

The Writing Process

Although often forced by circumstances to write quickly or while under pressure, most writers find that they produce their best work when they take time for the various overlapping and circling back steps of the process: planning, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading. While traditional writing instruction has recommended that writer formulate a thesis, create an outline, write a draft, and revise the draft, formulating a thesis as a first step is difficult. Writers often arrive at a thesis for an essay only after much planning and prewriting.

Planning

Before you begin writing or thinking about the content of your response, return to the topic and be sure you understand what is being asked. Look for key words in the topic, prompt, assignment, or question you're responding to.

describe	cause/effect	argue	illustrate
analyze	compare/contrast	show	discuss

Each of these key words indicates that a slightly different approach might be expected. To analyze, for example, means to discuss but to discuss by incorporating evidence or examples you see by tearing apart a topic, text, or situation. To argue, you must first analyze but then present your analysis in a convincing arrangement.

Consider the scope and format of the assignment. Are you being asked to write a paragraph, an essay, or a researched paper? How long should the paper be? Is a format suggested?

Consider your purpose for writing the response. If the assignment asks you to compare two situations, you are more than likely expected to draw a conclusion based on your comparison. Your purpose might therefore be to compare and conclude something based on your comparison. If you are asked to argue for a particular issue, your purpose is to persuade your readers to agree with or at least consider your point of view. Determining your purpose will help you later revise for focus, organization, style, and tone.

Consider your audience. Knowing your audience can help you determine the writing task's content, form, and style. An instructor might specify that an assignment is geared toward a "professional audience" a "group of your peers" or even a "group of children five to seven years old." Certainly a description of "what college life is like" would be written differently for a group of professionals than for a group of children: the first group is interested in what their children will experience; the second is interested in what they themselves may one day expect. The level of complexity and vocabulary would likewise have to be appropriate for the intended audience. If an audience is not expressly stated, you may assume that your audience is a group of educated readers who are interested in what you have to say about the topic.

Begin generating ideas for your response. The 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. Consider how you will support the thesis with discussion, evidence, or description, and how you will organize such support.

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** is writing while thinking about the topic but not about the writing itself. It's like brainstorming on paper. You allow yourself to write down whatever comes to mind, even if it is only remotely related to your topic. Try freewriting about your topic for ten minutes nonstop. Let the response sit for another ten or fifteen minutes while you take a break, walk around, or grab a soda, and then return and read what you wrote. You may find the grain of an idea that will be useful. Continue freewriting about another aspect or idea related to your topic. Follow the same process until you've arrived at enough related ideas to begin constructing a response.
- **Looping** is advanced freewriting. Return to a response you generated while freewriting. You may see a key word or phrase that is related to your topic but is undeveloped or surrounded by other gibberish that may have resulted from you freewriting. Highlight the term or phrase, write it alone at the top of a blank page, and then begin freewriting about just that word or term. This attempt may generate a word or term that may need exploring. Follow the same process until you see some well-developed ideas emerge.
- **Listing** is a quick and easy way to get ideas down on paper without the hassle of completing sentences or punctuating. Jot down words in a vertical list as they come to you. 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** is like listing, but it works well for people who want to see the relationship among ideas expressed spatially instead of linearly. To map out an idea, write a key word on a page. 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. Assume, for example, that you're asked to write a character analysis of Robin, a character in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "My Kinsman, Major Molineux." You might start with his name, surrounding it with everything you can remember about him having read the story.

Begin organizing or grouping your ideas together. Though you may eventually want to create an outline before drafting your paper or as a means of revising it, 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;

try to express this idea in a topic sentence, a sentence that will control the content of your paragraph.

Determine the focus of your 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 must consider what will control the paragraphs and topic sentences you create. This controlling statement is often called your thesis. It serves to express the purpose of your paper by expressing your attitude toward your topic.

Let's assume that in generating and organizing ideas about the character Robin you decide that "although he is young and inexperienced, his bravery and determination does show him to be, as he calls himself, a "shrewd" young man." This sentence could serve as a thesis because it 1) mentions the topic, Robin, 2) expresses your opinion of him, and 3) creates a character description, which is the kind of response the topic called for.

Organizing: As you organize the body paragraphs under your introductory paragraph, consider what order you will present them in. A good rule of thumb is to write the paragraphs first and then determine which is most convincing. Since the end of an essay is usually what the reader will remember most, placing the most convincing paragraph last will give the impression that your essay has accomplished what it set out to do. 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.

Drafting: 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 your response. After you have written a first draft, take a break before revising. Revising implies a willingness to make significant changes to a draft. The word "revision" means or "re-visioning" or reseeing the paper. The following questions may help you as you prepare to revise a draft:

- Does the writing accomplish its goal or purpose?
- Is the main point or thesis clear?
- Are the vocabulary, tone, and style appropriate for the intended audience?
- Are the paragraphs arranged so that the argument is convincing?
- Are there enough specific examples within paragraphs to convince a reader that the statements made in the topic sentences are valid?
- Does the writing stick to the topic? Are all examples clearly related to the topic?
- Does the writing seem choppy? Are transitions made between sentences and paragraphs?

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, organization, and content first. Looking at sentence-level matters such as grammar and mechanics usually comes later in the writing process, and revision

on the larger aspects of your paper will change sentences anyway. When you have revised the paper, then you will be ready to work on editing and proofreading.

by Jerry Alexander and Jill Frey, Presbyterian College Writing Center

Bring your draft to the Writing Center for another perspective on the paper. Tutors can give you suggestions for revising your draft. Bring your concerns about the paper when you come.

- Reserve a writing conference at <http://presby.mywonline.com>.

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