

Writing is a Process

By Anna Angeli

Writing is a process. And we mean more than the painful process of sitting down and blurting out thoughts onto a Word document in the two hours before an essay is due. Really good writing is a long and rewarding process of idea generation, research, multiple drafts, peer review, and revision. All successful writers eventually come to accept that, despite common misconceptions, writing is not a spontaneous burst of creative genius but a series of steps to be learned and carefully repeated.

Before we can begin to discuss effective writing, let's tackle that misconception: anyone who claims to write best under pressure is simply justifying procrastination. Your first draft is never your best draft, just as your first attempt at anything that involves attention to detail, meticulous planning, and solid structure is never your most polished work. The great novels you've read (whether *War and Peace* or *Twilight*) did not spring complete and perfect from their authors' brains onto paper.

Now imagine the following familiar scenario: your instructor has assigned an essay. Let's say it's some variation of the argumentative essay. You have a vague notion of what you're supposed to do: pick a topic, argue something about it, and back up your argument with evidence. You turn on your computer, open Word, and stare at the blinking cursor. Instead of panicking when faced with that blank page, learn to refine the necessary steps in the process of writing. These steps are discussed in more detail in later chapters, but this introduction will help guide you as you prepare to master the writing process.

Idea Generation

This first crucial step in writing often seems to be the most difficult for students preparing an essay. If your instructor has given you the choice of topic, or if you are writing for an upper-level course in which you are expected to hone in on a theme or a concept, idea generation can be daunting.

One of the most important things to keep in mind is to *start thinking about your paper topic early*. Don't sit down to write the essay on a deadline with no topic in mind -- it will likely cause anxiety and will rob you of the chance to fully perform the later steps in the process.

Next, make sure that you come up with something that is interesting to you. Students sometimes grasp at topics that seem familiar, such as social issues they hear about in the news or concepts they're learning about in their courses. While it may seem like a good idea to pick a topic simply to learn more about it, if you pick a topic that's boring to you, you're much more likely to procrastinate, skimp on research, and ultimately write a weak paper. And if you hate your topic (and your paper), chances are that your instructor will too. On the other hand, if you can't stop reading about your topic, and you find yourself telling anyone who'll listen to you about it, the writing process will be much easier and more rewarding. You'll want to get your thoughts coherent and onto paper, and your instructor is likely to sense your involvement and respond positively.

Let's return to the above scenario. You are staring at a blank document that is destined to be a brilliant 1000-word argumentative essay incorporating at least four sources. You browse your university library's online catalogue, your Facebook feed, your diary, some favorite blogs, and Twitter and come up with the following five possibilities:

- gun control (because it's all over the news)
- Skunk Ape (what is that thing?)
- horror/zombies in film (*The Walking Dead* = amazing)
- abortion (isn't this a topic instructors like?)
- obesity (once again, it keeps popping up on social media)
- standardized testing (ugh)
- Chuck Norris as a cultural phenomenon (because everything you do, he does better)

Even making such a jumbled list is better than grasping at the first thing you think of. Often, your instructor will define parameters that will help guide your choice. If not, simply spend some time in front of your computer, browsing the library's shelves for titles, or bouncing ideas off of friends. [Research as Discovery](#) will help you develop specific methods for using research as brainstorming for your paper.

The most important things to keep in mind during this part of the process are to *start early* and to *care about your topic*.

Research

Once you've decided that you absolutely have to find out more about the Skunk Ape, or whatever you choose as your topic, it's time to start researching. As you start viewing writing as a process, you'll see this step as one of the most enjoyable in the process of writing a paper. You'll also realize that it's one of the longest. As you delve into your topic, you may discover new and interesting aspects that help you narrow your argument and scope. This is also the stage that will help you eliminate topics that are too narrow, too broad, or simply not practical.

Skunk Ape, for example, might prove to be tricky. Upon a quick perusal of some databases, *Google Scholar*, and the library catalogue, you see that there is not much out there. What you do find is that he's the Floridian relative of Bigfoot and Sasquatch, or alternately a common black bear with facial fungus and a BO problem, which is fascinating but not a great topic.

When you run into a snag like this, you can always try to reshape the topic into something more manageable. You might ask questions about Skunk Ape: Why is this bear stinky? What's wrong with his face? And what's going on in the Everglades that leads to ill bears in the first place? This line of thinking might lead you to other topics to explore, such as the ecological implications of airboat traffic, agricultural run-off, or even invasive species for the Everglades.

