

THE WRITING PROCESS

BASICS: KEY STEPS AND HOW IT WORKS

SUNY POTSDAM COLLEGE WRITERS' BLOCK

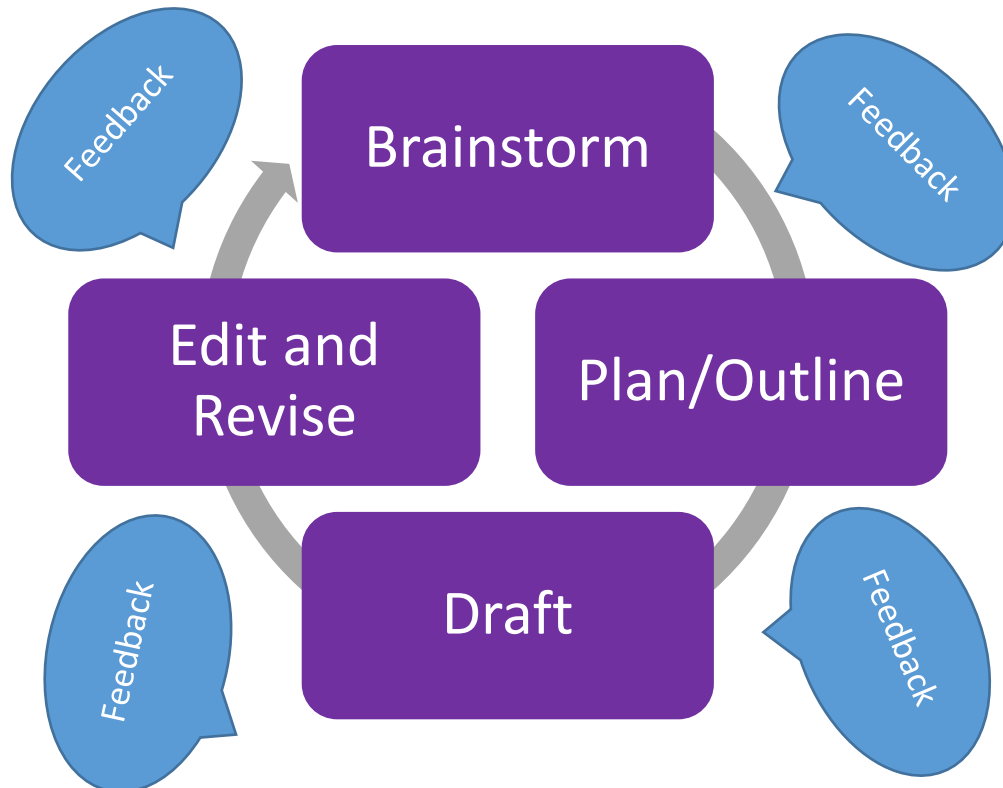
Understanding the Writing Process

Just like there's an approach to learning, there's an approach to writing. The process of translating our thoughts and ideas into papers can be difficult. It's easy to forget that it is a process, and not just something that happens.

Every paper starts as an idea in someone's head, turns into a collection of sentences, and goes through revisions to become the final products we hand in or publish. It's much more than writing something down, changing a few words, and handing it in.

Take learning to drive a car. If you just hop in the driver's seat and start driving, it can be dangerous. All the information you don't know and skills you don't have make it hard to do it successfully. If we want to drive, we have to learn traffic laws and take a permit test. We have to practice for hours and take a five-hour course. It's a process, and every step is important.

Writing is the same way.



The purple boxes are the main steps. The blue speech bubbles are feedback. We'll go over feedback in a minute. First, here's a breakdown of the writing process.

1. Brainstorm

- Think about the assignment. What is it asking you to do? What materials will you need to do that? What ideas are you considering writing about?
- Make lists or mindmaps showing all of your ideas, how they fit together, examples – whatever you've got so far.
 - o **Read**
 - o This one is simple, but easily forgotten. Read required materials and take notes that will help with the assignment. You need to know the content before you can write about it.

2. Plan/Outline

- Once you have an understanding of the assignment, and an idea of what you want to do, make a plan for getting the paper done. Will you work on it a little bit every day? One night a week, for a longer period of time?
- Write a thesis. Make an outline of your main points, and write down all the supporting evidence you have. If you can't think of supporting evidence, you probably need to rethink your main points.
 - o As you draft and revise, you will probably improve your thesis, your points, and your evidence so they make a stronger paper. Start out with the ideas you have to fulfill assignment.
- Your outline can be a simple list of points with subpoints – doesn't have to be fancy.

3. Draft

- Write your paper. Don't worry about grammar or spelling. Don't worry about paragraphs flowing perfectly. Just get your ideas down in sentences, until you have a complete draft. The ideas are the most important part of your paper.
- This is where students need to spend more time: LET YOUR IDEAS go onto the paper, knowing you're going to keep working on expressing them more clearly. Don't hold back, thinking all the ideas have to be finished and clear before you write them down. **Writing is a space for thinking things out, and drafting is key to that.**
- Take time to explain and back up each of your main points or ideas. Writing clear explanations now will help your ideas flow even better later. Get the content down.

4. Revise

- Revising means making changes to bigger ideas in the paper. It can be changing the order of your paragraphs or writing stronger transition sentences. It can be adding completely new points, and new paragraphs.
- Make sure your ideas reflect what you meant them to. Revise your content to make sure it addresses the assignment, and expresses what you want it to.

5. Edit

- Editing means making changes to sentences and individual words. It can be looking for errors in spelling or grammar, or making sure your sentences connect to each other.
- Now is the time to think of overall flow. Your ideas are written, you've written all the support for your ideas... now everything needs to be expressed clearly.
- Your teacher needs to be able to understand what you've written to evaluate it. Make sure you have clear word choice and structure, so your teacher can focus on your ideas and not your spelling.

And finally...

FEEDBACK

This is one of the most useful parts of the writing process, because it can occur at any point. Feedback is when another person gives you their opinion of something you've done. That can be your thesis, your outline, your rough draft, your final draft... Get the idea? At any point in the writing process, feedback can help, because it's thoughtful, helpful advice about how to make YOUR writing stronger.

Talk through your ideas with a teacher, tutor, or friend; convince them you have a strong point and good examples; find the weak spots that need more work; have them read a clear draft or a revised version that is almost done. These are your "practice readers" who can give you feedback to find ways to improve.

Your teacher is one of the best sources of feedback, because they can help you move from a draft to a successful, finished assignment. They know exactly what the assignment asks for, and they know your writing. If you aren't sure that your writing is clear, ask your teacher for feedback on a draft.

Feedback is essential in professional writing, so get practice now.

This is an overview of the steps of the writing process. As you grow as a writer, you'll go deeper into each stage of the process. Here, we're just trying to map it out for you.

Now that you have a better understanding of the steps, let's talk about what the writing process means for you.

Why it Matters

Okay, you might be thinking. There are steps involved with writing. Why are they important?

These steps don't just apply to writing papers for school. You might be asked to make an outline at your job, highlighting the main points of the new business plan. You might be responsible for drafting the annual letter the company sends to its investors. Whatever you're writing, you'll be expected to think it over, make a plan, and spend time drafting, revising and editing to some extent before you share it with others.

So you never know when you'll need these skills. You might use them for the rest of your life.

Learn them now to help you later.

More Than "Red Ink"

A lot of the time, when people think about writing, they think of a red pen. It almost hangs over you as you write, because you imagine the red ink pointing out any mistakes you make.

Don't let the red ink intimidate you. A lot of teachers don't even use red pen anymore, because it has such a bad reputation. It makes it seem like your writing is wrong, or bad. In reality, your writing may just need a little more editing.

Try a few of these editing tips before submitting your papers:

Put the paper away, and read it a day later.

A lot of the little errors we make go unnoticed, because our brains autocorrect them. We know what we want to say, so our brains fill it in the right way, instead of how it's actually written. Taking a break from the paper lets you look at it with fresh eyes – the way a teacher will see it – and actually catch some of those errors.

Read it out loud.

You may notice that, at the Writers' Block, we like to read papers out loud. Hearing your paper is a different experience than reading it. We catch run-on sentences and the flow between paragraphs better when we can hear it. Try reading it to yourself. Then ask someone to read it to you. It makes a difference.

Read it backwards.

It sounds crazy, but if you're worried about catching typos and grammatical errors, read your paper backwards. Start with the last sentence, then the one before that, until you reach the top of your paper. It's a good way to make sure each sentence is one complete thought. You won't get caught up in the flow of ideas, so you can focus on correctness one sentence at a time.

Make Your Mark

For a lot of assignments, you'll have a list of options to choose from. Teachers will give you a choice because they want you to be motivated to write about something. They expect you to apply what you learn in class in your writing. They want you to show your understanding, and use it. Following the writing process helps you meet their expectation. It gives you time to express new ideas, and shape others.

Your examples have to be strong in college writing. Choosing examples, and actually writing the assignment, takes time. Make sure everything fits together in an accurate way.

And proofread!

If you just spit it out, it might be clear, but it probably won't fulfill all the requirements. The requirements are there to make you think in a new way. Let the writing process help you do that.

It's not just a process because the teacher says so: it really makes your thinking (and writing) stronger.

It also makes it easier for you to write. So if the writing process makes the experience easier for you, and makes your thinking and writing skills better at the same time... why not use it?

Watch this video on the writing process for a final review.

