

# TERM PAPERS **STEP BY STEP**

*Planning, Research, and Writing*

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## To the Teacher

When you stop to think about it, writing a good term paper is a surprisingly complex task that requires a wide variety of skills, both mechanical and psychological. Is it any wonder that students encounter difficulties?

For many, the move from writing “reports” to more demanding “term papers” or “research papers” is a big step. The expectations are suddenly higher, and the whole process requires much greater concentration and commitment. It’s easy to get bogged down, confused, bored, discouraged, and very frustrated along the way.

Textbooks traditionally focus on the mechanics of a successful term paper: note-taking, outlines, footnotes and bibliography, grammar and punctuation, and so on. These formal elements are important and certainly need to be mastered.

But writing is also an intensely personal act that draws on each student writer’s individual interests and feelings. The process is greatly affected by students’ attitudes toward the task and toward themselves as writers. For each of them, writing at times can become a lonely—and sometimes terrifyingly isolated—task. This subjective side of the writing process often receives far less discussion in writing texts than the mechanics.

### The Aims of These Materials

First and foremost, these materials are intended to show student writers that they are not *alone* in facing the many difficulties of writing term papers. These reproducible sheets have been written in a supportive, empathetic tone that recognizes that good writing is never easy.

Equally important, these materials have been designed to focus specifically on the most important problem areas where students experience difficulties. Very often writing texts bombard writers with too much “advice” to absorb all at once. Students get so overwhelmed in a mass of rules that the human element gets lost entirely.

These materials constantly reinforce the idea that successful research paper writing results from following a step-by-step process that takes *time*. This approach breaks up this process into smaller, isolated steps.

Assuming students have had previous experience with the basics of report writing, these materials cover the important mechanics related specifically to the stages of term-paper writing: idea-generating strategies, research skills, outlining, drafting, and revising. Equally important, these materials also address the psychological realities of writing—setting positive attitudes, assessing work styles, overcoming various writing blocks, and using assorted techniques to get students to engage themselves fully—from the heart—in their writing task.

## Format

The packet contains 50 reproducible student sheets. Each sheet focuses on a different writing problem faced by average students writing term-paper assignments at the upper high school level. The sheets have been written in an easy-to-understand style that emphasizes practical solutions to common problems.

Each sheet begins with an “Ideas to Think About” section, which presents introductory ideas about the target problem. The following “Techniques to Try” section then offers a range of *specific* strategies for handling the problem discussed.

The sheets are organized in a chronological sequence that follows the step-by-step process of writing a typical student research paper—from getting ready to work to proofreading the final product.

## Suggestions for Using These Sheets

These materials have been designed for flexible use to fit your specific needs. They can be used selectively to address specific student problems, or used in sequence as a complete research paper writing course for the entire class. They can be used to reinforce other writing texts or used on their own as an independent research paper writing unit.

We hope you will find these sheets useful as a springboard for discussion in your classroom about what specific writing problems—mechanical *and* psychological—*your* students are facing in their research paper writing.

Since so much of writing success draws on the self-esteem of student writers themselves (how they feel about the task and about their abilities to complete the task), the psychological climate that *you*, the teacher, set is key to your students’ success. Let students know you recognize that writing is not easy, that you expect them to run into stumbling blocks. (You could even share stories of your own struggles with writing, past or present.)

## A Final Note

In sum, this set of reproducible masters has been designed to help you help your students to change the research paper assignment from a painful chore into a more personally rewarding—and even enjoyable—process.

Good luck!

## WHAT MAKES WRITING TERM PAPERS DIFFICULT?

### *Ideas to Think About*

#### **Who Says Writing Term Papers Is Easy?**

Students experience a wide range of problems with writing research papers. Do any of these comments sound like *you*?

- “Writing makes me anxious. No matter how hard I try, I always get blocked as soon as I sit down to face that blank page.”
- “Writing research papers involves too much detail work—I’m not that organized.”
- “The hardest part for me is getting started. I always put off writing until the very last minute.”
- “I’m such a perfectionist, I *hate* everything I write the minute I get it on paper.”
- “I get killed on grammar and punctuation. My papers come back with so much red ink I can’t read what I originally wrote.”

