



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

The Mushroom Method: How to Start Writing a Paper

I teach History of Anthropology, a course included in the writing-across-the-curriculum plan to teach writing, reading, and subject mastery as interdependent rather than as separate skills. The class is an upper-division course that combines lectures and classroom presentations, and requires extensive writing. The following instructions were developed because, after teaching the class for two years, I found that I was still not seeing much improvement between drafts (despite labor-intensive "corrections" and breaking the paper into four stages). The students needed more help in the first stage—the chaotic data-gathering and processing. The following instructions were designed to provide this help.

Instructions for Growing a Mushroom

Using notecards when you first begin preparing to write a paper is like providing the mycelium from which mushrooms grow. (Mycelium refers to the scattered filaments that, through a mysterious process, come together and grow into a mushroom.) To create a paper, you need to gather filaments. A paper is not a bouquet of other people's mushrooms; it is your own mushroom, grown from numerous microscopic fragments of information.

Your paper is a 10-page synopsis of the life and contributions of a major contributor to disciplinary anthropology between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. It should contain information about this person's biography, the intellectual context in which he/she was nurtured, a statement about his/her theoretical orientation, and a review of his/her important theoretical contributions.

What do I put on the notecards?

Begin by collecting bits and pieces of information relevant to the above categories (biography, major theoretical contributions, etc.) on notecards. Begin with your assigned textbooks. Make a bibliographic card for each textbook. Look up your person in the index. Break down the information in the textbook into categories (e.g., on a card headed "Personal characteristics," put only the material that refers to personal char-

acteristics, such as the fact that he was very friendly but was rumored to have murdered a native in the tea fields, or that she was always approachable by students but had a pathological hatred of short people with gray eyes; on a card headed "Teachers" or "Influential people," include information such as "studied at Cambridge under the noted historian Brooke" [put cross-reference notes to yourself, such as *cf. Cambridge; Brooke*]). Always include the source of your material (e.g., Hodgen 1967: 22).

After transferring information from your textbook, go to the books on reserve in the library and do the same thing with them. Then go to the *American Anthropologist* and look for obituaries. Try to read, or at least look at, the major books and papers written by your anthropologist. Continue to build up your bibliographic files, keeping track of where things are and whether you have to order them. Expand your horizons by reading about the people encountered and influenced by your anthropologist (if you're doing Frazer, you should read about Tylor et al., and also look at books on the Victorian era); look at newspapers on microfilm from the period during which your anthropologist lived—perhaps around the time of birth and death.

At this point *do not* try to write your paper (if it hits you between the eyes, however, take it). This is the gathering phase. Gather everything, even if it doesn't seem relevant at the time. You may gather something that will turn out to be the central metaphor of your final paper. You are like a truffle-hunting pig snuffling along every inch of ground—slowly, methodically, patiently. One mycelium does not a mushroom make.

How do I arrange notecards?

I arrange notecards alphabetically, primarily because I do a lot of cross-referencing and keep developing new categories, and it's the only way I can find pieces of information. I often put information in several categories and cross-reference the cards (for example: a notecard headed "Birth" might contain the date and place of birth, with cross-references underlined: *cf. death; Cambridge; 19th century; [parents' names];*



World Fair; merchant class ...). If you don't like alphabetical arrangements, try color-coding your notecards (blue for biography, yellow for major contributions, green for bibliography, etc.); but you'll still need some method of organizing material within each category. Some categories will seem absurd and irrelevant, and often they are. But mushrooms do not grow in sterile soil.

Keep a separate section in your notecard collection for "bibliography." Use the *American Anthropologist* format. On each card, put the call number of the book or journal, or indicate that it is not in the library; if you order it through inter-library loan, indicate on the card that you have done so. Place a check mark in the upper right-hand corner of the cards when you have transferred as little or as much of the reference as you want or need onto other notecards.

You might also want to keep separate sections for:

- Ideas for opening statements
- Ideas for closing statements
- Table of contents or index
- Doodle-cards for connecting ideas

Do not throw anything out. The thing you throw out is the thing you will wish you had kept (Murphy's Law #499).

What do I do next?

The longer you continue to collect information, the more you will start to think about your material. Leave time for this to happen. Make time to think about what you've collected. Sit down and just look through your cards. Look at them in order; look at them at random. Keep a doodle-card handy. Think about your final paper as well as the first two that precede it. About a week before the first paper is due, write out an outline of the major events in the person's life—they should be right there on your cards. Think about his/her life and try to sum it up in a powerful opening statement.

The Paper Sandwich

The opening paragraph is like the top slice of bread in a sandwich; the ending paragraph is like the bottom half. In between are the avocados, onion rings, and sunflower seeds—the supporting material that makes a complete meal.

Notable First Sentences:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. . . ." (Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*)

"Not in Asia and not in innocence was mankind born." (Robert Ardrey, *Territorial Imperative*—a theoretically problematic book, but a terrific opening statement)

Develop an opening paragraph that captures the reader's interest and summarizes the paper. Why is this person important in anthropology? Who did he/she influence? Capture the thrust and impact of his/her life in a powerful summarizing and forward-looking paragraph.

Develop an ending paragraph that summarizes and concludes the paper. The issues raised in the first paragraph should be summed up here; the questions posed and the momentous hints should be resolved; and the key contributions should be emphasized. Writing the paper is like playing ball: the opening paragraph throws the balls out; the ending paragraph catches them.

CMM (Critical Mycelium Mass)

How does a paper get written? How does a mushroom grow? Perhaps a mushroom emerges automatically when a certain critical mass is reached. If you sow the filaments and take time to wallow in the rich, dark earth of mushroom country, writing a paper is almost like going to sleep with a box full of notecards tucked under your arm and waking up with a mushroom growing out of your forehead.

Susan Parman, *Instructor, Anthropology*

For further information, contact the author at California State University, 800 N. State College Boulevard, Fullerton, CA 92634.

Suanno D. Rousche, Editor

February 8, 1991, Vol. XIII, No. 4
©The University of Texas at Austin, 1991
Further duplication is permitted by MEMBER
institutions for their own personnel.

INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Subscriptions are available to nonconsortium members for \$40 per year. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms and once during the summer. ISSN 0199-106X.