

Unit 3: Writing Techniques

Lesson 4 The Writing Process

In this lesson we'll look at the writing process and the steps to take when creating a written document.

Writers in films or on television often seem to create their masterpieces instantly. But every piece of writing, from *The Declaration of Independence* to an email, is the result of a process. With simple pieces of writing, like emails, short letters, or memos, the process happens mostly inside your head. The longer or more complex the writing, the more it helps to go through the process in separate steps. *The Declaration of Independence*, for example, went through several drafts that sparked many debates about what words to include and what words to omit in the final form. The steps of the writing process can be broken down into three categories: prewriting, writing, and revising.

Prewriting is the process of discovering your ideas before you start writing. Different prewriting strategies help you figure out what's in your mind. They also help you come up with ways to express it in writing. Even a conversation can be the beginning of prewriting, especially if it helps you think about a topic more deeply or clarify your ideas. In this tutorial we'll look at several kinds of written prewriting that are useful in essay writing. The two main groups of strategies are brainstorming and outlining.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is the first step of prewriting. In brainstorming, the goal is to get as many related ideas as you can onto a piece of paper so you can really see what you're thinking. Let's look at a few different kinds of brainstorming. You can try them all and see which one works best for you or do a combination of several to get even more ideas on paper. One brainstorming exercise is called branching. In branching, your ideas relate to each other like the branches of a tree. To start branching, write a central topic in the middle of a page. It may be an assigned topic or just something you'd like to think about more. Then, think of everything you associate with that topic. Start drawing lines out from the center and writing your ideas on these lines. The central topic is the trunk of the tree, and your associated ideas are the branches. You can draw smaller and smaller lines from the branches for other related ideas. In branching, like many prewriting methods, it's often useful to set a certain time limit for yourself, maybe 10 or 20 minutes, and see what ideas you can generate in that time. If you haven't yet figured out what the central idea of your paper will be, you may want to try bubble-brainstorming rather than branching. With bubble-brainstorming, you can start with any idea you think might be interesting. Put the idea in a circle, and draw lines out from it to other circles. Then put associated ideas in those circles. Try this for 10 or 20 minutes and see where your ideas go. You may end up somewhere you didn't even know you were interested in! Once you have your brainstorming down on paper, take a look at what you have. Where did you draw lines to the most other ideas? What connections do you see among all your ideas or in one part of the picture you've created? What directions do you want to pursue further? Answering these questions will help you think more clearly about the ideas you want to include in your paper. If your thinking seems to be in words rather than pictures, you can try another way of generating ideas, called free writing. As with brainstorming, you'll want to set a certain time limit for yourself. Choose a question or topic and write down everything that comes into your head. Don't worry about grammar or punctuation, or about whether your ideas are coherent; just keep writing. Once the time is up, take a look at what you've written, and underline what seems important, or what you'd like to think about more.

Outlining

After you've produced some ideas by brainstorming, you'll want to give them more structure. The ideas you found while brainstorming are like archaeological treasures unearthed from your mind. Making an outline will help you build a showcase to display them to your readers. Coming up with a structure before you start writing sentences makes it easier to develop transitions between your points. Outlining also lets you experiment with the organization of your essay before you start writing.

In this tutorial we'll cover two kinds of outlining: tree diagrams and vertical outlines. As you create outlines, keep in mind that it's important to keep them from becoming rigid. Allow yourself flexibility so your writing can develop. A tree diagram is a more regulated version of branching. The branches of a tree diagram are arranged to be read from left to right, and from top down. Spaces in the tree diagram leave room for you to expand as you write and visualize more branches. To create a vertical outline, write your thesis at the top of the paper. Then, use headings and subheadings to organize your points, evidence, and illustrations. Creating a vertical outline is a good way to check if the sequence of your points works and to see if there are any gaps where you need more information. Here's an example of a vertical outline. It's the one I used to write this tutorial. Look at it, and then press continue when you're ready to go on. As you see, a vertical outline is really the skeleton of a paper. The structure needs only to be fleshed out with your sentences to become a full essay.

A sample outline of a thesis is given below.

I. Introduction

- A. Writing is always a process.
- B. Introduce three main steps

II. Prewriting

- A. Brainstorming
 - 1. Branching
 - 2. Bubble-brainstorming
 - 3. Free writing
- B. Outlining
 - 1. Tree diagrams
 - 2. Vertical outlines

III. Writing

- A. Turning prewriting into paragraphs
- B. Writing is recursive

IV. Revising

- A. Getting feedback
- B. Difference between global and local revision
 - 1. Global revision
 - a. Use draft as a springboard for new ideas
 - b. Evaluate and revise focus and direction
 - 2. Local revision
 - a. Editing strategies

V. Summary

Okay, so now you've got a lot of material to work with, and it's time to put some paragraphs out there. An outline is like a road map for your essay. Grouping your ideas together in the brainstorming and outlining exercises should help you see connections that will make your paragraphs cohesive. Often, your topic sentences will come from the branches of a tree diagram or the main headings of a vertical outline. Evidence and illustrations of your points will be the twigs of the tree or the subheadings of a vertical diagram. The order of the points in your outline will indicate the order of the

paragraphs in your paper. But wait, it's not that easy, you say? You've got gaps in your logic. Or you're sure you've got a great point but can't think of how in the world to show it to your reader. And in spite of all this stuff you've got in front of you, you're still stuck on how to get from point B to point C. Enter, the "recursive" nature of the writing process. What's that, you ask? Well, in general the writing process moves from prewriting to writing to revising. At any point an earlier step can "recur," or come up again. So, if you're stuck for evidence in the third paragraph of the essay, go back to branching, using your topic sentence as the trunk of the tree, and see what you can find. Or, if midway through your paper your outline doesn't seem to let you make transitions easily, throw it out and make a new one. Use what you've already got written as the basis for the new, improved structure. Working with your writing recursively will allow you to discover new things about your ideas. Also, constantly re—evaluating your ideas will strengthen your essays.

