Some fields stipulate the plan of a research report. In the experimental sciences, for example, readers expect reports to follow a plan something like this:

Introduction – Methods and Materials – Results – Discussion – Conclusion

If your field requires you to follow a conventional plan, ask your instructor for a model or find one in a secondary source. In most fields, however, you have to create a plan of your own, but that plan must still help readers find what they are looking for.

12.1 AVOID THREE COMMON BUT FLAWED PLANS
Not all plans are equally good.

1. Do not organize your report as a narrative of your thinking. Few readers care what you found first, then dead ends you hit, then problems you overcame. They become especially annoyed when they have to slog through the history of your project to get to a main point you’ve saved for the end.

To test your draft for this problem, highlight sentences that refer not to the results of your research but to how you did it or to what you were thinking. You see signs of this in language like
The first issue was . . .; Then I compared . . .; Finally I conclude. If you highlight more than a few such sentences, you may not be supporting a claim but rather telling the story of how you found it. If so, reorganize your report around the core elements of your argument—your claim and the reasons supporting it.

2. Do not assemble your report as a patchwork of your sources. Readers want your analysis, not a summary of your sources. New researchers go wrong when they patch together quotations, summaries of sources, especially downloads from the Web. The worst form of this is called “quilting,” stitched-together passages from a dozen sources in a design that reflects little of your own thinking. It invites the charge *This is all summary, no analysis.* Quilting is a particular risk if you do most of your research online. Experienced readers recognize such patchworks, so you’re unlikely to slip one past your teacher, and you risk a charge of plagiarism.

Advanced researchers rarely offer patchwork summaries, but they can follow sources too closely in another way: they map their report onto the organization of a major source rather than create a new one that serves their argument better. If the key terms that run through your report are the same as those in one or more sources, consider whether you are making your own argument or mimicking theirs.

3. Do not map your report directly on to the language of your assignment. If you echo the language of your assignment in your first paragraph, your teacher may think that you’ve contributed no ideas of your own, as in this example:

**Assignment:** Different theories of perception give different weight to cognitive mediation in processing sensory input. Some claim that input reaches the brain unmediated; others that receptive organs are subject to cognitive influence. Compare two theories of visual, aural, or tactile perception that take different positions on this matter.

**Student’s Opening Paragraph:** Different theorists of visual perception give different weight to the role of cognitive mediation in
processing sensory input. In this paper I will compare two theories of visual perception, one of which . . .

If your assignment lists a series of issues to cover, avoid addressing them in the order given. If, for example, you were asked to “compare and contrast Freud and Jung on the imagination and unconscious,” you do not have to organize your report into two parts, the first on Freud, the second on Jung, a kind of organization that too often results in a pair of unrelated summaries. Try breaking the topics into their conceptual parts, such as elements of the unconscious and the imagination, their definitions, and so on; then order those parts in a way useful to your readers.

12.2 PLANNING YOUR REPORT

12.2.1 Sketch a Working Introduction

Writers are often advised to write their introduction last. A few writers can wait until they’ve written their last words before they write their first ones, but most of us need a working introduction to start us on the right track. Expect to write your introduction twice, a sketchy one for yourself right now, then later a final one for your readers. That final introduction will usually have four parts (see chapter 16), so you might as well sketch your working introduction to anticipate them.

1. At the top of the first page of your storyboard, sketch a brief summary of only the key points in only those sources most relevant to your argument. A long account of marginally relevant references is more annoying than impressive. Summarize only the sources that you intend to correct, modify, or expand on. Then order those sources in a way that is useful to your readers: chronologically, by quality, significance, point of view, and so on. Under no circumstances follow the order in which you happened to read them or record them in your notes. If you’re sure what will go into this summary, just list the sources in a useful order.

2. After your summary of sources, rephrase your question as a statement about a flaw or gap that you see in them:
Why is the Alamo story so important in our national mythology?

Few of these historians, however, have explained why the Alamo story has become so important in our national mythology.

3. Sketch an answer to So what if we don’t find out? You may be only guessing but try to find some answer.

If we understood how such stories become national legends, we would better understand our national values, perhaps even what makes us distinct.

If you can’t think of any answer to So what?, skip it; we’ll return to it in chapter 14.

4. State the answer to your question as your point, or promise an answer in a launching point. You have two choices here:

- State the point of your paper at the end of your introduction to frame what follows and again near the beginning of your conclusion.

