All You Ever Wanted to Know about the Writing Process (But Were Afraid to Ask)

The writing process is just that, a process. English teachers are fond of declaring – in a loud voice with arms crossed across their tattered camel-haired coats -- that the writing process consists of the following steps. While they make this declaration, they are usually glaring at students who either (heaven forbid!) correct them or notice that they are wearing clothes that date from the last century. The steps are:

1. Prewriting
2. Writing (often called Drafting)
3. Revising
4. Editing and Polishing
5. Publishing

However, this is really a figment of an English teacher’s imagination. The real world doesn’t really work that way. (Actually, most English teachers only have a foggy idea of what the real world is like.) Anyway, it’s not composed of neat, discreet steps followed in order from beginning to end. Instead, all of these steps really happen at the same time. We think as we write; we revise as we think and write; we edit as we revise, etc., etc., you get the picture…but it is easier to understand the various steps if we artificially break them down into separate steps. Here are some things to think about.

**Prewriting**

“Prewriting” is a fancy way of saying “thinking on paper.” Oftentimes, you cannot get a clear picture of what is in your mind until you can see it displayed in front of you. (A rather gross but useful visual.) Prewriting really consists of everything that you do before you sit down to get serious with your writing. It’s the preparation stage of the process. Here are some different ways you may consider using.

1. Keep a journal (Write every day -- it’s good for your soul!)
2. Freewrite (Write for 10-20 minutes without lifting your pen from your paper. This is, essentially, stream-of-consciousness writing whereby you write everything that comes to mind. It produces a lot of junk but occasionally also produces some pretty good stuff. The best use of freewriting is to get yourself over “writer’s block” – the fear of the blank page.)
3. Brainstorm (List as many ideas that come to mind. This works for people who think in a linear fashion. Simply make a list of everything that you think about your topic.)
4. Mapping, diagramming, clustering (This is for nonlinear people. Simply make bubbles or doodles all across the page, anything that helps you visualize your topic. Then, you can draw lines to connect the bubbles when you notice relationships.)
5. Venn diagram or “T” chart or double-bubble chart (These are other graphic aids that are useful when making comparisons.)
6. Research, interview, and look up information. Oftentimes, this means a visit to the good old library. Be ware of the Internet. It is useful, but there's also a lot of junk on the Internet as well.

7. Discuss, talk to people. There's a lot to be said about human interaction.

8. Observe the world around you. Take a moment to enjoy a moment on earth without rushing through your life. That moment may change your journey.

Things to think about:

1. Understand the boundaries of the assignment. (What type of writing are you being asked to produce? How long should it be? What form should it take?)

2. Determine the purpose of your writing. (Are you trying to inform, explain, convince, persuade, or entertain? The purpose of your writing will influence everything else about your writing – what you say and how you say it.)

3. Determine your audience and the tone you want to convey. (Tone is usually a produce of word choice and sentence structure. Are you trying to be serious, light-hearted, satiric, or sarcastic?)

Limit/focus/narrow the general topic:

1. Journalist’s questions (who, what, where, when, why, how)

2. Group entries and eliminate irrelevant/unrelated items

3. Think about patterns of development (how you may write your paper)
   a. Description (to detail/describe a person, place, thing)
   b. Narration (to tell a story about something that happened)
   c. Exemplification (to prove using specific examples)
   d. Division-classification (to divide or group into related categories)
   e. Process analysis (to explain, step-by-step, how something happens)
   f. Comparison-contrast (to point out similarities and differences)
   g. Cause-effect (to analyze reasons and consequences)
   h. Definition (to explain what something means)
   i. Argumentation-persuasion (to prove a point of view)

Form a thesis:

Here, you need to think about what you want to say about a particular topic. Most thesis statements are written in one sentence. Most are explicit (that is, a reader can point to it and say, “There it is!” Sometimes, especially in descriptive and narrative writing, thesis statements are implied, or not directly stated. However, by the end of the introduction of your essay (whichever essay you’re writing), every reader should be able to figure out what you’re talking about and your opinion of your topic – regardless of whether the thesis is stated or not.

1. Take your general topic and narrow it down to something workable

2. Remember, a thesis states the subject and the point of view of a paper or your opinion about your subject.
3. Avoid announcements, statements of fact, and broad statements
4. Please be aware: If your reader (eventually, your teacher) cannot identify the thesis statement, then the highest grade your paper will earn is a “D” or an “F.” Yes, a clearly identifiable thesis statement is that important!

You also should consider, especially in essays that use lots of evidence, writing some sort of “statement of organization.” That statement – which may be a separate sentence or attached to the thesis statement – gives the reader a good idea of the overall structure of your essay. For example, “I'll prove this by stating A, then B, then C.” A and B and C, although only mentioned briefly in the statement of organization, tells the reader what to expect as he/she continues reading the essay. The longer the essay, the more this is needed. I, however, suggest that you do something like this for most of your essays. Your readers will thank you for it.