- “It’s all so boring and irrelevant. What does writing term papers have to do with real life anyway?”

#### **Writing Term Papers Draws on Many Skills**

If you experience writing problems, take courage in realizing that you are not alone. Writing a research paper draws on a complex combination of many different skills.

Some skills involve writing mechanics—taking notes, making outlines, following rules of grammar and punctuation, and so on. Other skills are in the area of personal self-management—how you motivate and organize yourself to get the job done.

### *Techniques to Try*

#### **1. What Makes Writing Term Papers Difficult for You?**

Review the student comments listed above. Then take a few minutes to list here all *your* complaints about writing research papers. (Be complete—try to list as many as you can think of.)

#### **2. Do You Actually Enjoy Any Parts of the Research Writing Process?**

Now take a moment to think about those aspects of research writing that you actually like—or at least don’t find to be a problem for you. (Example: “*I like the research stage when I can search out answers to my questions about my topic.*”) List them here.

#### **3. Share Your Answers to Questions #1 and #2 with Other Members of Your Class**

How many of your problems are also problems for others? Do others share the same strengths as you?

## UNDERSTANDING THE WRITER'S FACTS OF LIFE

### *Ideas to Think About*

#### **What Are the Writer's Facts of Life?**

No matter what project they are working on, good writers all agree on certain basic "facts of life" about how to achieve effective writing:

- Good writing takes time. It *can't* be rushed.
- Good writing is written in stages. It benefits from being left to sit in periods throughout the writing process.
- Good writing has something to say. The quality of its content is a direct result of the time and effort invested in developing its ideas.
- Good writing is organized logically.
- Good writing is clearly expressed, most often as a result of careful revision.
- Good writing results from effective "self-management"—such as budgeting time and working to get the most out of work sessions.
- Good writing depends on maintaining positive attitudes about the project and about *yourself* as a writer.
- Good writing depends on knowing how to handle negative emotions when you meet with frustrations along the way.

### *Techniques to Try*

#### **1. How Healthy Are Your Writing Habits?**

Review "The Writer's Facts of Life" above. Put a + in front of each fact that you already observe in your writing habits.

a.

#### **2. Where Could You Improve Your Writing Habits?**

Read through the list again and circle those facts that you do not presently follow in your writing work habits.

b.

#### **3. Target Your Most Important Problem Areas**

List the three *biggest* problem areas that you recognize you need to work further on:

c.

## WRITER'S BLOCK I: NEGATIVE SELF-TALK

### *Ideas to Think About*

#### **Your Attitude Can Make All the Difference**

A great deal of successful writing is a mind game. As in many other activities in your life, the negative attitudes you hold about your writing can sabotage your potential success.

#### **Negative Self-Talk Undermines Your Writing Efforts**

What you say and think about yourself as a writer influences how you write to a much greater extent than you probably realize.

Do any of these comments sound like the way *you* talk about yourself as a writer?

- “Good writers are born that way! Either you have it or you don’t.”
- “My teacher already knows that I can’t write—what’s the use?”
- “I’m good at math. I’m not a word person; I’m a numbers person.”

- “Me write? Forget it! I never could and I never will!”

#### **Negative Attitudes Sabotage Your Writing in Other Ways, Too**

Students who do not feel confident about their writing often fall into the bad habit of reminding themselves about how they have “failed” in the past, rather than concentrating on how to improve their writing skills in the task ahead.

If they *do* decide to make a new start, these students often set themselves up with unrealistic expectations about what they should be able to accomplish or how fast they should be able to improve. And they also discourage themselves by constantly comparing themselves with better writers.

### *Techniques to Try*

#### **1. Do You Sabotage Your Writing Confidence with Bad Habits?**

Take a moment to think about how you may be unnecessarily undermining your self-confidence as a writer:

- Do you allow yourself to be discouraged by dwelling on past “failures”?
- Do you discourage yourself by constantly comparing yourself with better writers?
- Do you set yourself up with unrealistic expectations about what you should be able to accomplish?

#### **2. Listen to Your Self-Talk About Writing**

When you are involved in a writing project, be attentive to any negative messages you may be sending to yourself when you are anxious, frustrated, tired, or discouraged.

