

Lesson Plan: Procrastination-Proof Researching and Writing

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Lesson: Procrastination-Proof Researching and Writing

Time Frame: 60 minutes

Target Audience: Upper division (100W or other) college or university students with research paper assignments

Materials needed: laptop, projector, PowerPoint presentation for the teacher, hard copies of student version of PowerPoint presentation with sections to be filled in by students, five white board pens, and course syllabus with schedule detailing due dates of writing process documents

Objectives: After the lesson, students will be able to

- use epistemic writing to generate and refine ideas.
- plan the researching and writing process for an assigned paper.
- formulate a research question to match the scope of a 10-15 page paper.

Background: This lesson is for students who have already been given a research paper assignment. Students have chosen their general topics and started finding and reading relevant scholarly sources. Prior to this session, they read about the research and writing process. I use Chapter 6 of *A Sequence for Academic Writing* (Behrens & Rosen, 2012). The visuals on the PowerPoint slides correspond to each part of this lesson and help to engage students in the discussion.

Introduction to Lesson [5 minutes] (Slides 1-3):

Agenda (write on board):

How to prevent procrastination in your research and writing

1. Writing to think (Epistemic writing)
2. Planning the researching and writing process
3. Writing a good research question

You have been assigned a research paper in this class. A few weeks ago, you turned in your general research topic and started finding sources. Now, you need to narrow your topic and engage in pre-writing for your research paper.



Figure 1: How can we make the process of writing a research paper less stressful and more effective?

Note to Instructor: Display picture prompt and question (figure 1, Slide 2 of PowerPoint) Use the picture prompt to stimulate a brief discussion. Ask students how they are feeling about the upcoming research paper. When students express negative or positive feelings, ask probing questions to elicit the reasons behind these feelings. Ask if any students have trouble with procrastination. Ask why people procrastinate.

We usually procrastinate when something seems too difficult or too time consuming. Not surprisingly, students often procrastinate when they have large projects that involve researching and writing. Procrastination creates more stress and is counterproductive. However, today you will learn three ways to improve the researching and writing process and to help prevent procrastination:

- epistemic writing,
- planning your research and writing process, and
- writing a good research question.

You will be expected to apply what you learn today in your homework for the next class session. For your homework, you will be asked to use epistemic writing to narrow the scope of your research topic and write your research question. You will also write about your current research and writing process.

Procedure [45 minutes]:

Step 1: Use Epistemic Writing to Generate and Refine Ideas [10 minutes] (Slides 3-5)

Let's begin by talking about how you can get yourself started in the researching and writing process. A good first step is to engage in pre-writing activities. This pre-writing should be more exploration than declaration. You should think of your writing in this stage as epistemic (slide 4). Who knows what "epistemic writing" is?

Epistemic writing is writing to think or writing that "creates knowledge" (Haven, 2009). You can use epistemic writing to

- generate ideas,
- piece things together, or
- figure things out.

Sometimes students only conceive of writing as a means to show what they know or think. However, if the student does not yet know what to think or is still gathering knowledge, this conception can lead to further procrastination. Thus, it is important to see writing not just as a

tool for communicating pre-formed thoughts but also as a tool for thinking. For example, people often write in a journal in order to make sense of their lives or gain new insights. They do not know what they will say before they write. What kind of epistemic writing do you do? *Ask probing questions to elicit different responses from students. Use slide 5 as needed.*

For your research paper, you also need epistemic writing and not just at the beginning of the process. You can get stuck at any point. While gathering data, you may become overwhelmed by information and not know how to organize your thoughts. While drafting your paper, you may realize you need to develop more ideas for a section of your paper. Even in the final stages of writing, you may need to “write to think” to develop your conclusion. Writing to think activities such as free writing and listing can be used to gain momentum at any stage of the researching and writing process.

