

# The Writing Process

## From Blank Page to Final Draft



If you're not used to academic writing, the amount of work involved can seem a little overwhelming. For most ordinary writing, you don't have to think far beyond the main point of what you're saying and the words you use to say it; this is perfectly sufficient for day-to-day writing tasks like sending a thank-you note or posting a status update on Facebook, but an academic essay has much more stringent requirements.

While this can seem like a massive workload, it becomes considerably less intimidating if you take it one step at a time. There are many important parts of the process of writing an essay, but there are two things you should especially keep in mind:

- **Always plan your paper before you start writing it.** If you sit down and just start writing and expect your paper to get a good grade, you're likely to be disappointed. If you spend no time planning the organization of your essay, it will be very obvious in the finished product.
- **Don't wait until right before the due date.** Writing an academic essay requires time, because there is more to creating an essay than just the physical writing aspect. If you wait until the night before your essay is due to start working on it, you won't have time to do all of the planning and polishing necessary to make a good grade on your paper.

There are several steps to getting a paper where you want it to be, and several of those steps come well before you actually start working on the rough draft. The process of writing a paper can be divided into several parts:

- Planning
- Prewriting
- Drafting
- Revising
- Proofreading

All five of these actions are critical to writing a successful paper, from the early organization all the way through to the final polishing.

### Planning: Before You Begin

When you first get an essay assignment, it can be tempting to just sit down and try to free-write it straight through from start to finish and perhaps do some token proofreading to catch glaring errors. While you may sometimes manage to write a decent paper with that method, it's unreliable at best, and it certainly won't be your *best* work.

For an essay to be truly successful, it has to be carefully planned. There are many things to consider before you start actually writing the essay.

- Understand the assignment
  - What kind of essay is it (narrative, process analysis, argumentative, etc.)?
  - How long is the paper supposed to be?
  - Do you need APA or MLA format?
  - When is the assignment due?
  - Are you required to submit your paper to Smart Thinking or visit the Writing Center?
  - Are there any details you need your instructor to explain or clarify?
- Choose your topic
  - Is the purpose to explain, convince, or analyze?
  - Can the topic you've chosen produce enough for a full essay?
  - Can the topic be adequately covered within the scope of your paper?
  - Does the topic match the purpose of the assignment?

When you first get assigned to write a paper, you should start planning it *as soon as you get the assignment*. Procrastination can cause serious problems in any area of study, but procrastinating (that is, waiting until the last possible moment to complete a task) is particularly damaging on composition assignments because the essay process tends to naturally resist being rushed.

## Prewriting: Organizing Your Thoughts

Having a basic plan for your paper is not enough to start writing it. Once you have a topic and understand the assignment, you begin the prewriting stage. Prewriting a paper is basically a fancy way of saying "organize." It's about gathering all the academic materials you need, deciding what main points to make, and just generally setting up a "road map" for where you want your paper to go. When you're prewriting your paper, consider a few things:

- Do the research. If there are any research requirements for your paper, this is the time to start considering and acting on them.
  - Find good sources.
  - Skim your sources for information that will be useful in your paper.
  - Gather information for your citations and bibliography.
- Decide on the main topic of the paper and the points you want to make to support it.
  - Match the points to the essay (chronological order for narrative or process, comparison points for comparison essay, supporting arguments for argumentative essay, etc.).
  - Organize those points into a thesis statement.
  - Create an outline that includes your main points and any subpoints you need to mention.

One very important part of the prewriting stage is *don't shy away from doing an outline*. Even if your teacher doesn't require you to create a formal outline, it's still always a good idea to create some sort of outline for your main points. Many inexperienced writers protest this and say, "Oh, no. I always do better when I just free-write!" You may be excellent at freewriting – and certainly, it has its place. But *freewriting is never an appropriate substitute for planning and outlining*. Freewriting is a good way to get ideas flowing and a good way to brainstorm, but you should *not* be relying on freewriting to be your rough draft. Trying to write an essay

without first creating an outline – even if it's just a rough outline – is like trying to hang curtains in the bedroom before you've even finished building the kitchen; it's impractical and will lead to a poorly-constructed finished product. The important thing to remember is that the prewriting stage is meant to give yourself guidelines – *not* a finished paper. Nothing you do in your prewriting stage is etched in stone, and the finished paper may look nothing like what you envision in this stage.

