

Macbeth's Ten Steps to a Paper

1. Read over relevant passages in the text noting where and how you strongly agree or disagree. (Writing in the margins is good.)
2. Look for a recurring theme in your comments--that theme will make an excellent paper topic. (From this point onward, stubbornly refuse to consider further other issues/themes your comments raise. Perhaps they can be taken up in another paper.)
3. Practice writing a brief but fair account of the ideas in the text that are relevant to your theme. Include textual support with adequate citations.
4. Work at articulating how and why you think the point being made in the text is right/wrong.
5. Construct an argument out of the materials of (3) and (4). Hint: imagine yourself writing to a friend or family member; you want them to understand this very interesting issue, and to see why your way of thinking about it is insightful and (probably) right.
6. Critically assess what you have so far:
 - i) Are you introducing all and only the textual considerations that are relevant to your point?
 - ii) Are you being faithful to and insightful about the view you are discussing?
 - iii) Have you developed your own ideas clearly and comprehensively?
7. Rewrite as necessary.
8. Polish:
 - i) Write an introductory paragraph that orients the reader, presents the central issue, and gives the reader some indication of your approach.
 - ii) Check your paragraphs and sentences. Do paragraph breaks occur in natural places? Are your sentences processable by the finite mind? Hint: read the piece aloud--with or without live audience. (I find without is better.) If you find that you are having trouble reading your paper aloud, chances are that your paragraphing and/or sentence structure is awkward.
 - iii) Write a conclusion that brings the discussion to "closure" and reminds the reader of what you take to be the central point of the paper.
9. Spell check and grammar check. (And don't rely completely on your computer--it really is a dumb machine.)*
10. Take a deep breath, print the final copy (saving the file, of course), make sure all the pages are there, and hand in.

*For grammar, I find that Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, is very useful. Buy a copy! You'll be glad you did.