Step 2: Plan the Stages of the Writing Process [10 minutes] (Slides 6-8)

The researching and writing process has overlapping and recursive stages (slide 6). What are some of the stages? What is entailed in each of these stages? How are these stages recursive? They are recursive because you may re-visit certain stages. For example, you may find as you are drafting your paper that you need to go back to the gathering data stage. Or, you may have to return to the invention stage to “write to think” as you are preparing your conclusion. You will move back and forth in this process. So, how can you sustain your motivation throughout this researching and writing process?

A second reliable way to avoid procrastination is project management. Break the stages of the process into smaller more manageable chunks. Then write down the tasks you need to do each day or week. Start from your final due date and plan backwards. It will be easier to motivate yourself to complete these smaller less time consuming tasks than to sit down to work on a large research project. *Use examples of doing this process in everyday life such as with cleaning gradually everyday rather than letting it build up.* Let’s look at how I have mapped out the different stages for your research paper assignment. Please find this chart in your handout, slides 7-8.

Show a chart such as slides 7-8 listing interim tasks and have students find the corresponding due date in their course schedule. The following questions can be modified to fit the interim assignments in your class.

Where are you now? When do you need to turn in your list of sources? When are your thesis and outline due? So, why have I paced out these assignments for you?

- I have mapped this out for you so that you will not procrastinate.
- Instead of worrying about a large overwhelming project, you can focus on one or two more manageable tasks at time.

Notice that some of the items on this list do not have due dates. Since each of you has a different schedule and writing pace, you will need to make interim due dates for yourself on these items.

Step 3: Write a Good Research Question [7 minutes] (Slides 9-14)

A third method for warding off procrastination is to write a good research question. A good research question focuses and motivates you in your research. The question will determine the resources you need and should shape the way you read and gather notes. Your research question will also define the scope of your paper.

To formulate a good research question (slide 10), you should

- start with what interests you; you will be spending a good amount of time on your research, and an engaging question will help to sustain your motivation during the process.
- pose a question that will guide your research. The question should match the scope of your paper.
- make sure the question is neutral and open.

The quick response to your research question will eventually become the thesis of your paper, but do not rush to find your thesis. Right now, you still have ideas and information to discover; you are in the “Gathering Data” and “Invention” stages.

Step 3A: Model Research Question

Take a look at this model (slide 11). Here we have a student’s general research topic of “Political Activism.” Would “Political Activism” be a good topic for a 10-15 page paper? No, this topic is too broad in scope. It could fill many different books. How about “political activism on college campuses today” as a topic?

What type of information has the student added to make the topic more specific? *Ask students to notice how the student has narrowed the topic in the model to include who (college students), where (college campuses), and when (today).*

As you are narrowing your research topic, ask yourself “who, what, where, how and when” questions. Use epistemic writing; list, do a cluster diagram, or free write to discover your area of focus.

Call on a student to read the sample research question (slide 11): “What kinds of political activism are college students involved in today?” Do you think this question fits the scope of a 10-15 page paper? Notice the key words in this question, “political activism” and “college students.” Could those words be used to search for sources in the library data base? You could also use many of the synonyms and related terms listed here to search for sources.

Step 3B: Neutral Questions

Now, let’s look at what it means to pose “neutral questions” (slide 12). You want to avoid biased research questions that suggest their own answers because they may prevent you from truly exploring the topic. Which of these questions is better? Why is this question better?

Step 3C: Open Questions

You also want to emphasize how, why, and what questions that open discussion (slide 13). Avoid yes or no questions that end discussion. Which of these questions is better? Why?

Step 3D: Questions of Appropriate Scope

Okay, let's look at how you can match the scope of your question to the scope of your paper (slide 14). It is important to avoid topics that are too broad. Which of these questions is better for a 10-15 page paper? Why?

Step 4: Create a Research Question in Groups [13 minutes] (Slide 15)

Now, it is your turn. Here is a general research topic, "Father Involvement" (slide 15). Work in groups of 3-4 to narrow the topic and develop an effective research question. When you are finished, I will ask you to write the research question on the board. You have 10 minutes to complete this task.