- State it only in your conclusion, as a climax to your reasoning.

This is a crucial choice, because it creates your social contract with your readers. If you state your main point toward the end of your introduction, you put your readers in charge: Reader, you control how to read this report. You know my problem and its solution, my point. You can decide how—even whether—to read on. No surprises.

On the other hand, if you wait until your conclusion to state your main claim, you create a more controlling relationship: Reader, you must follow me though every twist and turn until we reach the end, where I will finally reveal my point. Most readers prefer to see your main point at the end of your introduction, because that lets them read what follows faster, understand its relevance better, and remember it all longer. Stating your claim early also helps keep you on track.

Some new researchers fear that if they reveal their main point too early, readers will be “bored” and stop reading. Others worry about repeating themselves. Both fears are baseless. If you ask an
interesting question, readers will want to see how well you can answer it.

If you decide to announce your claim only in your conclusion, you still need a sentence at the end of your introduction that launches your reader into the body of your report. That sentence should include terms that name the key concepts that will run through your report (see 6.6.1, 8.2.1, 12.2.2). You’ll be better prepared to write that launching sentence after you draft your final introduction. So for purposes of planning, put your main claim at the bottom of your storyboard’s introduction page; you can move it later.

Some writers add a “road map” at the end their introduction:

In part 1, I discuss the issue of . . . Part 2 addresses . . . Part 3 examines . . .

Road maps are common in the social sciences, but many in the humanities find them clumsy. You can add a road map to your storyboard to guide your drafting, then cut it from your final draft. If you keep it, make it short.

Here is how the first page of your storyboard might now look:

Research reports A, B, and C suggest that firstborn middle-class native Caucasian males earn more, stay employed longer, and report more job satisfaction. [Summary of key sources follows.]

But those reports tell us nothing about recent immigrants from Southeast Asia. The predicted influence seems to cut across groups, though it partly depends on how long a family has been in the United States and their economic level before they arrived.

Sketchy as it is, this introduction is enough to start you on track. In your last draft, you’ll revise it to state your problem more completely (see chapter 16).
12.2.2 Identify Key Concepts That Will Run Through Your Whole Report

For a report to seem coherent, readers must see a few key concepts running through all its parts. You might find them among the terms you used to categorize your notes, but they must include key words from the sentences stating your problem and main point. On the introduction page, circle four or five words that express those concepts. Ignore words that name your general topic; focus on those relevant to your specific question:

employment, job satisfaction, recent SE Asian immigrants, cross-cultural, length of residence, prior economic level

If you find few key terms, your topic and point may be too general (review 8.2.1). List those key terms at the top of each storyboard page, and keep them in mind as you draft.

12.2.3 Plan the Body of Your Report

1. **Sketch background and define terms.** After the introduction page of your storyboard, add a page on which you outline necessary background. You may have to define terms, spell out your problem or review research in more detail, set limits on your project, locate your problem in a larger historical or social context, and so on. Keep it short.

2. **Create a page for each major section of your report.** At the top of each of these pages, write the point that the rest of that section supports, develops, or explains. Usually, this will be a reason supporting your main claim.

3. **Find a suitable order.** When you assembled your argument, you ordered its parts in a way that may have been clear to you. But when you plan a draft, you must order them in a way that meets the needs of your readers. When you’re not sure what that order should be, consider these options. The first two are based on your topic:

   - **Part-by-part.** If you can break your topic into its parts, you can deal with each in turn, but you must still order those parts in a
way that helps readers understand them—by their functional relationships, hierarchy, and so on.

- **Chronological.** This is the simplest: earlier to later or cause to effect.

These next six are based on your readers’ knowledge and understanding.

- **Short to long, simple to complex.** Most readers prefer to deal with simple issues before they work through more complex ones.

- **More familiar to less familiar.** Most readers prefer to read about more familiar issues before they read about new ones.

- **Less contestable to more contestable.** Most readers move more easily from what they agree with to what they don’t.

- **More important to less important (or vice versa).** Readers prefer to read more important reasons first (but those reasons may have more impact if they come last).

- **Earlier understanding to prepare for later understanding.** Readers may have to understand some events, principles, definitions, and so on before they understand something else.

- **General analysis followed by specific applications.** Readers may have to understand the outlines of your overall position before they can follow how you apply it to specific texts, events, situations, and so on.

