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Hey, guys. Adam S. here; Prepped and Polished, South Natick, Massachusetts. Last time we talked about backwards planning, big picture; how to look at a big project and think about how to break it down and plan it backwards over time. Today we're going to really dive into a pretty common assignment that a lot of kids struggle with: How to write an essay. For a lot of us when we first get assigned a paper, we just have these memories of sitting and looking at a blank piece of paper and a lot of frustrated hours spent sitting in front of a computer just staring at an empty page. It doesn't have to be that way. The trick is to realize that, in a way, every paper you're ever going to write is the same but different. Let's head over to the whiteboard and I'll show you what I mean.

Here we are, a scene that's pretty familiar for most of us, just staring at a blank piece of paper; no idea what to do, where to begin. How do we even get started? The lesson that we learned last time is that sometimes it helps if you can start at the end. What does the finished product look like? You know a finished paper is going to have a few elements that every paper you write is going to have. Let's talk about what those are. First, you're going to have a title; every paper has a title, then there's an intro, a body, we have a conclusion, and then some works cited or bibliography. Let's break these component pieces down a little bit and talk about what each one of them means.

This basic skeleton is going to hold true for pretty much every academic paper that you're ever going to write. Of course, the content will change based on the topic, but the structure is going to pretty . . . relatively constant. Let's talk about what these pieces mean. First is your title; that could be a page, it could be a header at the top of your paper. It's pretty simple. It gives the title of your paper, your name, date, maybe the class title, and other pertinent information like that. The next thing that your paper's going to lead into is your introduction. Your introduction, regardless of the topic, is always going to serve a similar function. There are a few main points you always need to hit. The first thing you want your intro to do is to set the scene. Tell me what you're going to talk about. Tell me where I am. Give me some context. Then you're going to give us a hook. Why should we read this paper? Why do I care? What's interesting about your take on this situation? Then you're going to state your argument; this is your thesis. Give me your topic. Then you're going to finish your intro by forecasting your main claims.

Every paper that you write is going to have maybe anywhere between 3 and 5, depending on the length of the paper, main claims to really back up your argument. Forecast what those are going to be. Remember, you want this to be pretty concise and to the point. Any good paper is going to start strong and finish strong, because people remember the first thing and the last thing that they see.



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After your introduction, you're going to transition into your body paragraphs. The body of your paper is where you're going to discuss your main claims. Each claim is generally going to get at least a paragraph, maybe a couple of paragraphs, even a couple of pages depending on how long the paper's going to be. Each body paragraph should have a few things in common. They should all start with a topic sentence; that's where you introduce the claim that you're going to talk about. Then you want to explain why that claim is important to this paper. How does it relate to your thesis? How does it strengthen your argument? Then you want to give support; this is where you would include quotations from sources that you had read. If you're writing about a specific book, this would be quotes from the book. If it's a research paper, these could be journal articles, even websites. Then at the end you want to transition; you want to set the stage for moving into your next body paragraph, a smooth transition for introducing your next claim.

At the end of your body comes your conclusion. This is your chance to wrap it all up. What do you want to do? Remember, you want to start strong, you want to finish strong, so you got to make sure you have a strong conclusion. First, you want to remind us of your best points. Hopefully, your paper was structured such that you started with your smallest points and closed with your biggest. You want to go small too big, and then remind us of the best ones. Then restate your refined thesis. You gave us an argument at the beginning of the paper. Did your opinion change? Did you learn anything over the course of this discussion? Then tell us the next step. What would a future paper about this topic be about? Are there any unanswered questions? That's how you want to close out your paper.

Then after your conclusion, your paper's going to finish with some kind of works-cited page or bibliography. Your teacher might have different preferences about what format they want you to use, so make sure you check about the rules regarding citations. There's also a lot of great web resources that make citing works really easy.

Now I want to take a second to talk about the importance of outlining. Outlining is really important; it's actually a huge time saver. It might sound like more work up front, but if you outline well, writing the paper's the easy part. All you have to do is connect the dots. Now you know that this is the basic skeleton of, really, any paper you're ever going to have to write. They're all going to be different, but they're also all going to be kind of the same.



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For example, let's say we had to write a paper about our best vacation ever. We'd have an intro. What's the scene? My vacation. Where'd you go? I went to Hawaii. Set the scene; tell me what Hawaii's like. What's the hook? What happened in Hawaii? What's really exciting? What's your argument? My argument is that this was the best vacation ever because . . . then forecast your main claims. It was the best vacation ever because I surfed, I learned something, I made a new friend. Then you go and talk about your claims. Claim 1: I surfed. Claim 2: I learned something. Fill in what you're going to talk about with details about each point. Then you have your conclusion. Main points: Great vacation for these reasons.

Refined thesis: I learned that although this was a great vacation, it wasn't as great for the reasons that I thought it was. I learned something. My opinion changed. Then give me the next step, what's the next discussion about this argument? Maybe next time this is the vacation I'd like to take in the future. You plunk those points into this skeleton, and now all you have to do is sit down and connect the dots and you have a paper.

How do you plan for a paper? What are the basic steps? We talked about the skeleton and what goes into a paper. How do you break that up over the course of a week or 2, or 3? There's some important steps to writing a paper. The first thing you have to do is research, if necessary, if you need to research your topic before you write about it. Then you want to write your outline. Then you want to write your first draft. Don't hand in your first draft. It's really important that you take the time to proofread, revise, and make edits. You want to give yourself enough time before the paper's due to be able to do that. You'll have a much better paper in the end. After the first draft, you want to make edits and revise it as necessary. Then you have your final draft, including your works cited.

All of this is going to take time. That's 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 items. If we had 2 weeks to get this paper done, we'd want to backwards plan. Start at the due date and count backwards. Say you have 10 days between now and then; that means you can assign 2 days to each of these points. You have 2 days to research, another couple of days to outline it, a couple of days to work on your first draft, a couple of days of editing and revising, and then your final draft is done, no sweat.

Those are the basic steps of writing a paper, a road map of how to get there. Hopefully, now you can see how every paper is the same but different. You never have to write your first paper again. If you can remember this road map, you'll always know where to begin, where you're going, and how you're going to get there. See you next time.