Project or hand out a copy of slide 15 for students to fill in. Circulate as the groups are working to check for understanding and to see if they are on task. As the groups finish, give each one a whiteboard pen and have the groups write the research question they developed on the whiteboard. If some groups finish early, have them fill in key words, synonyms, and related terms that could be used to search for articles.

Step 5: Critique the Research Question [5 minutes] (Slide 15)

Have each group read its research question. Ask guiding questions as needed.

- Is this question interesting?
- Is this question neutral and open? Why or why not? If not, how can it be improved?
- Does this question match the scope of our 10-15 page research paper? Why or why not? If not, how can it be improved?
- Which research questions do you like the best? Why?

In summary, a good research question is interesting, neutral and open, and fits the scope of the assignment. Having a good research question is essential because the question will guide your selection and reading of sources. A good research question will also help you avoid procrastination because it will provide clear direction and motivation for your research.

Closure/Evaluation [5 minutes] (Slide 16):

So what have you learned today about avoiding procrastination and improving the researching and writing process?

- Use writing as a thinking tool (epistemic writing).
- Plan the stages of the writing process (project management).
- Write a good research question (interesting, open, neutral, appropriate scope).

For homework, you have the opportunity to apply what we learned today. First, write your research question for the research paper in this class. Start by free writing on your topic while thinking about ways to narrow the scope. Then create a question following the criteria we discussed. Second, complete the charts in slides 7-8. Then respond to the following reflection

prompt. These three items are due next week: your research question, completed chart (slides 7-8), and response to the prompt.

Reflection Prompt

1. Using the terms and stages we discussed today, describe where you are in the researching and writing process for this class:
 - What have you done so far?
 - Which stage (s) are you in now?
2. Describe your goals:
 - What do you need to do next for your researching and writing and when will you do it?
(Be as specific as possible.)
 - Which strategies do you want to use to facilitate the process? Name three we have discussed.
 - What mistakes have you made in the past that you want to avoid this time?

Your response should be a paragraph of 5-8 sentences.

Grading

1. Has completed the chart in handout (slides 7-8) with realistic and well-paced due dates that correspond to the course schedule	5
2. Has thoughtful developed discussion of current researching and writing process	10
3. Uses terms and stages discussed in class	5
4. Outlines clear goals with specific timelines	5
5. Describes three research and writing strategies	5
6. Writes 5-8 sentences in clear edited prose	5
Total	/35

Lesson Analysis

The strength of this lesson is that it addresses topics of immediate concern to students as they are embarking on their research papers. The lesson is also very interactive. Each concept discussed is followed up with hands-on activities and check points for the teacher and students.

For the sample research questions, teachers should create their own examples that cater to their students' majors. It may take more time than I have allotted here for the class critique of the group research questions, but, if time runs out, the teacher can either model how he or she would fix the question or assign the critique for a future class. Lastly, teachers should adapt the chart to fit the interim assignments and due dates in their class.

References

Behrens & Rosen. (2012). *A Sequence for Academic Writing (5th Ed.)*. Pearson Education.

Haven, C. (2009, October 12). The new literacy: Stanford study finds richness and complexity in students' writing. *Stanford University News*. Retrieved from <http://news.stanford.edu>.

Figure 1:

Sarahstaff. (2011, December 8). Effective Revision/Exam Techniques [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://sarahstaff.blogspot.com/>

Strategies for Research: *Procrastination-Proof* *Researching and Writing*

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How can we make the process of writing a research paper less stressful and more effective?



Overview

- Strategies for improving your researching and writing process
 - Epistemic writing
 - Planning your researching and writing process
 - Developing a good research question

Writing as Epistemic

- Writing as a thinking tool

Writing

- that “creates knowledge” (Haven, 2009)
- to generate ideas
- to put the pieces together
- to figure things out



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What types of Epistemic writing do you do?