Often, these principles cooperate: what readers agree with and easily understand might also be short and familiar. But these principles may also conflict: readers might reject most quickly reasons that are most important. Whatever your order, it must reflect your readers’ needs, not the order that the material seems to impose on itself (as in an obvious compare-contrast organization), least of all the order in which those reasons occurred to you.

Finally, make the principle of order you choose clear by sketch-
planning, drafting, and revising

ing at the top of each page words that show it: First . . . , second . . . ; Later . . . , Finally . . . ; More important . . . ; A more complex issue is . . . ; As a result . . . Don’t worry if these terms feel awkward. At this point, they’re for your benefit, not your readers’. You can revise or even delete them from your final draft.

184 P L A N N I N G , D R A F T I N G , A N D R E V I S I N G

Finding a Workable Order for This Book
You may have to try out several orders to find the right one. We did. What you are reading is organized differently from both the first and second editions, either because readers told us that some parts didn’t “flow” or because we just had a better idea. Among other changes, we moved the chapter on the most difficult topic, warrants, to the end of part III, so that if readers got discouraged in that chapter, they would at least have covered the other parts of argument first. We’ve also moved parts around from one chapter to another. But changing that order was nothing new: we had already tried out more than a dozen orders for the first edition—and still didn’t get it quite right.

12.2.4 Plan Each Section and Subsection

1. Highlight the key terms in each section and subsection. Just as your whole report needs an introduction, so does each of its sections. Earlier we told you to state the point of each section at the top of its storyboard page. Now, just as you picked out key terms to run through your whole report, circle the ones that uniquely distinguish this section from all the others; they should be in the sentence that states the point of that section. If you cannot find terms to distinguish a section, look closely at how it contributes to the whole. It may offer little or nothing.

2. Indicate where to put evidence, acknowledgments, warrants, and summaries. Add these parts to the storyboard page for each section. They may, in turn, need to be supported by their own arguments.

• Evidence. Most sections consist of evidence supporting a reason. If you have different kinds of evidence supporting the same reason, group and order them in a way that makes
sense to readers. Note where you may have to explain your evidence—where it came from, why it’s reliable, exactly how it supports a reason.

- **Acknowledgments and responses.** Imagine what readers might object to, then outline a response. Responses may be sub-arguments with a claim, reasons, evidence, and even another response to an imagined response to your response.

- **Warrants.** Generally speaking, if you need a warrant, state it before you offer its claim and supporting reason. This following argument, for example, needs a warrant if it’s intended for non-experts in Elizabethan social history:

  Since most students at Oxford University in 1580 signed documents with only their first and last names, reason most of them must have been commoners. claim

  That argument is clearer to everyone (even experts) when introduced by a warrant:

  In late sixteenth-century England, when someone was not a gentleman but a commoner, he did not add “Mr.” or “Esq.” to his signature. warrant Most students at Oxford University in 1580 signed documents with only their first and last names, reason so most of them must have been commoners. claim

  If you think readers might question your warrant, make an argument supporting it.

  If your report is long and “fact-heavy” with dates, names, events, or numbers, you might end each major section by briefly summarizing the progress of your argument. What have you established in that section? How does your argument shape up so far? If in your final draft those summaries seem clumsy, cut them.
12.2.5 Sketch a Working Conclusion

State your point again at the top of a conclusion page of your storyboard. After it, if you can, sketch its significance (another answer to *So what?*).

In doing all this, you may discover that you can’t use all the notes you collected. That doesn’t mean you wasted time. Research is like gold mining: dig up a lot, pick out a little, toss the rest. Ernest Hemingway said that you know you’re writing well when you discard stuff you know is good—but not as good as what you keep.

---

**Start Drafting as Soon as You Can**

Deadlines come too soon: we long for another month, a week, just one more day. (The three of us fought deadlines for every edition of this book.) In fact, some researchers seem never able to finish, thinking they have to keep working until their report, dissertation, or book is perfect. That perfect report has never been written and never will be. All you can do is to make yours as good as you can in the time available. When you’ve done that, you can say to yourself: *Reader, after my best efforts, here’s what I believe—not the whole or final truth, but a truth important to me and I hope to you. I have tested and supported that truth as fully as time and my abilities allow, so that you might find my argument strong enough to consider, perhaps to accept, maybe even to change what you believe.*