

This post may be subtitled "How to Structure and Write an Effective Paper."

I know that many of you are advanced undergrads who have already written many effective papers. But many of you are at a much earlier stage in your academic careers. Any and/or all you might find something in this message helpful in writing this particular paper. (You probably will want to print out the message because it is a long one, and having it in print will make it more useful to you as you start to work on your paper.)

It is really much more difficult to write a short paper than to write a long one. There is no space to be wasted on what is irrelevant--hence planning and strategizing the paper are paramount.

In writing anything and everything, I typically use a procedure based on Aristotelian logic (a process outlined by scholar and Senator S. I. Hayakawa in a book the title of which escapes me....). I think that this is particularly appropriate for writing a paper in political theory for reasons that will be obvious.

Essentially, your paper is intended to present an argument answering the question(s) posed in the paper topic. This argument you will sum up in what will be the overarching "thesis" of your paper. This is a hypothesis that the rest of the paper is intended to prove, with the help of "supporting hypotheses." The thesis should take the form of an answer to the large overarching question that is the paper topic? I included some smaller questions to give you hints as to what supporting hypotheses will be needed to make an effective argument to support your thesis.

I find it helpful to decide at the outset--arbitrarily, admittedly--that my Thesis Statement will be supported by three supporting hypotheses that must be proven to in order to convince the reader that my Thesis is correct. (I won't speculate on the multiple origins of this magic number "3"--it is just a point of departure that is usually very fruitful, because at least it gets me started. The number of supporting hypotheses can always be adjusted upward or downward--but never down to 1!--in accordance with the logical requirements of the thesis statement and the available evidence.)

I then proceed with a Preliminary Outline (of my paper or even my book!) that has 5 parts (Five is another "magical number" historically across many civilizations, by the way...). It look like this:

I. Introduction

(This will make the reader interested in reading the paper by

- A. Indicating the overarching question the paper seeks to address (and its significance!),
- B. Positing the Thesis Statement that constitutes the answer to that question, and
- C. Giving the reader a brief overview of how you plan to support that argument, including reference to the supporting hypotheses that you plan to prove. You might choose (or not) to acknowledge here any "reservation(s)" that the reader might have concerning your argument and how you are prepared to address it/them; and finally the qualification (usually involving the use of the word "probably"). Thus here you would be prepared to say something in the form of the following:

"This paper will show that if is proven by the evidence (your citations from the writings of the thinkers) that Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2, and Hypothesis 3 are correct, then if it is not the case that [the reservation that you will dispose of], then it is probably (your qualifier) the case that [Thesis Statement]."

## II. Supporting Hypothesis #1

### A. Point 1

- 1. Point of evidence #1 (e.g., a quotation)
- 2. Point of evidence #2, etc.

### B. Point 2 [continue same as under A. Point 1)

### C. Point 3

(could be more than three supporting points, but should probably not just be one piece of evidence.)

## III. Supporting Hypothesis #2 (Proceed as for Supporting Hypothesis #2)

- A.
- etc.

## IV. Supporting Hypothesis #3 (Proceed as for Supporting Hypotheses #1 and 2)

## V. Conclusion

- A. Restatement of supporting hypotheses
- B. Acknowledgment and disposal/addressing of valid reservations that readers might have concerning your argument
- C. Qualification (recognize, with humility, that you are only human by not implying or claiming that your hypothesis would under all circumstances at all times be correct, by using a word such as "probably")
- D. Restatement of thesis

That's it!

\*Hint\*: This outlining process is most useful, because if you cannot make it through this outlining process, or even through "I. Introduction" above, then you have a major problem in logic or in evidence that you need to resolve before beginning to write your paper. If you find that there is not enough evidence or that you are unable to address possible reservations effectively, \*you need to rethink your thesis statement.\* Doing this whole business before beginning to write prevents you from spending hours writing and writing and writing, and then discovering as you are writing your conclusion that your argument cannot work!

Now how do you go about coming up with your supporting hypotheses? You are doing a comparative paper, and there are basically two ways of structuring comparisons:

Basically, having identifying the points on which you will be comparing your two thinkers you have two choices:

1. You can discuss Thinker/School A with respect to points 1, 2, and 3 (or whatever the number of points on which you are comparing them), and then thinker B with respect to the same points
  
2. You can compare Thinker/School A and B with respect to point 1 then compare them with respect to point 2, and then compare them with respect to point 3.

Your outline organization will reflect which strategy of comparison you choose. That choice will be simply a matter of which you personally prefer are more comfortable using, or will be dictated by which option makes the paper read more smoothly.

So if you select Strategy 1, since you are asked to compare only two thinkers or schools, you will have just 2 supporting hypotheses: so your outline would like like this:

- I. Introduction (all same elements as above)
- II. Hypothesis 1: Thinker/School A with respect to points 1, 2, and 3
  - A. Point 1  
(evidence cited from Thinker/School A readings)
  - B. Point 2 (" ")
  - C. Point 3 (" ")
  
- III. Hypothesis 2: Thinker/School B with respect to points 1, 2, and 3
  - A. Point 1
  - B. Point 2

### C. Point 3

IV. Conclusion (or just address possible reservations here and have a separate point V. for the Conclusion, if the reservations are important enough to merit significant discussion.)

The second strategy would lead you to produce an outline that looks more like this:

- I. Introduction
- II. Hypothesis #1: Point 1 (e.g., Nature of man)
  - A. Thinker/School A
    - 1. Evidence a
    - 2. Evidence b
  - B. Thinker/School B  
(as for thinker A)
- III. Hypothesis #2: Point 2
  - A. Thinker/School A
  - B. Thinker/School B
- IV. Hypothesis #3: Point 3
  - A. Thinker/School A
  - B. Thinker/School B
- V. Conclusion

It is important that you do select one strategy of comparison or the other--otherwise you will end up with a paper that the reader will find very difficult to follow. Whichever strategy you select will require that you find evidence in the form of passages from the readings (or lecture notes) to support the point you are making. Again, if you go through this process and cannot locate the evidence \*before\* you start to write, rethink your argument and recast your outline before writing!

Take my word for it, this really works. I have used it for all my articles, and for my very successful books. Hope you find it helpful.

Finally, for those of you who want to see this in action, take a look at my "State, Identity, and the National Question in China and Japan." Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate this method and have content that will help with the paper. Pp. 148-161 in Chapter 4 will help on Daoism and its critique of Confucianism, by the way.