In Daily Life and Academic Writing

Diaries	Reflections
Lists	Listing
Blogs	Freewriting
Twitter	Clustering
Journals	Rough outlining or interim drafts



Stages of the Writing Process

- Understanding the assignment
- Gathering data
- Invention
- Drafting
- Revision
- Editing

Behrens & Rosen, Ch.6, 217-218

Gathering Data and Invention

- Take careful notes
- Evaluate your sources
- Choose scholarly sources

TO DO	Due Date	Status
Conduct initial research and generate ideas		√
Choose a general topic		√
Conduct more research. Find 4 sources		
Narrow your topic. Ask , <i>Who, which aspects, where, when, how, why?</i>		In progress
Develop a research question		
Conduct more research. Find 3 sources		
Write working thesis		
Turn in list of 10 sources		

Drafting

TO DO	Due Date
Compose your thesis statement	
Write outline	
Turn in rough draft 1	
Revise rough draft 1	
Write abstract	
Turn in rough draft 2 with abstract	
Edit rough draft 2	
Do a final proof read of draft 3	
Turn in final draft	



Part I

The Research Question



Formulate a Research Question

- Pose a question that
 - interests you.
 - is neutral and open.
 - will guide your research and match the scope of your assignment.
- The short answer to this question will eventually become the thesis of your paper.



Model

General Topic	Political activism
More Specific Topic	Political activism on college campuses today
Research Question	What kinds of political activism are college students involved in today?
Keywords	Political activism, college students
Synonyms and Related Terms	Politics, voting, political, organizations, protests, political issues, universities, colleges, campus politics



Research Questions

1. Pose neutral questions that open you to a variety of ideas and information. Avoid biased questions that suggest their own answers.

Which is better?

How do children who attend Montessori preschools perform in kindergarten?

Are children who attend Montessori preschools better prepared for kindergarten?



Research Questions

2. Emphasize *how/why/what* questions that open discussion. Avoid yes or no questions that end discussion.

Which is better?

How does imaginative play affect language development in children?

Does imaginative play improve language development in children?



Research Questions

3. Match the scope of your question to the scope of your paper. Avoid topics that are too broad.

Which is better?


How does preschool attendance affect the social development and academic achievement of children in American public schools?

How does preschool attendance affect children?



Your Turn

General Topic	Father involvement
More Specific Topic	
Research Question	
Keywords	
Synonyms and Related Terms	



Summary: Improve Your Process. Beat Procrastination!

- **A good research question** will focus and motivate you in your research.
- **Epistemic writing** helps to generate ideas or figure things out at any stage of the research and writing process.
- **Mapping out the different stages** of the research and writing process will allow you to set more manageable goals.



Application

Homework

1. Take 10 minutes to free write, list, or do a cluster diagram on your research topic. Think about all the different aspects of the topic and ways you can narrow the topic down. Ask yourself who, what, where, how, and when questions. Finally, **compose your research question using the criteria we discussed today.**
2. Fill in the charts in your handout (slides 7-8) with interim due dates that correspond to the course schedule. **Write a reflection in response to the following prompt.**

Reflection Prompt

1. Using the terms and stages we discussed today, describe where you are in the research and writing process for this class:
 - What have you done so far?
 - Which stage (s) are you in now?
2. Describe your goals:
 - What do you need to do next for your research and writing and when will you do it? (Be as specific as possible)
 - Which strategies do you want to use to facilitate the process? Name three we have discussed.
 - What mistakes you have made in the past that you want to avoid this time?

Your response should be a paragraph of 5-8 sentences.

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| 6. Writes 5-8 sentences in clear edited prose | 5 |



References

Behrens & Rosen. (2012). *A Sequence for Academic Writing* (5th Ed.). Pearson Education.

Haven, C. (2009, October 12). The new literacy: Stanford study finds richness and complexity in students' writing. *Stanford University News*. Retrieved from <http://news.stanford.edu>

Figures

Figure 1

Sarahstaff. (2011, December 8). *Effective Revision/Exam Techniques* [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://sarahstaff.blogspot.com/>