Developing an Idea

Inquire: The Work of Writing a Paper

Overview

Once you have an idea ready to explore, you can begin to expand that idea into a fully-developed paper. Depending on how you arrived at your idea, this can be the most involved — at times cumbersome, at other times creative — part of the writing process, and is what people are usually referring to when they talk about the “work” of writing. Knowing how to analyze and develop your idea into a functioning, multi-faceted discussion is the first step in building an effective paper.

Big Question: How do I expand my idea into a full paper?

Watch: Growing the Seed

While it’s a bit of a cliché, developing an idea is not unlike growing a plant from a seed. Having a seed for a tomato plant doesn’t mean you’re ready to make a BLT. It takes a lot of time and hard work to grow a plant that is ready to bear fruit. In the same way, time and hard work are essential when transforming your idea into something that people will want to read and understand.

Once you have identified an idea that you want to explore, you can begin to expand that idea into a fully developed paper. Depending on how you arrived at your idea, this can be the most involved part of the writing process, and is what people are usually referring to when they talk about the “work” of writing. You will be well served when tackling your writing projects if you know how to analyze and develop your idea into a functioning, multi-faceted discussion.

To begin, you will unpack the “meat” of your central thesis and look for the points or subtopics that need to be explored in order to fully support your main topic. It is important that you identify and understand what subtopics are relevant to your thesis – what makes it tick, so to speak – so that you can do this effectively. Next, you will organize them in a logical way. Depending on the type of paper you are writing, there are several ways of doing this, some of which may be more effective than others.

Organizing and revising your paper are crucial aspects of the development process. They focus the various parts of your paper so that they fully support and flow from your central idea. To go back to the gardening metaphor, this is the pruning aspect of writing, and is usually the second part of your paper’s development.

Developing your idea is the main part of the writing process. In the words of American novelist E. L. Doctorow, “Writing is exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go.”
When you write a paper, have you noticed your development process? How have your ideas grown or changed as you’ve written them?

Read: Methods of Development

Overview: What Makes the Idea Tick?

Developing your idea involves unpacking the “meat” of your central thesis, looking for the points or subtopics that need to be explored in order to fully support your main topic, and then organizing them in a logical way. It is important to understand the underlying pieces of your topic, or what makes it tick, so that you can do this effectively. There are several ways of doing this, some of which may be more effective than others, depending on the type of paper you are writing.

Analyzing Your Thoughts

The first place you should start when unpacking your idea is with the idea itself. When you analyze how you arrived at an idea, you can create a kind of roadmap that you can use as a guide for finding the main subtopics of your paper. To do this, you might try asking yourself questions such as “Where did this idea come from?” “What does my audience need to know about it?” and “Why do I think it is important?” These simple questions can serve as excellent starting points for getting to the root of your idea and helping you identify those key elements that you want to address throughout your paper. You could also look back on any notes you’ve taken on your subject and search for particular points or words you emphasized, then think about how these parts relate to your thesis. Again, from there, you can build your sub-topics.

Anticipating Questions and Counterarguments

You can also try finding your subtopics by anticipating questions or counter-arguments that a reader might think of in response to your thesis. Perhaps the simplest way of exploring these is to share your thesis with a peer, especially someone who disagrees with you. Having a friendly, respectful discourse on a topic will usually force you to examine your thesis from a different point of view, bringing gaps in your reasoning to the forefront. In your paper, you can use this discussion to fill in these gaps, either with a deeper discussion of a particular point or with further research. If you don’t have peers to discuss your topic with, you can also try imagining a discussion, or try arguing the other side of your thesis. This can be a bit more difficult, but can still help you identify necessary points of discussion for your paper.

Researching Other Viewpoints

Researching what other people have written about your topic is another way of developing your own idea into a functioning paper. No topic exists in a vacuum, so there is usually at least some analysis that has been done on whatever you are wanting to write about. Again, depending on the type of paper you are writing, you may or may not directly use this research in the text of your paper; however, reading what others have written about your topic will give you some idea of which direction you want to take your own discussion. You may decide to use different ideas presented in these other works as supporting points for your own thesis, or you may use the arguments of one work as a starting point to write a counter-argument. Whichever way you use this method, always remember, if you quote a source in your paper, to include proper attribution and a bibliography listing whatever sources you used.