Think about the body (bulk) of your essay:

1. Provide lots of evidence (examples, facts, reasons, details, statistics, quotes, anecdotes – and don’t forget explanations and interpretations!)
2. Make sure your evidence is relevant, unified, specific, correct, adequate, and representative
3. Document all sources, and attribute all quotes. This is amazingly important!
4. Structure your evidence clearly (chronological/time order, spatial/location order emphatic/importance order, simple-to-complex order)

Make an outline:

Outlines are really useful for two reasons. Some people make outlines to help them plan an essay, to see its parts. Other people make outlines to help them evaluate their essays after they have actually written them. In any case, an outline is a sort of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” sort of test – your structure has to be “just right,” with everything pretty much balanced. There shouldn’t be parts that are “too much” or “too little.” Outlines should be brief and easy to see on one page, two pages for a really long essay. Consider it the bones of your essay on which you will fill out and flesh out with good stuff later on.

There is no one way to write an outline. Sure, there are formal ways of creating outlines, and you’ll find some dandy examples in your MLA handbook. However, there really are just three things to think about:

The Introduction

1. You need to start off in such a manner to create an interest for the reader. You need to make the reader want to read what you have written. There are lots of ways of doing that.
2. Once you’ve interested your reader, then you need to tell your reader what you’re going to explore in your essay. That’s the thesis statement. You don’t have to start a paragraph with it, but it should show up near the beginning of your essay.
3. Most essays will benefit from including a statement of organization. That, again, gives a reader a clue as to how you will explore your topic.
4. That’s really all that’s “required” in an introduction. There are, of course, lots of optional stuff, usually background information, explanations, or other “needed” stuff.

**The Body:**

Here is where you say whatever it is that you’re going to say. There are many ways to organize your information. All essays have structure, even ones that have implied thesis statements. If you organize your information clearly and make your essay easy to read, your reader will thank you. Remember to have clear, strong topic sentences, use good transitions, and always be specific and vivid.

**The Conclusion:**

There are lots of ways to end an essay. Please end it when it’s time to end it. That is, don’t fill your essay with padding or fluff just to meet a page count. When you’re done, you’re done.

**Some types of introductions:**

1. Broad statement narrowing to a limited subject (end introduction with thesis statement)
2. Brief anecdote leading up to thesis
3. Comparative or opposite ideas leading up to thesis
4. Series of short questions leading to thesis
5. Quotes leading to thesis
6. Refutation of a common belief leading up to a thesis
7. Dramatic fact or statistic leading to thesis

**Some types of conclusions:**

1. Summary of information presented
2. Prediction based on information presented
3. Quotation leading to concluding statement
4. Statistics leading to concluding statement
5. Recommendation or call for action
6. Echo of the introduction
Writing the paper:

Think of the “writing” portion of the writing process as emptying your skull onto the page. Write down every little thing you can think about until you cannot think any more. Empty it. Go ahead. Don’t worry about form or style or correctness. Just get it all down on paper. Some things that you need to do include:

1. Turn off your “internal editor” and sit down to write your first draft.
2. Don’t pay attention to grammar, spelling, mechanics and other minor errors.
3. Get all of your ideas down on paper; write for completion not accuracy at this point.
4. Write for quantity. It’s easier to cut out stuff later on than to add it. Add it now.

Revising:

The revision process is when you actually make your paper worth reading. When writing, you created a mass of stuff without any shape. Okay, now it’s time to give it shape. You want to create the message you want. When revising, you move things around, get rid of unneeded stuff, add the stuff that you missed, and really make your essay the message you want to convey to the reader.

In essence, revising consists of four processes:

• Adding
• Subtracting
• Substituting
• Rearranging

Now that you’ve finished a draft of your paper, it’s time to make it better. Remember, it’s the revision process that makes good papers great.

As you revise, think about the following items:

1. Does the paper answer the assignment given?
2. Does the paper address your audience?
3. Does the paper have the appropriate tone?
4. Does the paper serve the purpose intended?
5. Is the thesis clear and easily understood?
6. Add information where it appears to lack adequate support.
7. Delete useless or confusing information.
8. Do all of the supporting statements actually support the thesis?
9. Are clear transitions used between thoughts, ideas, and paragraphs?
10. Are the introduction and conclusion adequate and appropriate?
11. Is your organization systematic and methodical (consistent throughout the paper)?
12. Consider sentence structure and length.
13. Reconsider word choice.
14. Never use profanity or slang.
15. Always identify abbreviations.
16. REPEAT ALL OF THIS UNTIL YOU ARE SATISFIED (or cannot stand to look at it anymore).

**Editing/Polishing:**

Editing is when you correct all of the mistakes that you’ve made in the previous steps. Proofread for correct grammar, punctuation, typing errors. This step is done only after you are satisfied with the message you are conveying to your reader. It is very important, but it’s also important to wait until this stage of the game to worry about it. Essentially, you want to make sure that your reader pays attention to your message without getting distracted by any mistakes. Remember, it only takes five mistakes on one page for the average reader to mentally dismiss the writer, and therefore the writer’s message. Don’t allow careless, correctible errors break down the communication between you the writer and the reader.

**Polishing and last items:**

1. Give your paper a title
2. Make sure that your paper is on correct paper stock, typed, and legible.
3. Make sure that your paper is properly identified with your name, course title, date, and paper title
4. Make a copy of your paper and keep it as a record for yourself
5. Turn in your paper on time

That’s it!