How do I start an essay or research paper?

1. Read the assignment carefully, and be sure you understand it. Also read and be sure you understand the material on which the paper is to be based. Read the material more than once if necessary.
2. Ask yourself what ideas, when connected to the assigned topic, could be proven.
3. Consider your audience. For academic writing, assume your audience is college-level readers. (See handout on Audience and Tone).
4. Write a tentative thesis statement that expresses the main ideas of your paper. Use keywords from the assignment within your own thesis statement. (See handout on Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences). Be certain the thesis statement addresses the assignment.
5. Develop an outline of the main points needed to support the thesis statement. An outline helps you organize your ideas before you begin writing, and helps you stay on track after you begin writing the draft. Developing an outline before you begin to write the draft of the paper will save you time and frustration in the long run.
6. Present the ideas of the essay in a logical order. Each idea you present in the essay should support the thesis in some way, and this connection should be clear to your reader.
7. After you complete a draft of the essay, reread to make sure the thesis does not need to be changed to more accurately reflect what you’ve actually written in the essay. Writing is a process of thinking, so sometimes our focus changes as we write. If this is the case, change the thesis statement to accurately reflect the essay’s content, but be certain that the essay still fulfills the requirements of the assignment.

What elements should be included in the introductory paragraph besides the thesis statement?

- The first sentences of the paragraph should catch the reader’s interest. You may want to include striking statistics, an anecdote, or a vivid description that relates to your thesis. Remember, your purpose as a writer is to introduce your reader to the topic, then you should make a specific point about this topic (thesis statement).
- For literary analysis papers, the introductory paragraph should contain the title and full name of the author of the work you are analyzing and what type of writing it is (ex. poem).
- The introductory paragraph may include background information that contributes to the understanding of the thesis. When writing about literature, you should provide a brief summary of the work in your introduction.
- You may also need to provide your definition of any abstract terms (such as “power” or “courage”). Avoid quoting definitions from the dictionary.
- Many instructors prefer that you place the thesis sentence as the last sentence of the introduction.
- When writing about literature, films, etc., always refer to what happens within the writing using present tense. (Ex.—Correct: In the story, the character of Marie is in the process of looking for a new husband. Incorrect: In the story, the character of Marie was in the process of looking for a new husband.)