

The Writing Process

Polished writing is not achieved in one sitting. Even professional writers must work through the writing process to create seemingly effortless prose. The writing process includes **prewriting, writing, conferencing, revising, editing, proofreading, and publishing**. While it is tempting to view these as linear steps that lead to a finished piece, it is more accurate to think of them as intersecting roads that you can turn onto as you need them. You may start with prewriting but then bypass writing to conference with your professor about the ideas you generated. You may start writing, realize you hit a wall, and return to prewriting.

There is no one “Writing Process.” Your process may change depending on the type of paper, the class, the professor, or even your mood.

Prewriting

Prewriting is the mental labor of collecting ideas. The writer’s most dreaded foe is the blank page, and prewriting helps you overcome it by giving you a place to start.

Prewriting Methods

There are many methods you can use to collect ideas. Some of these may be more productive for you than others, so try them out and see which work best. You can use multiple methods to focus your thoughts.

- **Brainstorming and Listing:** Brainstorming and Listing involve creating a list or lists in response to a question or a topic. Put the question or topic at the top of the page and write down any words, phrases, or questions that come to mind.
- **Freewriting:** Freewriting is a timed writing exercise. Give yourself 3-5 minutes and spend the entire time writing anything that you think. Do not worry about spelling or grammar; do not worry if your mind strays from your topic. Write down everything! Only stop when the timer runs out. Not everything you write will be useful, but you can pull out the good ideas and conduct another freewrite to develop them.
- **Clustering/Mapping:** Clustering/Mapping allows you to make and show connections between ideas. Place your topic in the center of the page and draw lines out from there, adding relevant subtopics. Add more lines to write out specific details about the subtopics. The final product should look like a spiderweb of interconnected ideas.
- **Questioning:** Questioning makes use of the journalistic questions used by reporters—Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?—to delve deeper into your chosen topic.
- **Journaling:** Not all your ideas will come to you on a schedule. Sometimes writers get their best ideas as they do laundry or walk across campus. Keeping a writing journal where you can save these ideas will ensure you do not forget them. You could even save these as notes in your phone. A daily journal also gives you a space to record your experiences and issues that concern you. These entries could help you choose a topic for future writing.
- **Research:** Seeing what others have already written on a topic can be helpful. Conducting research allows you to find patterns and gaps in existing writing that you can use as a start for your own ideas.
- **Outlining:** Outlining is a secondary prewriting method. Once you have collected enough ideas, you will need to categorize and group them together to form the paragraphs of your piece. You can use outlining to test your organization before adding in the details.

Writing

Writing involves organizing and fleshing out your ideas with examples and evidence.

Suggestions for Getting Started

- **Start with your ideas first.** Begin by writing out each paragraph using just your thoughts. Then add outside sources to support your claims. Outside sources should supplement your ideas and arguments. They should not be the focus.
- **Start in the middle.** The introduction can be the most difficult part of a paper to write. Instead, work on a body paragraph that you feel confident about, such as a description of an example. You can always come back to the introduction later.
- **Take breaks.** Sitting and writing for hours is not productive for everyone. Sometimes it is better to divide the work into smaller increments—twenty minutes in the morning, an hour before bed, etc. If you feel your mind wandering, stop and do something to refresh yourself.
- **Find your writing environment.** Some write well when they are surrounded by people. Some prefer to listen to music. Still others need complete quiet. Decide what environment works best for you and don't be afraid to experiment with the best location.
- **Manage your resources.** Make sure that wherever you are writing you have all the sources and notes you need to complete your work. Create clearly marked folders on your computer for your drafts and sources. Keep all printed materials together in a tote bag for easy transportation to your writing space.
- **Save your work often and in multiple places.** You never know if there will be a power outage or if your computer will get a virus. Save your drafts on a thumb drive and not just on your computer. You could also email yourself a copy of your draft at the end of each writing session.

Conferencing

Conferencing is the collaborative part of the writing process where you ask for feedback.

Forms of Conferencing

- **Meet with your professor.** Your professor is an expert in their field of study. They can help you work through ideas, find useful sources, and guide your writing. They have chosen this profession because they enjoy doing this work, so do not worry that you are disturbing them.
- **Conduct peer review.** Peer review involves sharing your writing with your classmates. Because they are often writing about similar topics and know the writing assignment, they can help ensure you are on the right track. They also provide an additional set of eyes and may offer suggestions or catch issues that the professor doesn't.
- **Visit the Writing Center.** The Writing Center provides help from trained writing consultants at any stage of the writing process and offers support for both beginning and expert writers.
- **Bounce ideas off a friend.** Using your friends as a sounding board to talk through your ideas can help you figure out what you want to say or bust through writer's block. As long as you write your own paper and come up with your own ideas, there should not be an issue with plagiarism.

