

Masonic Writing: How To Unknown

M.S.A. is frequently asked for guidance and information on "how to" write a Masonic paper. The following has been adapted from the guidelines provided the members of The Illinois Lodge of Research.

Developing the ability to write a paper can be beneficial to a person in his vocation, in his church work, and in his community projects. There is great demand for persons who can do research work and write papers and make speeches within the Craft.

The following steps are usually taken in the preparation of a scholarly paper, and some suggestions, comments, and recommendations are made for those of our members who want to write a paper but never tackled such a project before.

1. SELECTION OF A SUBJECT

The initial step is not as easy as would appear when first considered. It is made difficult for a number of reasons. The world of Freemasonry is a large one and there are many phases that can be explored and developed making a selection cumbersome. It is usually made difficult because in most instances the person will think too big on what to cover; it is essential to be specific in selecting a subject. Success in selecting a suitable subject depends on thinking small on a specific subject. For example, instead of thinking about writing a paper on the complete history of the Scottish Rite, think in terms of writing a history of your lodge. Instead of thinking in terms of general Masonic history, think of something that has a local connection, is simple, and is specific. Look around you with open eyes and an inquiring mind. There are bound to be items in your community that will lend themselves to being developed into a suitable paper. Here are some suggestions of things you may find: Is there a street in your area named after a prominent Mason? Is there a school in your area named after a Mason? Has there been a public officer in your area named after a Mason? Has there been a public officer in your area who has served the community for many years who has been a Mason? What prominent public figures in your area have been members of your lodge? Does your lodge have an item such as an apron, a picture, etc., that has an interesting story or connection? Has any member of your lodge ever moved to another state and then served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge there?

In considering the subject give some thought to two questions: Is the subject one that will be of interest to others, and, am I interested in the subject? If you are not interested in the subject you will not enjoy working on it, and if others will not be interested in reading about your work you will be serving no useful purpose.

When you have selected a subject, write the editor and have him advise you if the subject is suitable for a paper and also if someone else is writing on it already.

(Many of the manuscripts submitted to M.S.A. for possible use as a Short Talk Bulletin are written on subjects already published.)

2. GATHER ALL THE FACTS

The second step is to gather all the available facts that will be incorporated in your paper. This may mean starting in a library, checking original records, interviewing persons with first-hand information, or a combination of these things. Don't expect others to do this work for you. We know of one instance where one of our Illinois members thought it would be nice to have the names of every Mason buried in Arlington National Cemetery. He wrote the Cemetery and requested such a list and he was surprised when he was informed that they had no way of knowing if a person buried in the Cemetery belonged to any specific'd group.

If you are writing a history of your lodge you will probably want to start with an examination of the Charter, then check the Grand Lodge Proceedings for information about the issuance of the dispensation, etc. Your lodge minutes book is an absolute necessity. Look for copies of programs, trestleboards, items connected with them. Look for members of your lodge who are collectors; they may have items of interest. Interview older members, listen to them, take their statements on a tape recorder, but later double check their statements in the details as memories are faulty. Look for problems that existed and how they were solved. Judge events by the times when they occurred and not with the standards of today. Have in mind five words at all times: Who, What, When, Where, Why. Check for material in your local library. If there are copies available of local newspapers, these might contain items of interest. Reading every issue would be a time consuming effort; it is best to be selective and check only those issues which were published at times when there is a likelihood that the newspaper might have published something about the lodge.

If the subject is one that lends itself to research in a library, plan on spending time there. Instead of copying material by hand, consider photocopying pertinent material not only to save time but to have the material readily available in your file for future reference.

Use cards to preserve facts. These could be one of the standard sizes, 3x5, 4x6, or 5x8. Put only one fact on each card so that later they can be shuffled and arranged in order easily. Always put on the card the place where the fact was secured; this may be needed later for a footnote, or to check its accuracy, or to return to the place and secure additional details.

Don't rely on your memory. Take notes on everything you discover even though the item may seem of no importance at the time. It may be an important link in your story when the time arrives to arrange the material.

If you are working on a general Masonic subject it might be well to start in one of the Masonic Encyclopedias (Mackey or Coil), or the Encyclopedia Britannica, or Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics. In cases of papers on biographies you might want to start with the Dictionary Of American Biography and then go to William R. Denslow's 10,000 Famous Freemasons. Possibly Who's Who.

3. PREPARE A GENERAL OUTLINE

With all the material on hand after you have completed your search for facts, you will have a good idea on how you are going to present the subject. At this point you should prepare a tentative outline. It will have at least three broad subdivisions, a beginning, the basic information, and a conclusion. In the case of a history or biographical paper, the job is simple because you can present the material in chronological order but you will find it best if the material is divided into logical segments. This will make your job a bit easier later on.

4. ARRANGE YOUR MATERIAL

At this point go over the cards and arrange them in proper order, keeping in mind the outline you have prepared.

5. PREPARE A DETAILED OUTLINE

With the use of the general outline and the cards you are now in a position to prepare a detailed outline which will serve as your blueprint for the preparation of your paper. The value of such an outline is that it will give you a bird's-eye-view of the entire paper, enable you to determine if the subject is well organized, that it is in logical order, and covers all the areas you intend to cover. At this point you may decide to move some of the cards to other places.

6. "IN THE BEGINNING ..."

We are taught that "no laudable undertaking should be begun without first invoking the aid of Deity." Many Masonic authors can attest to the importance of Divine guidance in every phase of Masonic writing.

7. PREPARE THE FIRST DRAFT

Using the detailed outline and the cards you are ready to type the first draft of the paper. You will present all the facts and ideas on the cards plus any others that come to mind to clarify the

area. Work fast and don't pay too much attention to details at this point in order not to lose your general trend of thought. Don't stop to check correct spelling of words, or other details. This can be done later.

After you have typed the first draft set it aside for a week or two. Get the material out of your mind before you go to the next step.

8. THE FINAL STEPS

Read your first draft of the paper slowly and carefully, check all facts for correctness, check spelling, grammar, and if the material sounds good. Place yourself in the position of the reader you are addressing. Have a questioning attitude testing the clarity of the language and its message. Note changes on the manuscript as you go along. Consider eliminating unnecessary words or facts or possible additions for the sake of completeness or clarification. After this has been done you are ready to type the paper in final form for submission.

Writing is hard work. It takes inspiration, perspiration, motivation, planning, writing and rewriting. The rewards are mostly intangible, but provide great personal satisfaction in seeing your thoughts preserved in print for posterity. It's a marvelous way of "spreading Masonic Light."

STB - April 1984