It’s also important to remember to develop your own ideas beyond your research. In other words, make sure you aren’t simply repeating someone else’s ideas as your own. A good way to prevent this is to have a solid concept of your idea in mind, or even written down, to guard your original thoughts against the unconscious influence of others. If, in the course of your research, you find a piece that seems too similar
to your own idea, don’t worry! First, you can use this piece as a cited source and then expand on your original idea to include points the other piece did not cover. Second, you might consider the sources used in the other piece and compare them with your own research. Make sure that you haven’t duplicated their research. If you have, you might try looking for different sources to support your points, or amend your points to approach your thesis from a different angle.

Organizing Your Paper

Once you’ve decided on the sub-topics you want to cover in your paper, you’ll want to decide how you want to approach these points and in what order. The organization of your paper will largely depend on what kind of essay you are writing: compare/contrast, argumentative, explicative, narrative, or something else entirely. From a general point of view, however, always remember that you want your essay to lead your reader along in a way that feels natural. Never jump from point to point without transitioning from one to the next, and never start discussing a new point when you haven’t concluded your current one. Most importantly, make sure that the structure of your paper is suited to your thesis. In other words, organize your paper in such a way that each point leads the reader closer to understanding your thesis, rather than haphazardly addressing each point as you think of it.

Reflect: Helpful Ways of Thinking

Poll

Generally, most people use a combination of development methods for expanding on their ideas. This usually is dependent on the kind of paper or essay they are writing, but some methods may be more helpful for some people than others. Of the ways of developing your idea presented in the Read section, which have you used or found most helpful on papers you’ve written in the past?

- Anticipating counterarguments
- Analyzing my thought process
- Researching other viewpoints

Expand: Development Through Revision

Overview: Building On What You Have

Once you’ve finished the first draft of a paper, the development process for your idea is still only partly complete. As you work through the revision stage of your paper, you’ll want to look for ways to build on the ideas you’ve presented that you may have missed on your first draft. This is where having a critical eye toward the details of your paper will be necessary.

Revising Contradictions

When developing your idea, it’s always good practice to keep an open mind toward directions that may make you rethink your original concept. For instance, you may find as you read through a particular sub-topic that the evidence you are using to support your point instead contradicts it. If this happens, you might need to reevaluate your point, or even your thesis, depending on whether your evidence is factually based or is instead a supporting opinion. If your evidence is fact-based, you will want to think about how this will impact your thesis. Does this evidence directly contradict your thesis or only this subtopic? If the evidence isn’t contradictory, does it merely not support the point you’re trying to make?
Evidence that doesn’t support your point, or is opinion based, can be made up for with some more research into your topic to see if you can find a different piece of evidence that supports your point. If, however, you have a contradiction, you can use this new information to help you adjust or rewrite your thesis. While this may entail more work on your paper in order to bring the rest of your writing in line with your revised thesis, your paper will be stronger for the effort.

Adding Support

You'll also want to judge your paper based on whether you’ve given enough support to your sub-topics with your own views and writing. Ask yourself if you’ve written enough about each topic, and not simply relied on your quotes or supplementary evidence to make your point for you. You never want your own voice and point of view to be drowned out by the perspectives of others. If you find that it seems like your paper is nothing but supporting evidence, you might go through each of your sub-topics and write more about the relevance you find between these topics and your thesis. This will help with the cohesion of your paper and add to your reader’s understanding of the main reasons for your discussion.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Building the Essay Draft
- An overview of essay writing with some good points about development and execution
- https://www.esc.edu/online-writing-center/resources/research/research-paper-steps/building-draft/
- Source: SUNY Empire State College

Essay Structure
- A helpful article on essay structure and development
- https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/essay-structure
- Source: Harvard College Writing Center

Lesson Glossary

revision: changing a piece of writing to improve the substance of what is written
thesis: sentence that defines an argument

Check Your Knowledge

1. Anticipating counterarguments to your thesis is a good way to develop your key subtopics.
   A. True
   B. False

2. You can identify potential counterarguments by sharing your thesis with someone who disagrees with you.
   A. True
   B. False
3. The organizational structure of your essay will stay the same no matter what kind of essay you are writing.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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