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A grant from Conoco, Incorporated, of Stamford, Connecticut, provided the financial support for the preparation of *Writing Papers*.

I. Putting a Paper Together

A. Getting started

1. Questions. Good papers usually begin with good questions. As you are doing the reading and research for a paper, scribble down your own version of these questions: What has particularly interested me about this subject? What passages in the text have I underlined in my first reading, and is there anything that connects them? (Where you see a pattern of related ideas widely separated in the text, there's often a paper topic.) What has my teacher, or somebody else in the class, or the textbook, or a secondary source said about this topic that I disagree with, or at least find questionable? (Where there's disagreement, there's often a paper topic.) Try to make your questions more and more specific and focused. Stop taking notes every once in a while and ask: How have my questions changed? What will probably be my main question? How will the reading I'm doing now help me answer that question?

2. Drafts. The belief that you write good papers in one intense, creative session can also make it hard to get started. You should think of your first writing as exploratory, as a first rather than as a final version. You will find it easier to begin to write things down if you remind yourself that this is a **draft**, that your first attempts can be changed, reorganized, or even thrown away. No good writer produces perfect copy the first time, and many change their works even after they have been published. (Even great writers blot, cross out, add, and change; take a look at some of their manuscripts.) Someone said once that an eraser, a pair of scissors, and a pot of paste (or a roll of Scotch tape and some correction fluid) are the writer's most important tools. Don't try to do without them.

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3. Free Writing. Some writers have suggested other ways to get started. Peter Elbow in his *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford, 1973) has some interesting ideas about free writing as a way to find out what you really have to say. In his free writing exercises, you write for ten minutes about your subject without stopping, without lifting your pen from the paper, without stopping to agonize over word choice or spelling or coherence, just letting ideas flow out. Then you stop and sift the good from the bad, the useful from the useless. Then you repeat the free writing, basing it on what you have salvaged from the first attempt. You repeat the process until you have something you can use to begin your paper. For some people this process may take as many as five increasingly coherent versions; for some people it may never work at all. But it's worth trying when you're having difficulty getting started.

4. Outlines. If you have some conception of your general idea and of the evidence you can give for it, an outline is a classic device for getting started. It can give you a framework for your first gropings and can help you organize the material your paper will be based on.

We wrote this handbook, for example, from a rather simple **topic or phrase outline**, an early version of the table of contents on page iii. A more elaborate outline would have more sub-headings:

III. Writing correctly

A. Sentence structure (syntax)

1. Dangling modifiers

a. Separated modifiers

b. Dangling modifiers at the beginning of sentences

c. Dangling *which*-clauses

2. Parallelism

and so on. Notice that in this more detailed outline you show the relative significance of items by their number or letter and by indentation — the more important or general closest to the left-hand margin, the less important or more specific farthest from it.

Sometimes a **sentence outline** is more helpful. When we described this project to our colleagues, we wouldn't just list the

topics we were covering, but would say something like: "In the first major section we show how to deal with some problems of focus and organization. In the second section we try to combat some common misconceptions about word choice. In the third . . ." and so on. For a short paper you might want to write a sentence about what each paragraph will do; for a longer paper, you would probably write one sentence for each section.

In an **assertion outline**, you write a sentence summarizing the point of each paragraph or section. This forces you to think carefully about the course your argument is going to take, and to develop each paragraph or section logically in relation to the others. We could have described what we were doing by saying: "The first sub-section, 'Getting started,' shows that, though beginning a paper at all is often difficult, certain techniques can make it easier. The second sub-section, 'Refining your topic; defining your thesis,' shows how to focus a topic once you have found one and to distinguish a topic from a thesis . . ." and so on. (Sometimes a **question outline**, a tentative design for your paper based on the questions you are trying to answer, will be more useful.)

An outline, like a first draft, can always be changed and usually should be. Though we knew approximately what subjects we wanted to cover, for example, their order changed somewhat as we worked. But an outline is always a useful point of reference, even as it changes.

B. Refining your topic; defining your thesis

Many papers try to cover too much. Trying to discuss the causes of the Second World War in ten pages is trying the impossible; you can achieve a superficial listing at best, never a coherent and fully developed explanation. Limit and refine your topic until you hit on something that you can really explore in detail in the space you have. Learn to distinguish between two-page and ten-page ideas. Force yourself to concentrate on something manageable by choosing a title that limits the focus of your paper: