

## General Writing Advice

Dr. Burrow

- *Get started.* Don't know what you're going to say? Stop trying. Write down what you can say; a memo format or list of ideas you have may work well.
- *Ask questions.* What don't I understand? What question am I aiming to answer? What motivates that question? Are there other ways of asking that question? What would count as a good answer to that question? Jot down your responses.
- *Can't write?* Get together with a friend and discuss your ideas. Try to explain what the issue is as clearly as you can. Pay attention to the questions asked of you: Are there bits of your thinking that need to be clarified? Problems with the view that you're explaining? Problems with your criticism of that view?
- *On your way.* You're already well on your way to having an essay in hand. Take the notes you've made and think about how they relate to your main topic. What order establishes a good argument? Think about what would be the most persuasive presentation. This will constitute your argument. Consider each main step in your argument: it should be clearly laid out as one of your reasons for your main thesis statement. The main thesis statement is the same thing as the conclusion of your argument; each step of your reasoning towards that conclusion are the premises of your argument. After each point you've made, consider what a really critical person would say to you. How would you defend the point you've made? Write out your responses to that person. Sketch out an introductory paragraph that briefly summarizes your position after you've written your paper. Or if you want, write the intro as a sketch first, but realize you'll need to rewrite it.
- *Checking.* Forget the intro and read the body of your paper: what have you said? What's the main point of your paper? Write down that answer and check it against your main thesis statement. Revision may be necessary. In fact, you may want to write that introductory paragraph over again to truly reflect what goes on in your paper. No one will know. Define any special terms you use in clear and plain language. Chop out any sentences in the intro which are just 'lead-ins' -- these are sentences you may feel compelled to stick in the first few lines of your paper to lead the unwitting passerby into your paper. Forget that, because there are no unwitting passersby. The reader should know what your paper is about from the title. Just dive on in and get to the point of what your paper is about right from the beginning. The reader can handle it. In fact, doing so will pique the interest of the reader right from the start. It's best to begin your paper with your main thesis point if you have a hard time getting rid of sentences that have nothing to do with the particular argument you're presenting.
- *Editing.* Check spelling. Then read over the entire essay, start to finish, to see if each sentence makes sense. Make huge, unwieldy sentences into a couple of short, to-the-point sentences. Overflowing paragraphs? Shorten them down: a paragraph should be one coherent point usually expressed in the opening sentence and explained in the body of the paragraph. Try shorter paragraphs rather than longer ones.
- *Breathing room.* Forget the essay. But don't lose it. Go back to it after a few days. Read it. Does it make sense? Any unclear parts? Would any intelligent person who had never read up on the topic know what you're saying? Would that same person be convinced by what you're saying? Make notes in response; go back and insert those into the text. Make sure each paragraph's opening sentence reflects the changes, and the introductory paragraph as well.