

## E127/Bahl – Background Essay Guidelines

**Length:** 4-5 pages (1200-1500 words)

**Format:** Double space; include heading on the first page (top left); place shortened title and page number in the header of every page (top right); see “Format Instructions” handout

**Title:** Include an informative, interesting, provocative and/or creative title

**The purpose of this essay is to inform yourself and to identify what aspects of your topic you will research for the two subsequent essays.** In this exploratory essay you will present background information relating to your proposed (narrowed) topic, including relevant history, laws and policies, statistics, problems, stakeholders, organizations, programs, debates, and other related contexts, etc. Remain attentive to the social change dimensions of your topic.

Remember that all three of the major essays for this course should be on the same topic, though the way that you narrow it and your research question will continue to evolve throughout the quarter (contact me if you want to change your topic altogether after submitting the Background Essay); a revised version of the Background Essay will become the background section of your Final Research Article.

### **Required Elements**

**Introduction:** The first paragraph of your essay should introduce the kinds of information and issues in relation to your narrowed topic that your paper will present. Close your introduction with a single sentence that provides an overview of the main subpoints of information that your paper will cover.

**Body Paragraphs:** You should have at least five body paragraphs, each with a clear topic sentence, that cover the following: historical background (including a relevant current event); related laws or policies; statistics; problems; stakeholders along with their perspectives and interests; brief descriptions of one or more relevant organizations, groups or agencies; and any debates (what stakeholders may disagree about and why, but without taking a position in those debates yourself). Additional information can include relevant definitions, current news stories, key figures, programs, etc.

**Conclusion:** The concluding paragraph should indicate how you intend to narrow your topic further, that is, what aspects of the topic you will continue to research. Explain what is significant about that narrowed aspect and why you’ve chosen it. Identify **one** real-world problem related to your topic that you may analyze further in subsequent papers. Develop **one** research question (see [CR](#), Ch. 3) that you would like to answer about your narrowed topic; it should not be opinion based or a good/bad, either/or, for/against, pro/con, yes/no, etc. type of question; nor should it predict the future or try to solve a problem (your job will not be to solve a problem in the three papers but to contribute to its analysis). Note that how you’re narrowing your topic and your proposed research question will continue to evolve.

**Required Sources:** At least one relevant visual image and a minimum of five substantial and diverse sources are required for this essay (at least two of which should be no more than three years old). Do not rely on any one source or type of source for the majority of your information. Experiment with various subject and keyword search terms and combinations. You should plan to sift through and evaluate numerous sources to finalize the ones that you plan to use. Select from the following types of sources (at least three types below, not including "Other," are required):

- Magazine articles: Try out a variety of search terms in ProQuest to find relevant and substantial articles (should be longer than 1000 words); use the tabs at the top of the search results (the list of article links) to sort and view only the magazine articles. Online magazine articles are also acceptable. Avoid academic journal scholarly journals for this essay.
- Books or book chapters: Use the online library catalog to access GRCC's holdings as well as electronic books that you can read directly from your computer. Also look for books via WorldCat, amazon.com, King County Library, and UW Libraries. Use the Inter-Library Loan service to have GRCC get books for you that Holman Library doesn't own.
- Online or print references: Encyclopedias (e.g., Wikipedia or Britannica), CQ Researcher, Opposing Viewpoints, social science textbooks, print materials from a library's Reference section, etc.
- Websites: While you can do some preliminary browsing with a general google search, especially if you are still considering more than one topic, you should begin with the Librarians' Internet Index. If you are searching for government agencies or non-profit organizations, click on "Advanced Search" in google to limit searches to .gov or .org suffixes. Should not just be a newswire article.
- Documentaries (Film, TV or radio programs): Use the library catalog to find documentaries at GRCC. The UW Libraries also have a vast selection of documentaries. Search online for relevant radio segments on *Democracy Now!*, as well as such National Public Radio programs as *Fresh Air* and *This American Life*. Also see [netflix.com](http://netflix.com), [imdb.com](http://imdb.com), or [youtube.com](http://youtube.com).
- Other: What other useful, substantial and credible sources have you found?

\*\*\*You are encouraged to find as much relevant background information on your topic as you can, so look far and wide at many different kinds of sources. You may even end up finding sources for the Literature Review (scholarly journal articles) or the Final Research Article, in which case you'll be ahead of the game! **Ask a librarian for assistance as you hunt for relevant sources and information; 24 hour online chat with a librarian is available:** <http://www.greenriver.edu/library/contact/index.shtm>.

**Quotations:** You must have at least one quotation from each of your five sources. In addition to the required five quotations, you can also cite them (paraphrase or simply refer to them). If you have more than the minimum required five sources, you must cite all of them in the body of your essay even if you don't quote from them. Follow APA guidelines to setup each quotation or citation grammatically with a signal phrase or attributive tag, and include a comment or explanation for each major quoted passage (see [http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04\\_c09\\_s1.html](http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04_c09_s1.html)). The quoted passages should not be so many or so long that they dominate your own essay. The majority of the writing in the essay should be your own, not the authors' you quote. You may need to indicate what source you are using more than once in a single paragraph: the reader should always know where you are getting your information from; there should never be confusion about whether you are stating your own ideas and interpretations or presenting someone else's information or views.

