

Illustrated articles. Last summer the article "Make Way for the Sultan of Swipes" (August 22, pp. 24-30) had about 3,900 words in it. This is nearly as long as your 16-page paper, yet the topic of the *Sports Illustrated* article was very narrow: one man, Lou Brock; one achievement, base-stealing.

Most students tend to write on topics too broad for the length assigned. Writing your paper will be easier if, before you begin, you zero in on one tiny aspect of a subject and stick to exploring that. Write about the history of one slang expression, not the history of slang. Explore the development of one rock musician, not the evolution of rock. Consider the consequences of one biology experiment, not the whole DNA issue. Then ask yourself if you've limited the topic enough.

Limiting is probably the most important thinking task facing you. Writers can never say all there is to say about a topic and must force themselves to leave out some good material. Take this topic. There's no room for the story about the legendary dangling modifier or for a discussion of stylistic devices. In fact, there's not even room for the topic. Although the assigned topic was "how to write a paper," the assigned length was only 1,000 words. The library had 13 shelves of books on writing. The six books selected as sources for the article had 2,192 pages total—not counting indexes. The word "limiting" hardly describes what was done to squeeze 2,192 pages into 1,000 words.

Research. At this point in how-to-write-a-paper articles, it is customary to advise students to approach reference librarians and ask for their willing help. It's time someone warned you about the ego-thrashing you can get from otherwise well-meaning reference librarians whose every gesture,

Your Term Paper Mission

Term papers are written for an audience of one—the professor. As you sit down to write, think of your audience and take pity. Your teacher would probably rather spend his nights doing something more creative. Instead, this sentinel of academe must sift through reams of white bond paper, hundreds of thousands of black type-written characters in double-spaced lines blurring together. Your assignment: to write a paper that stands out from the rest and says, "The rest may be incoherent drivel, but I'm different. I'm going to at least make your evening bearable."

every smile seems to be saying, "You dummy, you mean you don't know about *Bacon's Publicity Checker*, the ERIC Clearinghouse, the *Miscellany of Popular Antiquities*, *Topicator* or the National Union Catalog?"

Reference librarians don't mean to make you feel stupid, but they can. So swallow your ego and throw yourself at their mercy. Or look it up yourself: basic books like Shore's *Basic Reference Sources*; Bates' *Guide to Use of Books and Libraries*; Murphy's *How and Where to Look It Up*; and Winchell's *Guide to Reference Books* are all helpful reference book references.

Organizing. Another custom of how-to-write-papers articles is to stress the importance of the outline in preparing a paper. This is true. Outlines are important, but they're useless unless you understand why you're doing one. The why of outlines has to do with William Randolph Hearst's formula for writing.

His formula (roughly) was as follows: "First you tells folks what you're gonna tell 'em; then you tells 'em; then

you tells 'em what you told 'em." In writing, the easiest approach is to announce your topic, present details which flesh out your point of view (or thesis), then wrap it all up by reminding people what the topic has been. An outline helps you remember to do this. A paper must have a beginning, middle and end to be understood by readers.

A short paper—say 1,000 to 2,000 words—may not need an ending as much as a longer one simply because there's less time for a reader to get confused. But with a longer paper, a reader needs help from the writer to get through. A beginning where you tells folks, a middle where you tells 'em again, and an ending where you tells 'em yet again, is only fair.

Language. The trouble with following the Hearst formula too literally is that the paper will begin with the phrase "This paper is about," and end with an identical sentence, tenses amended. This is dull. And this is why writing is scary. Approaching a library and choosing a topic are fearsome enough. But wrestling with language often squashes any zest people might bring to writing. Anybody can jabber happily on a phone for an hour (speaking maybe 3,000 words in the process). But when asked to write the same number of words, the witty, jaunty telephonist becomes the perpetrator of "This paper is about" sentences—in a word, dull. Why? Because written language means Rules and Rules kill all the fun. Rules make you Self-Conscious.

Try not to be hamstrung by Rules. Your ear knows more than you think. Remember the old high school bugaboo about sentence fragments? Look again at the third paragraph of this article. Every sentence in it is a fragment, but your ear probably accepted that. Fragments are not an ironclad taboo, and any good grammar book will say so (in small print). Fragments that offend the ear are wrong, but musical fragments for stress or color are acceptable even in formal writing.

Let your ear do the writing and fragments, dangling clauses, tenses, most of your rhetorical pitfalls will probably cure themselves. Read your paper aloud, listen to yourself as you write. Thinking of language as sound will not only improve your grammar, but also make your writing less dull. If you feel you need a greater understanding of language, read a grammar text sometime leisurely when you are *not* writing a paper. But when you *are* writing, set aside self-consciousness and simply tell people what you have to say. On a topic of your choosing, of course. ■

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