

**MELANIE'S NO-ANGUISH GUIDE TO FIRST DRAFTS** *for argumentative or inquisitive papers in the social sciences and humanities*

Here is an approach that I've used a lot. In my experience it can be scaled pretty easily depending upon the intended length of the essay. I find that essays of a certain length (i.e. short, 1-7 pages) benefit from a thesis in the introduction, since the thesis can give a sense of cohesion to the finished product, **BUT the thesis should be in service to the paper** and not the other way around.

Here we go:

1) **Figure out what your question is.** This might take a couple of days... mull it over in the shower, at the gym, or whenever you've got nothing better to do.

2) Yes, it does in fact have to be a question! You're going to do your best to answer it.

3) Assemble all your sources and **make a giant master-list of quotes that you could use for your paper.** These will be like stepping-stones that you'll use to sketch out the path of your essay. You will probably not use all of these quotes, but having this big list gets the content-mining out of the way before you start writing. Your list should be broken down by author. Make sure to note the page numbers next to each quote so you won't have to waste time finding them again later.

4) **Set aside the quotes and brainstorm.** I like to sit down and force myself to write about 500 words without stopping or editing. The object here is not to write something good, but to get the mental juices flowing! Write your question. Write other questions that you think are related. Try to answer them using only what you know off the top of your head. Again, quality DOES NOT MATTER at this point! **All you need to do is put ideas on paper.** Some people like to make a flow chart (not an outline) or a mind map instead of writing. Whatever your preferred method of brainstorming, use it, so long as it transfers thoughts to paper.

5) **Set aside these notes;** you won't use them directly as part of your draft. **They will be available to jog your memory** or give you something to think about if you get stuck while you're writing later on.

6) Now think about the structure of your essay:

1. **a section where you set the stage for your question/problem** ("why we should care about this" or at the very least "why this matters in X context."), **otherwise known as an introduction.** Depending on what your professor expects, you may have to have a thesis here.

2. **a section where you answer the question**

3. **a section where you address potential counter-arguments and caveats.**

4. **a conclusion** that repeats your argument and drives home your most important points.

7) **Pick out the best quotes that you can use in section 2.** Set it up as the list of quotes you'll use there, **in the expected order in which you'll use them.** This is very similar to an outline, except I find this way to be a lot more flexible.

8) **Pick out which ones you'll use to address potential counter-arguments (section 3).** Make your quote list for this section.

9) Now, consider the two middle sections: **literally fill in the area between the quotes with your own words, so that your list turns into the meat of your essay.** You don't even have to do it in order! Talk about the ideas presented in quotations, expound upon the implications, discuss the potential meanings, go nuts! You can cut things out later if you need to. **Make sure that you have sound transitions** between quotations, so that **each quote builds upon what you've been saying** up to that point in the paragraph. You may have to shuffle things around a few times before you find the right order.

10) Re-read your draft so far: what were the main points? **In a conclusion to an argumentative essay, you should repeat, briefly, point-by-point, the take-home message(s) of your essay.** You don't necessarily need quotes here, but if you've got something snazzy and pertinent to finish with, go ahead.

11) Now, **finally, the introduction.** Before writing, think about where you went as you answered the question... what were the most important themes, and what aspects of the issue did you emphasize most? What did you conclude? You don't have to write anything right now. Just think about it. **What ended up being important, and what didn't?**

12) **Pick out the quotes that will help you set the stage** for your problem/question/issue. Pick ones that will foreshadow themes that took on a dominant role in your essay, and that will set up for the important parts.

13) Fill in your introduction: start with the most general context, and then zoom in to your particular concern. **A really good introduction expresses the context and the question of interest, and will set up the trajectory of your essay all the way through to the conclusion, like a bow and arrow aiming towards a target.** In other words, use the quotes to pique interest in the question, state the question, and then (if necessary), articulate the thesis in your own words. Even if the thesis is something that you don't say outright until the conclusion, everything after this point will be in support of the thesis, so make sure the thesis fits the content of your paper.

14) Ideally, **write your bibliography,** and then **take a day or two off from the paper** so that you can let everything stew in your mind. If you look at the same thing for too long it stops making sense, so it's best not to try to edit right after finishing your draft.