Revising

Revising can be the most difficult part of writing because it involves both the destruction of ideas you have already written and the construction of new ones. To revise well, you need to be able to step back from your writing and look at it with a critical eye. Which arguments don't work? Does the organization make sense? Where do you need to add

more detail or an outside source as evidence? Does the piece do what you want it to do? Answering questions like these can point to major changes you need to make in order for your writing to be successful.

Using Your Professor's Feedback to Revise

Your professor will likely provide feedback on an early draft of your writing. If they do not, you can request it or visit them during their office hours.

- **Know how professors comment.** Marginal comments are written in the margins of your draft and usually point to specific sections on the page. End comments tend to summarize the marginal comments and provide an overall critique of the piece. Most professors will not tell you exactly how to “fix” an issue. Instead they will offer alternatives or ask you questions to get you to think through the problems.
- **Do not take it personally.** The number of comments you receive is not a criticism of you as a person. Your professor wants you to grow as a writer and academic in your field. They know that you are still learning, and commenting on drafts allows them to provide you with individual instruction that matches your specific needs. Additionally, some comments may point to sections that you wrote really well.
- **Read comments carefully.** Pay special attention to comments on content and organization. While grammar comments may be more numerous and seem like easy fixes, they will not matter if the overall paper is weak.
- **Ask questions.** If a comment is confusing (or illegible), do not just ignore it. Talk to the professor and get them to clarify. In a one-on-one conversation, they will be able to provide examples and additional help.
- **Make changes.** You are not required to make the exact revisions suggested by your professor. It is your writing, and you may come up with stronger, more interesting solutions on your own. However, they have provided you with a checklist of sections that need to be strengthened, and they will notice if those have not been shored up in the final draft.
- **Look beyond their comments.** Most professors have dozens of students and dozens of papers to read. They will provide you with as much feedback as they can, but you should also review your writing to find other sections to improve.
- **Transfer what you learn.** It takes time and practice to become a better writer. As you learn, you will probably make some of the same errors again. Try to be aware of your problem areas and search for them as you revise future work. Also learn from what you do well and build on those successes.

Editing

Editing occurs when you are satisfied with the overall organization and content of your piece. During editing, narrow your focus to the paragraph and sentence level to test the flow and readability of your writing.

Editing Strategies

- **Read your paper aloud.** When you read silently, it can be easy to gloss over rough patches in your writing. Reading aloud forces you to acknowledge each word and can reveal areas where other readers might stumble or become confused.
- **Let someone else read your paper.** If you still have trouble identifying rough patches, ask a professor, classmate, Writing Center consultant, or friend to read your writing. Because they are not familiar with your writing voice and have not seen the paper before, they will be able to point out where they have difficulties.
- **Check for sentence variety.** Variety is the spice of writing! If all your sentences are short and simple, your writing will feel jerky and aggressive. If all your sentences are three or more lines long, your reader may lose the thread of your idea.
- **Add transition words, phrases, and sentences.** One of the biggest contributors to readability and flow problems is a lack of obvious connections between ideas. Make sure that each sentence clearly connects to the ones preceding and following it.

Proofreading

Proofreading is the final polishing of your piece before you publish and focuses on issues with grammar, punctuation, spelling, and word choice.

Proofreading Strategies

- **Proofread after revising and editing.** Revision and editing can involve removing or adding large sections to your writing, so it is better to proofread last. If you spend twenty minutes polishing a paragraph and then realize it does not fit your paper, you may be tempted to make it fit, weakening your work.
- **Wait.** Avoid proofreading immediately after finishing a paper. If you begin proofreading too soon, you will be too accustomed to how the paper looks and will likely miss some errors. Take a break and come back to it with fresh eyes.
- **Look for one thing at a time.** Another method to avoid missing errors is to break your proofreading up and do multiple read throughs, looking for one issue at a time. You will be able to focus better on finding spelling errors or incorrect punctuation or awkward wording if that is all you are looking for.
- **Start at the end.** To avoid “reading” the paper, start with the last sentence and work your way backwards. This will allow you to focus on the specific language and not the overall idea of a section.

Publishing

Publishing refers to the sharing of your writing for a grade, for payment, or for fun. Despite the seeming finality of this step, though, publishing does not always indicate the end of the writing process. It is possible to continue working on a piece after publication.