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Writing Processes

You are already a writer with long experience. In school you have taken notes, written book reports and term papers, answered exam questions, perhaps kept a journal. You've recorded minutes in community meetings and composed memos on the job. You've e-mailed friends, made shopping lists, maybe even tried your hand at writing songs or poetry. All this experience is about to pay off.

Unlike parachute jumping, writing in college is something you can go ahead and try without first learning all there is to know. In truth, nothing anyone can tell you will help as much as learning by doing. In this book our purpose is to help you write better, deeper, clearer, and more satisfying papers than you have ever written before. We encourage you to do so by diving into writing—experimenting, practicing, and building confidence as you expand your writing strategies.

WRITING, READING, AND CRITICAL THINKING

In college you will perform challenging tasks that enlarge what you already know about writing. In fact, you can view each writing task as a problem to solve, often through careful reading (see Ch. 2) and objective thinking (see Ch. 3). You will need to read—and write—actively, engaging with the ideas of others. At the same time, you will need to think critically, analyzing and judging those ideas. To help you assess your own achievement, you will use criteria—models, conventions, principles,

standards. As you write and rewrite, you can evaluate what you are doing by asking specific questions:

- Have you considered your audience?
- Have you achieved your purpose?
- Have you made your point clear by stating it as a thesis or by unmistakably implying it?
- Have you supported your point with enough reliable evidence to persuade your readers?
- Have you arranged your ideas logically so that each follows from, supports, or adds to the one before it?
- Have you made the connections among ideas clear to your readers?
- Have you established an appropriate tone?

In large measure, learning to write well is learning what questions to ask as you write. Throughout this book, we include questions and suggestions to help you accomplish your writing tasks and reflect on the processes you use to write, read, and think critically.

A PROCESS OF WRITING

Writing can seem at times an overwhelming drudgery, worse than scrubbing floors; at other moments, it's a sport full of thrills—like whizzing downhill on skis, not knowing what you'll meet around a bend. Surprising and unpredictable as the process may seem, nearly all writers do similar things:

- They generate ideas.
- They plan, draft, and develop their papers.
- They revise and edit.

Although these activities form the basis of most effective writing processes, they aren't lockstep stages: you don't always proceed in a straight line. You can skip around in whatever order you like, work on several parts at a time, or circle back over what's already done. For example, while gathering material, you may feel an urge to play with a sentence until it clicks. Or while writing a draft, you may decide to look for more material. You can leap ahead, cross out, backtrack, adjust, question, test a fresh approach, tinker, polish, and, at the end, spell-check the tricky words.

Generating Ideas

The first activity in writing—finding a topic and something to say about it—is often the most challenging and least predictable. (For strategies for generating ideas, see Ch. 4.)

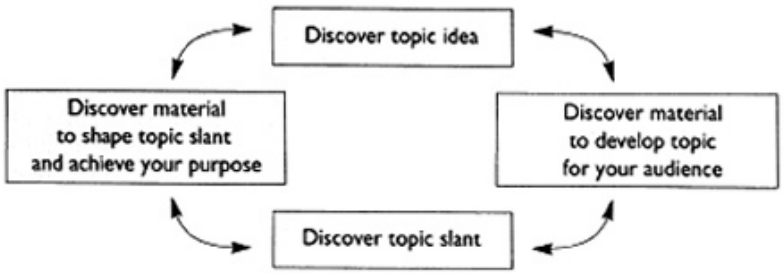
Finding Something to Write About. Selecting a topic is not always easy, but you may discover an idea while talking with friends, riding your bike, or even staring out the window. Sometimes a topic lies near home, in an everyday event you recall. Often your reading raises questions that call for investigation. When a particular writing assignment doesn't appeal to you, your challenge is to find a slant that does interest you. Find it, and words will flow—words that can engage readers as you accomplish your purpose. (See the graphic below.)

Discovering Material. You'll need information to shape and support your ideas—facts and figures, reports and opinions, examples and illustrations. Luckily you have numerous sources of supporting material to make your slant on a topic clear and convincing to your readers. You can recall your own experience and knowledge, you can observe things around you, you can converse with others who are knowledgeable, you can read materials that draw you to new views, and you can think critically about all the sources around you.

Planning, Drafting, and Developing

After finding a topic and beginning to gather material about it, you will plan your paper, write a draft, and then develop your ideas further. (See the graphic on p. 5.)

Planning. Having discovered a burning idea (or at least a smoldering one) to write about, and some supporting material (but maybe not enough yet), you can sort out what matters most. (For planning strategies, see



Ch. 5.) If right away you see one main point, or thesis, for your paper, test various ways of stating it, given your audience and purpose:

MAYBE Parking in the morning before class is annoying.
OR Parking on campus is a big problem.

Next arrange your ideas and material in a sensible order that clarifies your point. For example, you might group and label the ideas you have generated, make an outline, or analyze the main point, breaking it down into its parts:

> Parking on campus is a problem for students because of the long lines, inefficient entrances, and poorly marked spaces.

