
The Writing Process

Although there is no single way to write, it helps to keep in mind that writing is a process that involves several stages. To produce your best work, you should try to concentrate on one stage at a time.

Part I – Getting Started

Don't procrastinate.

If you wait to begin a project, it can start to feel overwhelming, and you won't have enough time to do a reasonable job. If you get an early start on your essay, you'll feel more in control of the process and will have time to get help if you encounter any problems.

Sub-divide the task.

Make rough notes one day, write a draft another day, and revise your draft a few days later. If you allow enough time for each stage in the process, writing an essay can be quite a straightforward task. Conversely, it's hard to think clearly and creatively under pressure.

Consider your natural rhythms in planning when to work on various parts of the process. Writing takes a lot of concentration, so try to schedule it accordingly and to minimize distractions.

Consider your purpose.

Keep checking to make sure that you are answering the question directly and that you haven't strayed off topic.

Try to genuinely explore and communicate ideas. If you don't spend time thinking about your topic, you may be able to develop a clear structure for your essay, but you will not have anything worthwhile to say about the topic that most readers haven't already considered.

Consider your audience.

Imagine yourself writing for students in another class who do not have the topic sheet or guidelines, and focus on explaining your ideas clearly and methodically.

Narrow your topic.

Narrow topics always make better essays because they give you an opportunity to tell the reader something he or she might not know.

Divide your topic into sub-topics, and sub-divide further if possible.

Leave a paper trail. The physical act of writing is important, so try to get your ideas down on paper. Try to generate ideas using one of the following strategies:

Freewriting: Set a limit and keep writing no matter what.

Brainstorming: Set a time limit and list all related ideas.

Clustering/Mapping: Begin with your topic in the centre of the page, and list ideas in circles radiating out from the centre.

Asking questions about your topic.

Part Two – Organizing the Material

Group your ideas.

Sort your ideas into general areas, distinguishing between main ideas and examples.

Develop a preliminary thesis statement or topic sentence.

Choose your strongest arguments.

Ensure that your thesis makes an argument about the topic and that your points aren't too similar to be discussed separately.

Consider the best order for your paragraphs.

Create a rough outline.

Jot down your main points for your body paragraphs and list supporting ideas or examples for each one, leaving room for additions to your list.

List the points you'll need to include in your introduction, jot down some ideas for concluding comments, and brainstorm for introductory and concluding strategies.

Write a rough draft.

Set a time limit, and write your first draft in one sitting. If you feel blocked, imagine that you are verbally explaining your ideas to a friend.

To get your ideas on paper, focus more on content than form. Don't revise as you write; instead, make brief notes for yourself in the margins, and if you can't think of a word, leave a blank and fill it in later. To keep yourself on track, keep referring back to your thesis statement or topic sentences.

If you are using computer, save your work often, print out a draft, and work with a hard copy.

Part Three – Revising and Polishing the Draft

Revise for structure and content.

Ideally, allow some time to elapse because this will allow you to be more objective about your writing. Even letting your paper sit overnight can give you some perspective on it.

Before you get started, set up the heading and spacing early to avoid last minute problems, and create a working title to clarify your focus.

Make an outline of what you have written. Use words or phrases to list the main ideas and examples in the margins of the draft or on a separate piece of paper. Then, use this outline to check for paragraph unity, development, and coherence. Check that you haven't included any off-topic ideas, ensure that you've provided enough supporting details, and make sure that there are clear transitions between sentences and paragraphs. Don't expect to retain every sentence in the final draft. Be prepared to cut unrelated ideas and to eliminate any repetition.

Edit for grammar and diction.

Rather than simply editing on the computer, print a copy of your paper.

Reread your essay, checking to ensure that your wording is concise and precise, and eliminating any slang.

Read your work aloud, and be systematic by checking for one grammatical problem at a time.

Use the spell-checker and grammar-checker on your computer to find potential problems.

You may also find it helpful to use your computer's search feature to check for specific problems such as apostrophe errors. In Microsoft Word, the "Find" feature (the binoculars icon in the top right corner) allows you to search for a particular word or punctuation mark. It will stop on each one, allowing you to edit your document.

To narrow your focus to the sentence level, try printing your essay in a larger font, reading your sentences in reverse order from the last to the first, or printing one sentence per line with space in between.

Don't forget to double-check the submission requirements.

Check that you've formatted your essay properly and that you know whether you're supposed to submit a hard copy in class, submit through a website, or do both.