- a. What negative messages do you say to *yourself* about your writing? Write them here.
- b. What negative messages do you say to *others* about your writing? Write them here.

## DEVELOPING A WINNING WRITER'S ATTITUDE

### *Ideas to Think About*

#### **Build Your Self-Confidence for Success**

Don't set yourself up to make your worst predictions come true. You can program yourself to get the **best** out of yourself just by changing the way you think—and talk—about your writing.

#### **Replace Negative Self-Talk with Positive Messages**

Don't be so hard on yourself! Replacing negative thinking with *positive* messages will quickly boost your self-confidence and give you more energy for working. It will also open up your receptivity to fresh ideas and outlooks and generally inspire you really to do your best.

#### **Set Realistic, Achievable Goals for Writing Well**

Being positive about your writing, however, does *not* mean setting wildly unrealistic expectations for yourself. You wouldn't expect to learn to play the guitar or become a champion swimmer overnight, so don't expect overnight miracles with your writing.

Set DO-able goals for yourself as a writer. And be ready to accept the inevitability of some struggle and frustration ahead.

### *Techniques to Try*

#### **1. Program Yourself with Positive Messages About Your Writing**

Review your negative self-talk messages from Sheet 3. Then try to write positive statements to replace your three most common negative self-talk messages. (Example: "*This paper is really going to be boring*" could become "*Since I want to improve my writing, I'm going to look for ways to make this project interesting to me.*")

a.

b.

c.

#### **2. Start Each Paper Fresh!**

Start with a clean slate when you begin each new writing project. Don't let thoughts about past "failures" sabotage you.

Take the time you need to understand how you might learn from problems that you have encountered in the past—then let yourself off the hook.

#### **3. Don't Overburden Yourself with Unrealistic Expectations**

In your heart, you know that you probably won't be able to conquer *all* your writing goals in one paper, no matter how hard you try.

Think about what specific, attainable goals you might set for your new writing project. (Example: "*Working on organizing my ideas better. . . . Making sure I leave time for final revising and proofreading.*")

## REMEMBERING TO RELAX

### *Ideas to Think About*

#### **Relaxed Writers Write Best**

It's tempting to believe that you can force yourself to write well, no matter how tired or stressed you feel. But don't kid yourself—your mind and body are intimately involved in all stages of the writing process.

#### **Tension in Your Mind or Body Works Against Writing Success**

Tension has the opposite effect of relaxation on your mind and body. When you are anxious or tired, your muscles tighten and the energy you need to write at your best becomes blocked.

Good writing comes from good energy. When your body is tired from stress or lack of sleep, you cannot work at your best.

#### **Relaxation Is Important to Good Writing**

Getting yourself in a relaxed and rested state of mind can help at *all* stages of the writing process:

1. Getting you motivated to get started.
2. Keeping you supplied with fresh ideas as you plan your approach in the early stages of your paper.
3. Providing you with the energy to see your paper through the drafting and revision stages so that it ends up being the best you can write.

### *Techniques to Try*

#### **1. Make Relaxation a Part of *Your* Writing Process**

What strategies do you already use to be sure you bring a relaxed mind and body to your writing tasks? Check them off here. What more can you do? Make the strategies you haven't checked off part of your routine. Then check them off too.

- Do you make sure to bring fresh energy to your writing by getting adequate sleep and rest?
- Do you take time out every day to help beat stress by getting regular exercise?
- Do you eat regular nutritious meals to give your body the fuel it needs to work at its best?
- Do you balance periods of work with time off to recharge your energies—such as spending time with friends and enjoying hobbies?

#### **2. Tense? Try This Quick Technique for Instant Relaxation**

Let go of tension with progressive relaxation, one of many stress-beating methods available. This will help induce a relaxed state of mind to improve your writing.

- a. Sit in a comfortable chair, or lie on the floor on your back. Close your eyes. Gently inhale and exhale a slow, deep breath.
- b. Now, focus your attention on your right foot. Gently tense it for five seconds. (Do not overstrain.) Then release the tension totally. Does the foot feel more relaxed?
- c. Slowly work up the right side of your body, repeating this tensing and releasing procedure. Focus progressively on your right calf, right thigh, right fist, right forearm, and right upper arm. Then repeat on your left side.
- d. Finish by tensing and relaxing the muscles of your face.