## **Additional Considerations**

**Topic Selection and Narrowing:** Before making a final topic selection, be willing to consider and even do preliminary research on more than one topic. Make sure you are focusing on a social change and social science aspect of your topic rather than a scientific aspect. For example, do not attempt to write a paper on the effects of psychotropic drugs on brain chemistry, though you might, for example, explore the policies around mental health and medication for prisoners. Even though you must narrow your topic before getting started so that you are not biting off more than you can chew, you will likely have to provide background info that is more general than just your narrowed topic. For example, if you were writing a paper on mass transit in Seattle, it would be relevant to look at the history of mass transit more broadly along with the experiences of other cities. Your job will be to balance the specific information you provide about your narrowed topic and the broader background and contexts.

**Information, Evaluation and Analysis:** Of the three major essays, this one requires the least explicit written evaluation and analysis on your part, but it is still not a "data dump," in which you just throw together all the information you can find. Although there may not be any such thing as objectivity, you should seek to remain neutral. Remember that in this paper you will not be putting forth an argument about your topic, which in fact you will not develop until the Final Research Article. Therefore, do not put forth your opinion, take sides in a controversy, or form judgments about what is right and wrong, good or bad. However, you will still need to exercise and exhibit your own critical thinking, judgment and creativity in narrowing your topic. You will also need to evaluate sources for credibility as you select, organize and present relevant information in a clear, concise and meaningful way.

**Voice and Audience:** Don't use "I," "me," or other forms of first person in the three major essays for this course. Also don't use "you" (second person) voice. Use third person speech, but avoid awkward and unnecessary uses of passive voice. Contact me in advance if you wish to include brief, relevant personal experience that you will discuss in the context of other non-personal published research. Never use first person to give your opinion ("I think" or "I believe") or to narrate the trivial details of your own research experience ("Then I went to the library to find some more sources!"). For the Background Essay and other writing in this class, your audience is NOT the general public. Instead think of your audience as fellow researchers, for example, your fellow students in this class.

**References and APA format:** Citations for your five or more sources must appear in your document on a new page entitled References and must follow APA format. Consult your writer's handbook to see how to format your entries for your References page or visit [http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04\\_c09\\_s2.html](http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04_c09_s2.html). All of your five or more sources need to be cited or quoted in the body of your essay (at least five quotations). Again, review your writer's handbook or visit the following website to see how to incorporate quotations and citations according to APA format in the body of your essay: [http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04\\_c09\\_s1.html](http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04_c09_s1.html).

**Paragraph Form:** Make sure each of your body paragraphs has a topic sentence that connects with the overview statement in your introduction. Pay attention to the transitions between and within

paragraphs. Paragraphs in academic writing are (usually) between 1/3 - 3/4 of a page long. If they're shorter than that, you may not be adequately developing your ideas. If the ideas or information don't deserve to be developed further, then you might consider combining the content of the short paragraph with another paragraph; in this case, you would need to revise the topic sentence so that it covers the combined materials. If a paragraph is much longer than 3/4 of a page, you risk losing the attention of your reader as well as losing focus in your paragraph itself. Of course, there are exceptions to the 1/3-3/4 page guideline.

## **Preparation**

**Information Questions:** Even before you begin or as you get started hunting for relevant sources and information, make a list of as many information questions you can think of with regard to your topic. What is it that YOU think you might like to know or need to know about your topic? It is helpful actually to write these out since it will focus your hunt. As you research, keep adding to this list. Which information are you not able to find out? Why might that be? Whom might you ask for help in locating the answer to a particular question that you think is important but can't seem to find?

**Historical Timeline:** Come up with a historical timeline with the dates for at least 3-5 major events, laws, or other developments. Briefly explain the significance of each date; perhaps write a mini-narrative.

**Statistics:** As you go through various sources, identify at least one or two statistics that are relevant for your research topic/question. Why are these statistics relevant? Would everyone agree on what they mean, or are they the subject of disagreement and controversy?

**Stakeholders:** List as many different groups or parties that are involved or affected by your research topic/question (do not say "society," which is too general a category) as you can think of. List at least five different types of groups/parties. Ideally, you should be able to identify their distinct interests, perspectives and relative power, which may motivate you to look for even more diverse sources. For example, in researching the criminal justice system, how might you go about researching the experiences and points of view of prisoners themselves?

**Debates/Disagreements/Controversies:** Describe and explain at least two major debates or disagreements that are relevant to your topic. Who disagrees with whom and why? Do they disagree because of conflicting evidence, interests, values and/or assumptions? These disagreements might be found in the mainstream media or in some other sources.

**Problems:** While your job is not to solve a real-world problem (even in the Final Research Article), you should begin trying to understand it. Think about the following questions, though you do not necessarily have to answer them for the BE: Why and when did it become a problem? Why hasn't it been solved? How has it evolved over time? What efforts have been to solve the problem? What has or hasn't been effective about those proposed solutions? Who is (most) to blame for the problem? What are the main disagreements about causes and solutions? Who has the power to do something about the problem? What is a financial analysis of the problem? Who gains something from the problem remaining a problem?