

# The Writing Process

In school and professional settings, we often write under pressure of deadlines and expectations. Some writers do their best work by overlapping and circling back across different stages of the writing process — prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Use this guide as an introductory overview of the different stages, and remember that PC Writing Center tutors are trained to help students at any stage of the writing process.

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## Stage 1: Prewriting

### Understand the assignment

Before you start writing, make sure you understand exactly what you are being asked to do. You can do this by identifying key words in the topic, prompt, assignment, or question you're responding to. Words such as *describe*, *analyze*, *argue*, *illustrate*, *discuss*, or *compare and contrast* all indicate that a specific kind of written response is expected.

### Understand the scope and format

What exactly are you being asked to produce? A single paragraph? A short story? An essay? A research paper? All of these kinds of documents call for different quantities of information, so you'll want to start by setting up the right kind of document.

### Understand your purpose as a writer

Once you know exactly what you are being asked to do on the assignment — whether it is to *argue*, *describe*, or some other task — use that knowledge to inform the focus of your writing, how you might organize your remarks, what style you want to use, and so on. You should be able to articulate in a single sentence what it is you are trying to accomplish with the written work.

## **Understand your audience**

All language users understand intuitively that words fit for one audience may not be fit for another audience. Our manner of presentation shifts based on whether we are with friends or with strangers. Writing assignments in college are the same way: the level of complexity and vocabulary should match, more or less, what the intended audience expects. If an audience is not expressly stated in the writing assignment, assume that your audience includes educated readers who are interested in what you have to say about the topic.

## **Start generating thoughts and ideas**

A main idea or thesis for your response might come to you immediately as you consider the question. If so, then you are on your way. Start writing in a way that will help you support the thesis with discussion, evidence, or description. Often, however, a writing prompt will suggest many ideas, all of which are related but none of which seem to add up to a main point. You may discover your thesis by writing about a topic. Consider a few of the following strategies to help you get ideas on paper if you are stuck trying to come up with a thesis.

### *Freewriting*

Write down whatever comes to your mind when you consider your topic. It doesn't matter if what you write is good or not, since getting words on the page will help get your mind warmed up. This is the brainstorming technique.

### *Looping*

Locate a word or phrase from your freewriting and brainstorming, and then start freewriting in response to that word or phrase. Look for moments when your thoughts circle back around to the same ideas, and follow those in more freewriting.

### *Listing*

Make a vertical list of topic-related words or phrases as they come to you. There is no need here to worry about sentences. You can then go back and highlight words that are related to your topic and eliminate those that are not. Lists are often easier to organize later than freewriting that looks like prose.

### *Mapping*

Write a keyword on a page and then draw a circle around it. Then write around the circle any words or ideas that are related or that come to your mind. Each of these ideas may then form the center of its own map. This technique is a good way to start visualizing relationships across ideas that have come up during other freewriting or listing exercises.

Start organizing and grouping your ideas together. You might want to make an outline before drafting your paper, but many writers find that simply grouping related ideas together helps them see how to form paragraphs. If you have a map or web of ideas, they may already be grouped with other like ideas. Once you see related ideas come together, determine what factor they have in common and try to express this common idea in a sentence that will control the content of a full paragraph.

## **Determine the focus of what you are writing**

If your writing calls for only a paragraph response, you may be close to drafting the paragraph after grouping related ideas. If you know that your response will have to be more than one paragraph, you will need to think about what will control paragraphs and topic sentences you create. Controlling statements often evolve into your thesis.

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## **Stage 2: Drafting**

### **Get your thoughts and ideas onto the document**

There is no substitute for getting words on the page. Try not to worry yet about what comes first or last, and avoid getting too hung up on perfecting details in spelling and punctuation. For now, you need to write with an eye on your thesis statement and what central idea will control your paragraphs.

### **Establish your thesis and topic sentences**

Once you know what thesis statement will control your paragraphs and what topic sentences will control the examples you include in those paragraphs, you are ready to begin drafting paragraphs that help to accomplish the purpose of the written work.

### **Compose paragraphs not pages**

If the sentence is the basic unit of the paragraph, the paragraph should be the basic unit of the writing assignment. Make sure each paragraph has a controlling claim (or topic sentence) that determines what the paragraph contributes to the broader assignment. Any sentence or diversion that breaks from the thread of the paragraph can be cut later. As you draft, be deliberate about constructing full, stand-alone paragraphs that later can be arranged into order.

### **Arrange your paragraphs in order**

To organize body paragraphs under your introductory paragraph, a good rule of thumb is to write paragraphs first and then determine which is most convincing. Placing that paragraph last will give your readers an impression that your essay accomplished its purpose. You will likewise want to organize individual examples within a body paragraph from least to most important or convincing unless another organizational scheme seems most appropriate, such as chronological or spatial.

*Keep in mind as you draft...*

- Every paragraph needs to contribute to the purpose of the paper.

- Every sentence needs to contribute to the purpose of the paragraph.
- Develop paragraphs with examples, explanations, and phrases that describe the connection between sentences.

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## **Stage 3: Revising and Editing**

### **Address higher-order concerns first**

As the word "revision" means or "re-visioning" or re-seeing, the revising stage requires a willingness to make significant changes to a draft. You may rewrite or reorganize paragraphs, omit and replace paragraphs, or even change the overall focus or main point of the writing itself. When you are revising your papers, begin with overall questions of focus, development, and organization.

### **Address lower-order concerns last**

Looking at sentence-level matters such as grammar, spelling, and mechanics usually comes later in the writing process. In most cases, revising larger aspects of your paper will change sentences anyway.

### **Complete final editing and proofreading together**

Editing means reading closely with an eye for the sound and structure of sentences, and it requires you to make changes with sentences and words so that they minimize any possible confusion for your readers. Editing also involves checking grammar and mechanics. Practice reading your paper aloud as part of a final proofreading.

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