

Timeline of the Writing Process

PLAN AHEAD

As soon as your paper is assigned, note the due date and work from there. You should adapt this process to your own working style, but the point is to plan ahead so that you don't end up writing your entire assignment at the last minute.

CHOOSE YOUR TOPIC

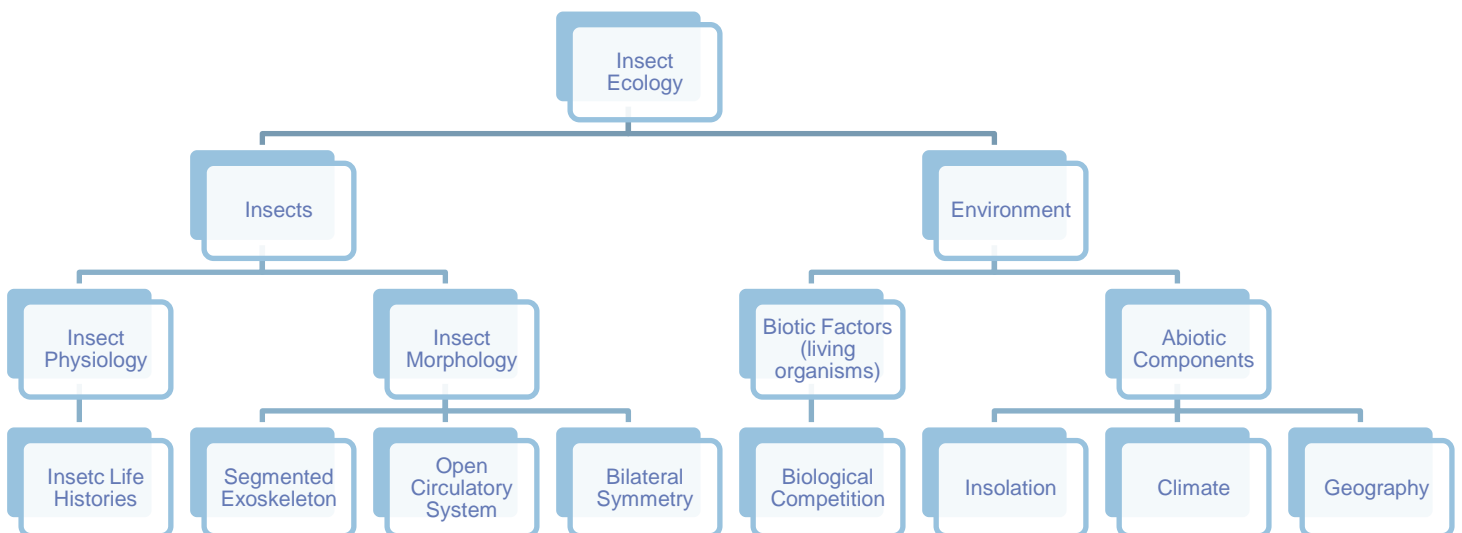
Read the assignment carefully to determine whether the instructor is giving you the latitude to write about any topic of your choosing. If your instructor allows you to choose a topic, your topic must reflect the objective of your assignment. The golden rule is to choose something that truly interests you because this interest will sustain you through the lengthy process of writing the paper.

DEVELOP A ROUGH OUTLINE OR MIND MAP

Begin by asking yourself the basic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Who is your paper's audience? What do you already know about the topic? What issues or concerns do you want to address? Where is your topic most relevant? Why is this topic of interest to you (e.g., personal, professional, academic)? Why is this topic worth discussing?

You can develop a rough outline or concept map to help you answer these basic questions. Outlines are focused in scope, defined by Roman numerals and capital letters only. A concept map is a Web diagram that links relationships between a main idea and other sub ideas or concepts. It requires you to consider how the ideas that come into your mind as you ask the basic questions relate to your topic.

Sample concept map for insect ecology.