Some common pitfalls that panicking students fall into and that you should learn to avoid are:

- only using *Google* and not the library databases
- reading a source only long enough to find a good quotation that supports your own argument

- stopping your research after the first four sources, even if they aren't that useful

The library is your greatest resource, and your university spends countless dollars keeping literally millions of sources at your fingertips. Take advantage of it! In [Finding and Evaluating Sources](#), you'll also learn the importance of reading sources in their entirety and exploring many options before settling on a few to incorporate into your writing.

Lastly, the most important thing is to enjoy your research. If you find yourself unable to concentrate on reading or to retain anything you read, return to [Idea Generation](#) and pick a topic you care about.

Drafting

Now that you have found a topic and have read a lot of material about it, you have ideas floating around in your head. It's time to get them down on paper. Instead of diving right into your introduction, however, it's a better use of time to first write an organizing draft to get your ideas into a structure you can use. An outline is a great way of getting organized, but if that's daunting, you can start with a simple list of major subtopics or themes you've learned about. You'll also have to develop an argument, or thesis statement.

For example, your research on the Skunk Ape, and then subsequently on the ecological issues associated with the Everglades, might have led you to believe that the invasive species running amok in the region pose a threat to the ecological health of the Everglades. To make this argument, you'll have to bring in evidence by giving examples and citing your expert sources.

Arranging these is a question of balancing what is most logical to you and how a reader can best navigate your argument. Here is an example of one possible outline for this topic:

I. Introduction to historical context of the problem

A. Everglades

B. Who is supposed to live in the Everglades?

C. **Thesis:** Invasive species such as the feral hog and the Burmese python are destroying the Everglades by upsetting the delicate ecosystem; the python preys on native species of animals and the hog outcompetes deer and destroys native plant species.

II. Python

A. Eats everything, difficult to eradicate

B. Population explosion could lead to extinction of native species

III. Hog

A. Outcompetes deer

B. Rooting destroys necessary plant life

IV. Conclusion

- A. Why should it matter who lives in the Everglades?
- B. Some ideas to solve the problem

Your outline can be as detailed or as sparse as you prefer, but often, a detailed outline can make drafting the essay much easier.

Drafting the essay simply means writing as many drafts as you feel is necessary to achieve a polished and effective final product. Although you should always write to the best of your ability, expect your first draft to be fairly rough, especially if you've never written about your topic before and the material is new to you. All writers write multiple drafts as they work out the kinks and expand the aspects that are underdeveloped in their works.

Peer Review and Revision

In addition to learning how to generate ideas, do research, organize ideas, and create drafts, you should also master the skill of giving and receiving effective feedback through peer review. Instead of regarding peer review as a hurdle you'll have to clear in your writing course, consider it as an opportunity to develop and practice a lifelong skill that will greatly benefit you later.

Giving and getting feedback is a necessary step in any writing you'll do in college and beyond, especially when the stakes are high. You'll want to create the most perfect draft possible when you hand in a major research paper, apply for a grant or scholarship, or create documents for a promotion at your workplace. Asking peers to read and review your writing will help you do this.

Your peers might point out to you, for example, that your paper on the Everglades is missing key information about how invasive creatures were introduced into the region, and by whom. They might point out minor details -- you forgot a title! this is a comma splice! typo! -- but they may also pose questions that reveal some major structural flaw or lapse in logical progression of thought.

Peer review and revision go hand in hand. As you learn to work with your peers in the classroom, you'll learn when to accept or reject their advice regarding your writing. Ideally, you'll receive polite but critical feedback that will point out the strengths *and* the weaknesses of your argument, giving you the chance to revisit, rethink, and *revise* your draft several times before submitting a final draft. Your instructor's feedback will also be valuable to you in showing you which areas to rework and improve. [Making the Most of Peer Feedback](#) and [Making the Most of Instructor Feedback](#) will help you interpret and make the most of both your peers' feedback and your instructors' for effective revision.

While the writing process involves all of the above stages, from *Idea Generation* to *Peer Review*, the stages may not always be as clearly defined as the examples given here. Although there is a specific time you feel you are generating ideas, you're actually always brainstorming as you write. Similarly, your research may start well before you even get an assignment and may continue long past the due date. Each stage of the writing process is interconnected with the others, making for a fluid progression towards the final product: a polished final draft. And although good writers generally use all of the stages mentioned above, no two writers use them in exactly the same way. As you develop as a writer, you'll learn how to adapt these stages to produce your best work.

Writing is rarely a single burst of exertion, nor is it an individual effort. Effective writing incorporates all of the above steps in a process that spans weeks and results in a polished result that reflects the hard work of both the author and her reviewers. As you learn to master each of these steps, remember that if you weren't a conscientious follower of these steps, you might have handed in that last-minute paper about Skunkape the hairless bear, or even worse, a limp argument about how Chuck Norris doesn't fall off a horse, a horse falls off Chuck Norris.