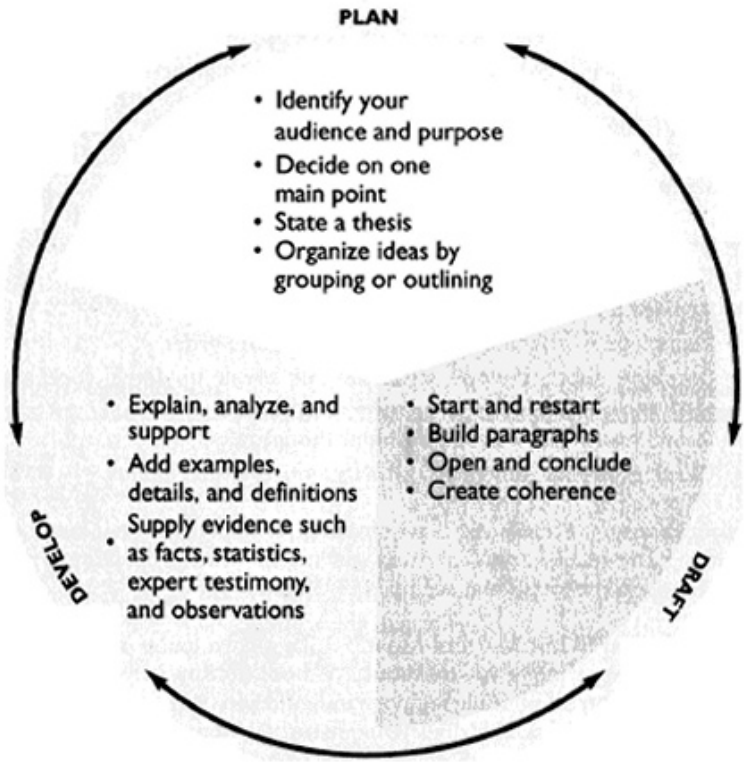
But if no clear thesis emerges quickly, don't worry. You may find one while you draft—that is, while you write an early version of your paper.

Drafting. When your ideas first start to flow, you want to welcome them—lure them forth, not tear them apart, so they don't go back into hiding. (For drafting strategies, see Ch. 6.) Don't be afraid to take risks at this stage: you'll probably be surprised and pleased at what happens, even though your first version will be rough. Writing takes time; a paper usually needs several drafts and may need a clearer introduction, a stronger conclusion, more convincing evidence, or a revised plan. Especially when your subject is unfamiliar or complicated, you may decide to throw out your first attempt and start over as a stronger idea evolves.

Developing. As you draft, you'll weave in explanations, examples, details, definitions, and varied evidence to make your ideas clear and persuasive. For example, you may need to define an at-risk student, illustrate the problems faced by a single parent, or supply statistics about hit-and-run accidents. If you lack specific support for your main point, you can use strategies for developing ideas (see Ch. 7), or return to strategies for generating ideas. You'll keep gaining insights and drawing conclusions while you draft. Welcome these ideas, and work them in if they fit.

Revising and Editing

You might want to relax once you have a draft, but for most writers revising begins the work in earnest. (See the visual on p. 6.) Revising means both reseeing and rewriting, making major changes so that your paper accomplishes what you want it to. After you have a well-developed



and well-organized revision, you are ready to edit: to correct errors and improve wording.

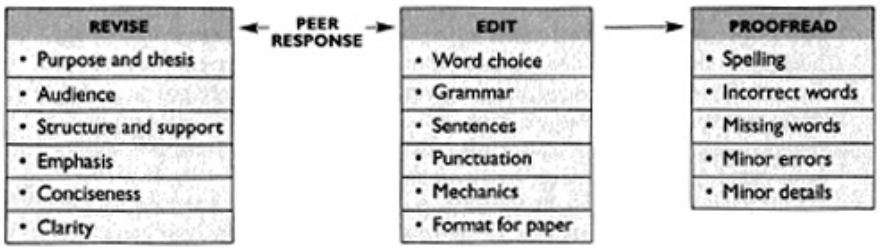
Revising. Revision is more than just changing words. In fact, you may revise what you know and what you think while you're writing or when you pause to reread. You can then rework your thesis, reconsider your audience, shift your plans, decide what to put in or leave out, rearrange for clarity, move sentences or paragraphs around, connect points differently, or express ideas better. Perhaps you'll add costs to a paper on parking problems or switch to fathers instead of mothers as you consider teen parenthood. (For revising strategies, see Ch. 8.)

If you put aside your draft for a few hours or a day, you can reread it with fresh eyes and a clear mind. Other students can also help

you—sometimes more than a textbook or an instructor can—by responding to your drafts as engaged readers.

Editing. Editing means refining details and correcting flaws that stand in the way of your readers' understanding and enjoyment. (For editing strategies, see Ch. 9.) Don't edit too early, though, because you may waste time on some part that you later revise out. In editing, you usually make these repairs:

- Get rid of unnecessary words.
- Choose livelier and more precise words.
- Replace any incorrect or inappropriate wording.
- Rearrange words in a clearer, more emphatic order.
- Combine short, choppy sentences, or break up long, confusing sentences.
- Refine transitions for continuity of thought.
- Check grammar, sentences, punctuation, and mechanics.

Proofreading. Finally you'll proofread your paper, taking a last look, checking correctness, and catching spelling or word-processing errors. (For more on proofreading, see pp. 157–59.)

Remembering What Matters Most. Like a hard game of basketball, writing a college paper is strenuous. Without getting in your way, we want to lend you all possible support and guidance throughout the writing process. So, no doubt, does your instructor, someone closer to you than any textbook writer. Still, even the best instructors and textbook writers—like the best coaches—can improve your game only so much. Advice on how to write won't make you a better writer. You'll learn more and have more fun when you take a few sentences to the hoop and make points yourself. After you sink a few baskets, you'll gain confidence in your ability and find the process of writing easier.