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Insect_Ecology_Concept_Map.png

Once you have developed your outline or concept map, write your thesis statement. This involves taking your outlined Roman numerals, bullet points, or concept map elements and converting them into statements. Don't worry if your statements are not 100% correct; your

research will eventually support or refute your hypothesis. At this stage, you want to write a thesis paragraph that focuses on the topic, issue, or concern you propose or support to defend in your assignment. Take time to formulate your thesis paragraph because it represents more than 40% of your final assignment. Your thesis paragraph is the glue that holds the rest of your assignment and its corresponding research together.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Review the assignment to verify whether or not your instructor requires you to cite certain sources. For example, your instructor may desire for you to use only peer-reviewed journal articles dated within the last five years. Moreover, many instructors require students to compose annotated bibliographies of the resources they use in their assignments. An annotated bibliography is a list of books, articles, and Web sites with brief descriptions of their relevance to the topic. The purpose of this preliminary research is to help you determine the best sources available to assist you in completing the assignment. Knowing which sources to use can save you valuable time searching through resources that may not prove appropriate for your topic.

RESEARCH, READ, AND TAKE NOTES

Do *not* limit your sources to Google. Your campus library has a plethora of periodical databases from which you can find, read, and print full-text articles, book chapters, reference books, conference proceedings, white papers, and much more. Many periodical databases 1) allow students to build lists of articles, 2) send e-mail alerts, and 3) generate APA or MLA citations. Your basic search engine cannot do this! Your campus librarian may also be able to recommend online resources regardless of the subject or topic. Check your school's Web page for a Library or Learning Resource Center link. Online students have access to the same library research materials available to on-campus students. Most campus librarians can be reached via e-mail, instant messaging, Skype™, or Facebook™.

After collecting your various resources, begin reading and taking notes. As you become increasingly comfortable with reading scholarly material, as well as the note-taking process, your ability to sift through information and pick out important points will grow. Highlighting and fervent scribbling will soon become standard procedures. Consider purchasing a SMARTPen, which records as you write, if you have problems understanding your notes.

Webs and diagrams may also prove useful as you cipher through your notes to find important statements and develop your own thoughts on an aspect of your research subject. Contact your instructor to see if he or she has archived any lecture podcasts or chat sessions. Conduct a search for tutorials that explain more complicated or confusing skills, techniques, or concepts. [YouTube™ Education](#), [Library Information Literacy Online Network](#) (LION) Blip TV, and [Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Teaching Online](#) (MERLOT) are Web channels that offer numerous tutorials on a wide range of topics.

COMPILE NOTES AND COMPLETE YOUR OUTLINE

You have researched, highlighted, and worked your fingers to the bone. It is now time to use your notes to fill in your rough outline or mind map. There is no right or wrong way to accomplish this task. Your main objective is to organize your thoughts and create a template for your paper.

ROUGH DRAFT

Your rough draft is just that, a draft. You are writing sentences and paragraphs that you will likely revisit and refine. The rough draft moves you from the outline or map to your final product.

In the rough draft, you are structuring your research and ideas into a format that resembles that final product. Your instructor may ask to see your rough draft; if so, he or she will provide you with comments and suggestions. Ensure your draft is as clean and readable as possible; edit your work for grammar, punctuation, and word choice. Format your paper into the style required by your university. Writing style guides are discussed later in this lesson.

Check with your university for help with grammar, punctuation, and word use, as it may offer printed or online guides. The university may also provide you with access to tutorials. Two excellent online resources are:

- *Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>
- *Online Grammar Handbook* at <http://englishplus.com/grammar/contents.htm>

EDIT

Study the notes your instructor places on your draft. Look for subtle cues as to what he or she wants. For example, does your instructor make note of a statement or use of a resource that he or she particularly likes? Does your instructor indicate that you are repeating yourself, or that your paragraphs and summaries could be tightened, refined, shortened, or more to the point? Expectations will vary from one professor to another, as well as from one course to the next, but you will discover commonalities that will help you with each paper you are asked to write.

FINAL PAPER

Once you have analyzed your instructor's comments and intensely reviewed your draft, consider such elements as organization, logic, flow, transitions, unnecessary tangents, and ideas you may have inadvertently omitted. Your final paper should provide a strong argument that is supported by external resources. The paper should be easy to follow so that your argument is clear to the reader. You must provide an introduction, a conclusion, and a body. The tone of the paper should match the assignment appropriately and demonstrate critical thinking and your comprehension of the topic.