



THE WRITING PROCESS

Overview of the Writing Process

Although there is no simple formula for good writing, most successful writers view writing as both a means of communication and a process involving several stages of development. Every writer starts with an idea or an assignment and then must work to translate his or her thoughts about the general subject into a clear and easily read essay. In general, the writing process has three stages. During **invention**, sometimes called prewriting, you decide what you will write about. Then you accumulate ideas and information to support or explain what you want to say. During the next stage, **organization**, you consider how your ideas are related and decide how best to arrange them. And finally, during **writing and revision**, you write your essay, progressing through several drafts as you refine ideas as well as style, structure, and mechanics.

When you write, you need not finish one stage before starting another. Because the three stages often overlap, most writers engage in some aspects of invention, arrangement, and writing and revision simultaneously—finding ideas, considering possible methods of organization, and looking for the right words all at the same time. And even as writers draft or revise their essays, they may discover ideas that had not occurred to them before. In fact, no two writers approach the writing process in exactly the same way. Some people outline; others do not. Some take elaborate notes during the invention stage; others keep track of everything in their heads. But regardless of the differences in their particular systems, almost all successful writers work in some orderly way. Of most importance, this helps to carry out assignments and to become a more effective, competent, and relaxed writer.

INVENTION

Invention, or prewriting, is a crucial part of the writing process. Unfortunately, many people totally ignore this stage, either because they underestimate the importance of preparation or because they simply do not know how to plan to write. In college and afterward, you will often be told what to write about, at least in part, and you may be tempted to plunge into a first draft immediately. Before writing, however, you should probe your subject and decide what you are going to say about it.

Your first step should be to make sure you understand your assignment. Next, you should limit your subject by considering your essay's length, purpose, and audience, as well as what you know about the subject. You can then move from your subject, which may be too broad to meet the requirements of the assignment, to a manageably narrow topic (a particular slant or governing question that guides your research). When you have settled on a topic, you need to gather and organize ideas and facts until, finally, you are prepared to formulate a thesis or the main idea of your essay, the point you want to make.

ORGANIZATION

Before you actually begin writing, you have to decide how to arrange your material into an essay. This extremely important choice determines how clear your essay will be and how your audience will react to it. Sometimes deciding how to arrange your ideas will be easy because your assignment specifies a particular pattern of development. Also, certain assignments or examination questions imply how your material should be structured. The important thing is to recognize the clues that such assignments give or those you find in your topic or thesis, and to structure your essay accordingly.

WRITING AND REVISION

When you finally begin drafting your essay, your major concern should be getting your ideas down on paper. At this point, you should not let worries about sentence proportion or word choice interfere with your flow of ideas. All you want to do is to keep your momentum until you finish the first draft. Later, when you write the second or third draft, you can polish your writing, making sure as you revise that each part does what it should do.

Remember that revision is not something you do after your paper is finished. It is a continuing process during which you consider the logic and clarity of your ideas as well as their effective and correct expression. Thus, revision is more than proofreading or editing, crossing out one word and substituting another. It may involve extensive addition, deletion, and reordering what you want to communicate to your audience.

When you are ready to revise, you can start by setting up a revision checklist and applying it to your essay. As you move systematically from the whole essay to the individual paragraphs to the sentences and words, you can assess your paper's effectiveness. First, check your thesis statement to see if it is still accurate. If you departed from your original goal while you were writing, you will need either to revise the thesis so that it accurately sums up the ideas and information contained in your essay or to remove any unrelated material or sections--or to revise them so that they are relevant to your thesis.

Next, look at your body paragraphs to see if they need strengthening. Are they unified? Coherent? Well developed? Do the points you make support your topic sentences and your thesis? You might have to add more facts or examples to one paragraph to make it as strong as the others. Consider your introductory and concluding strategies. Are they appropriate for your material, your audience, and your purpose? Do they reinforce your thesis?

Now look over your sentences. Are they correct? Effective? Interesting? Are there any sentences that might be added or deleted or relocated? Then consider the words you use. Are there any additions or substitutions you feel you should make? Only now, after doing all your revision, should you go back and edit your essay. Polish your sentence structure, check your spelling, and make sure your punctuation and grammar are correct. How you revise—what specific strategies you decide to use—depends upon your preference, your instructor's directions, and the time you have.