources related? How does this connect to the previous paragraph?
- Moving to a new thought. How is this connected to the question I just posed or the point I just made? How does this complicate, support, or further explain what I've said before?
- Last sentences. What do I want my reader to take away from reading this paragraph? What is the main development in my thoughts that has occurred in this paragraph?

9. How do I get off this crazy ride? I don't know how to conclude my essay.

Many talented writers struggle with conclusions. They are the ultimate transition, the last thing your reader sees. They show how everything is connected. *Note:* Do not try to use all of these strategies in one conclusion. Start with the first, then try others.

- Sum up the essay in 2 to 3 sentences, hitting only the main points: What was your question and what were the main things you discovered from your inquiry? What is the big idea you're taking away from the project?
- What questions do you still have? After inquiring into this topic, do you have any further questions? Did it raise questions about a related topic?
- Tell us why we should care. What makes your topic important to think about? How does it affect you, me, the world?
- Propose a solution. Make suggestions for researchers, scientists, engineers, everyday citizens.
- Close with a personal experience or memory that connects with your topic. This strategy will work best if you start with the memory/story and then transition into your concluding remarks. Try to pick a memory that has something to do with the overall point your paper has come to.