## Drafting: Putting It on Paper

Once you've done your prewriting, it's time to actually start writing the paper. This is the drafting stage. Using your outline, thesis statement, and any required research materials you've gathered, you can now begin crafting your essay by making the key points from your outline and building them up with supporting details – either from research, your own impressions, or both, depending on the type of paper you're writing. There are a few things to remember during the drafting phase:

- Do not neglect the "rough" in "rough draft." Your final draft will likely look very different from your rough draft.
- You don't have to start at the beginning. If you're struggling to find the opening sentences of your paper but already know how you want to make one of your points, start with what you know, then go back to the introduction later.
- Cite your sources as you use them; don't wait and then go back and do them later. If you wait until the paper is written and then try to match your citations to your sources, you've made a great deal of unnecessary work for yourself.

## Revising: Refining Your Work

One of the most misunderstood parts of the writing process is revising. Often, the approach to writing a paper is to write a rough draft, do some token proofreading, and turn in the paper that way. This is not a good way to write a paper because it completely ignores the need for revision, which is one of the most important parts of the process. Part of this stems from the misconception that revising and proofreading are the same thing. *Revising and proofreading are two very different things.* Where proofreading is about correcting technical mistakes, revising is about taking a second look at the paper and making sure it is easy to understand, that all the information is where it needs to be, and that there is nothing on the paper that doesn't need to be. There's an easy-to-remember method for revising your paper. For each detail and point you make, run it through the FACT process: Fit, Add, Cut, Test.

- **Fit.** Does this information fit into your paper? Is it relevant to the main point? Is it relevant to the point you're making in that paragraph, or should you move it to elsewhere in the paper?
- **Add.** Are all of your points well explained, or are you missing key details? Do you need to include more supporting details? Does your paper meet the length requirements?
- **Cut.** Is all of that information necessary? Even if it's true, is it useful? Does it fit where it needs to fit, or is there no place for it? Is it within the scope of your paper?
- **Test.** Is your essay well organized? Do the points flow smoothly? Are the transitions clear?

During the revision process, don't worry too much about grammar and mechanics (of course, you can correct obvious errors as you see them). The focus of revision is making the paper smooth, organized, and as easy to read as possible. You'll do the final polishing later. Revision is all about the organizational and stylistic improvement.

- Add details to clarify vague points.
- Cut things that make the paper too wordy or confusing.
- Move things so that they're in sensible places.
- Look for ways to improve the wording and flow of sentences and paragraphs.

## Proofreading: The Final Steps

Once your paper has been written and revised, it's time to put the finishing touches on the paper. This is the time for you to make sure everything is nice and neat. There are several important things you should check during this process.

- Grammar and mechanics
  - Is your paper free of fragments and run-on sentences?
  - Does your writing avoid punctuation errors?
    - Remember, punctuation errors can either be caused by *missing* punctuation or by *unnecessary* punctuation.
  - Do all of your subjects, verbs, and pronouns agree as they should?
- Spelling
  - Have you run your paper through a spell checker?
  - Have you checked your paper for contextual spelling errors ("there" vs. "their," etc.)?
- Source acknowledgements
  - Have you included all the necessary inline citations?
  - Does your bibliography (Works Cited) include all appropriate information?
- Assignment guidelines
  - Does your paper meet all of the format requirements?
  - Do you have an appropriate header?
  - Is your text in the correct font?
  - Does your paper meet the length requirements?
  - Have you used student resources to review your paper (Writing Center, Smart Thinking, etc.)?

Once you've made all of the appropriate corrections, your essay is complete and ready to be turned in. The whole process you have to go through makes the paper polished and refined, but this process takes a considerable amount of time in order to be done correctly, so it's very important for you to begin working on the essay as soon as you get the assignment. The important thing is not to waste time – when you try to rush through the essay at the last minute, your revising and proofreading will suffer, which can lead to small mistakes that build up and cost you grade points. If you plan to visit the Writing Center or get tutoring for your assignment, remember that you need to allow yourself plenty of time to make corrections, and there may be more corrections to make than you anticipate – so going to the Writing Center the same day the assignment is

due may leave you with many corrections to make but no time to make them. Time management is easily one of the most important skills necessary in the writing process.

## Additional Writing Center Resources

- Argumentative Essay
- Narrative Essay
- Using Sources

## Further Reading

- The Writing Process by Purdue University Online Writing Lab  
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/1>
- 4 Things to Do Before You Start Writing an Essay (Oxford Dictionaries Blog)  
<http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2015/05/4-things-before-writing-essays>