

Writing a Killer Paper on Route 66

First let's get a soda and talk a little, because if you're going to do a terrific job (or a decent job if you're already out of time) it will be necessary to get beyond where you are at the moment. The best way is to jot down any basic ideas you already have. That's so you won't forget to include anything nifty. Once you've thought about what you *should* write, you'll be able to concentrate on what you *can* write. That said, here we go.

Requirements

Make sure that your list has, right at the top, any clues your instructor gave you about the *perspective* or *viewpoint* you are to convey. Is it historical? Contemporary? Social? Economic? Knowing this will guide your research and help you decide what to emphasize. Also make sure you are clear about any specific points you are to cover. Don't just write what you find -- your real task is to mold what you find to fit the requirements. Also make sure you know and follow instructions about margins, spacing, indents, typeface, and so on.

Length

Unless your instructor specifies another format, set your paper up with real-world margins of one inch all the way around, and use 11-point Times for a font. That will be large enough to read easily, yet it won't look like you're padding your work with big letters. Double-spaced, your pages will contain 360-375 words each. So for a thousand-word paper, you can figure on doing about three pages. Piece of cake, right?

Style

What continues to work well is a style that might be called *modified friendly*. That means incorporating enough supporting information to show some expertise with the subject, without using big words that sound stuffy. Write in third person and keep sentences from getting too complex. Be clear. Don't try to sound clever by being critical. Keep adjectives to a minimum. Finally, edit out of your finished copy any words that end in *ly*. (Okay, keep one if you must.)

Bibliography

Even if not required, references are useful in the grade game. So organize your research material before writing. If you are expected to include a bibliography, be sure of the form to use. Some instructors prefer author's name first, others want titles first. A good paper can still lose points on form. So will inadequate research.

Books on a topic like Route 66 are considered secondary sources, so it's cool to mix in a few obscure articles to demonstrate good research. And if you are doing the paper in an honors class or for upper division in college, be certain that you actually quote from or otherwise use every source listed. Explanatory footnotes can help too, but they must serve a purpose as well. Don't let your paper look gimmicky.

Graphics

Route 66 has wonderful images to go with any story about the road. If graphics are expected as part of your presentation, use images related to your text. But don't go overboard. Color copies are no substitute for good writing. If your paper is a photo-essay, however, make sure you *write to the images* rather than sprinkling unrelated pictures through the text.

Writing

Whether your paper is three pages long or thirty, the same guidelines apply. The only difference will be level of detail. Here is a simple checklist.

[1] Make a note about what you'd like to mention in your opening and then move on. It is much easier to write the lead after the rest of your piece is drafted.

[2] Let your reader know what is important about the topic in a paragraph of about three sentences. This will be your theme.

[3] Set up a smooth transition to the main body of the paper. Another short paragraph will do. Again, this is easier to write later on when you can see where it leads.

[4] Dive right into the topic. Chronological development is easiest, but often too predictable. Consider answering *what*, *when*, *where*, and *who* questions in that order. One to three paragraphs, depending on overall length, will do the job. Work in quotations from knowledgeable sources for about half the paragraphs.

[5] Write a summary only if is a specific requirement for the paper. Otherwise, close with an anecdote that reiterates your theme, or your feeling about this topic as a writer and researcher—and make your exit.

[6] Go back to the beginning. Clean up the transition and write a lead that brings some image of the highway to the reader's mind. That will set the mood for the paper you've written. It could be somber or even playful. Remember throughout that the story of Route 66 has powerful elements of joy, sadness, and rebirth. Use them.

A good paper will satisfy curiosity. A great paper will increase it.

I wish you well.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom". The letters are stylized and connected, with a prominent flourish on the 'T'.

Tom Snyder