## WRITER'S BLOCK II: WORKING AGAINST YOUR BEST WORK STYLE

### *Ideas to Think About*

#### **The Same Working Methods Do Not Work for Every Writer**

Because different writers have different personalities, they often require different strategies to produce their best writing. All writers need to learn how to develop work habits and methods that work for *them*.

#### **How Do Writers Work Against Their Natural Work Styles?**

By not being attentive to their own best work-style needs, writers can find themselves working against themselves in a number of ways:

- **Time Use.** (Example: *Leaving a project until the last minute, when the writers know they don't work well under pressure.*)

- **Task Management.** (Example: *Being forced to work sequentially, when the writers prefer to jump around, mixing many tasks at once.*)
- **Tools.** (Example: *Working exclusively on a computer, knowing that they would produce more efficiently by working off the screen part of the time.*)

#### **Make the Effort to Develop Work Habits That Work for You**

Sometimes it seems easier to stay with work habits that you know are not best for you, rather than to make the effort to try new methods.

But how YOU work best is the best way for you to work. Make sure your work habit choices really do work best to get the job done.

### *Techniques to Try*

#### **1. How Do You Work Best?**

What are the characteristics of your writing personality? Underline the descriptions that fit you.

- Do you work best calmly over time? or under pressure?
- Do you like to work on a project methodically, step by step? or on many tasks all at the same time?
- How's your attention span? Do you do your work best immersed in a task for a long period of time? or with more frequent, shorter stabs at the task?

#### **2. In What Ways Do You Know That You Work *Against* Yourself?**

List three of your present writing work habits that you know don't really fit your best writing personality. (Example: *"I get bored*

*easily if I have to work at the same task for too long a period.*")

- a.
- b.
- c.

#### **3. What Changes Could You Make in Your Work Habits That Would Fit *Your* Writer's Nature Better?**

Look at the poor writing work habits you've listed above. What specific changes could you make in your work style to fit your personality better? (Example: *"I could work on more than one task at a time to allow me to shift back and forth to keep from getting bored.*") List the changes on the back of this page.

## PLANNING A WORK ENVIRONMENT THAT WORKS FOR YOU

### *Ideas to Think About*

#### **Your Work Environment Can Make the Difference Between Success and Failure**

All writers have at least some opportunity to shape the kind of work environment they work in. To the extent that you can, it makes sense to design a work environment that fits *your* writing style.

#### **Find a Setting That Fits *Your* Personal Working Style**

Writers really *are* different. What characteristics in the list below fit your work style best? Underline them.

- Working in solitude? or with other people around?
- Working in quiet? or with background noise (such as radio or TV)?
- Working in a closed, intimate space? or in an open space with lots of light?

- Working in a neat, clean space? or in a space with lots of comfortable clutter?

#### **Guard Against Distractions**

Some people, intentionally or unintentionally, set themselves up to have their work time disrupted by interruptions. Some common examples:

- Working near a phone that is likely to interrupt your work.
- Choosing a work setting (such as a library or fast-food restaurant) where you are likely to run into friends.
- Getting started without making certain that you have all materials that you need (supplies, research materials, etc.).

### *Techniques to Try*

#### **1. What Work Environment Fits *You* Best?**

First, take a moment to fantasize your ideal work space. Let your imagination run free—but envision a space that would realistically work to help you write at your best! (Example: *A treehouse with superfine stereo system and refrigerator stocked with nonstop cola!*) Describe your ideal workspace here:

Now, ask yourself which ideas you could actually incorporate in a work setting that is available to you now. (Example: *A desk by a window with a view of a tree and two cans of soda to drink during your work session.*)

#### **2. Is Your Work Setting Distraction-Proof?**

Do you sabotage yourself by choosing a work setting that sets you up to be a victim of distractions? List the distractions in your usual work setting(s):

What changes could you make to avoid distractions that get in the way of writing at your best? List the changes next to each distraction.