Revising is literally "re—seeing" your writing from another perspective. You can get a new perspective on your writing by asking your teacher or peers for feedback. You can also often get a new perspective just by putting an essay aside for a couple of days and then coming back to it for a fresh look. To get the best feedback from readers of your essay, it's often useful to give them some questions to think about as they read. For example, if you're especially concerned about the focus or organization of your paper, ask your readers to comment on it specifically. If you're not sure that your thesis is clear, ask them to try to find it. Specific feedback can often be more critical than general blanket statements, but you'll find honest evaluations much more helpful as you rewrite your essay. The better the feedback, the more you can really rethink all aspects of your essay. If you're revising by yourself, think about the questions you had about your paper before you reread. As you reread, listen for any new ideas that come up in your mind and jot them down. You may be able to incorporate them later into the paper. Revision falls into two categories, global and local. Global revision is concerned with the large—scale features of your essay; local revision deals with the sentence—level features of your writing. Global revision is the first step in the revising process; local revision is the second. You wouldn't want to spend hours honing the sentences in paragraphs you may completely drop!

Going Global

Global revisions target the "big—picture" issues in your essay. They include thesis, organization, paragraph development, and focus. When you're revising globally, it's good to think of your first draft as a springboard to a new paper. It's often useful to highlight what you'd like to include from the essay, create a new outline, and start with a new document. You may do some additional prewriting to develop new ideas that "re—seeing" your paper allowed you to discover. Part of global revision is reading each paragraph and then rereading your thesis statement. Is the paragraph covered by the "umbrella" of the thesis? If not, do you need to eliminate or change the paragraph, or change the thesis? (or both?) Each time you change the thesis repeat this process of thesis checking with all the paragraphs. Another part of global revision is double—checking your transitions between paragraphs. Are all transitions present? Do they make sense, or do you need to change the order of your paragraphs to make the sequence of your points clear? You'll also want to check your evidence or illustrations of your points in each paragraph. Are some of your paragraphs too long or complicated? If so, they may have multiple agendas. You may need to separate them into two paragraphs. Are some only a sentence or two? You may need to brainstorm to find more evidence, or eliminate the paragraphs completely. Global revision may seem daunting because it can so thoroughly change a paper. You may eliminate many paragraphs that you spent quite a bit of time on. To avoid getting discouraged, think about those paragraphs as prewriting for a future essay. They may be great material for some future paper, just not this one!

Local Revisions

Local revisions tackle grammar, punctuation, consistency of tone, diction, and proofreading. The key to effective local revision is being able to slow down and re—read each sentence carefully. Look for vague words and phrases, fragments, words that don't seem to belong, or typing errors. If you use a comma, be sure that you need it there. If you use a semicolon or colon, look up their appropriate uses. Could your sentence be used as an example of how to use a semicolon or colon? If not, you may need to rework the sentence. One way of slowing down your reading so that you can pay attention to sentences is to read your paper out loud. You can read it to someone else or to yourself. As you read, are there any passages you trip over? If so, these may be awkward, and you may need to rework them for clarity and smoothness. Are there sentences where you're not sure where to put the emphasis? These may be long sentences in need of subordination or some other kind of clarification. Reading out loud can also help you determine if your tone is appropriate to the piece of writing. Another way of slowing down is to read your paper sentence by sentence backwards. In other words, start with the last sentence, read it, and edit it. Then move to the next to last sentence, and so on. This strategy is especially useful if you have a habit of writing sentence fragments. Fragments can be hard to spot when they seem to blend into the sentences around them. Isolating them by reading the paper backwards often makes them jump out. Local revision, or editing, is key to making a polished final piece of writing.

In this lesson, we covered the three main steps of the writing process: prewriting, writing, and revising. Let's review them briefly.

Prewriting

Prewriting is the process of discovering your ideas. Brainstorming generates ideas. Three different kinds of brainstorming are branching, bubble—brainstorming, and free writing. Prewriting is most effective if you set a certain time limit for yourself and see what you can produce. Outlining organizes your ideas. Outlines are the skeletons of essays. They need to stay flexible as you write so your ideas can develop. Two kinds of outlines are tree diagrams and vertical outlines.

Writing

Writing is a recursive process. Although it moves from prewriting to writing to revising, any earlier step can be revisited as you write. As you write, the contents of your paragraphs should come from groupings of ideas in prewriting. An outline is like a road map for your essay. The order of your paragraphs should basically come from the order of your outline.

Revising

Revision means "re—seeing" your writing. Getting specific feedback can help you revise more effectively. Revision can be divided into two kinds: global and local. Global revision tackles the "big picture" of your essay: thesis, focus, organization, and paragraph development. Global revision involves evaluating entire paragraphs of your essay. Being able to revise globally is one of the most important skills for becoming a better writer. Local revision concerns sentence—level issues and editing. These include grammar, punctuation, tone, diction, and proofreading. The key to local revision is slowing down and reading your sentences carefully.

To practice this, try working through the following steps.

1. Brainstorming: Take five minutes and free write about your writing practices. Some people call free writing "nonstop writing"—the idea is that you should just put the pen to paper and write

whatever comes into your head for the next five minutes. Don't worry about sentences, punctuation, or spelling. Think about what you do before you write-how do you collect your thoughts? Do you always sit in the same place to write? Do you write on a computer, or on paper first? What seems to work for you as a writer? What things about your writing practices would you consider changing to make your writing habits more effective?

2. **Outlining:** Take a look at what you've written. What jumps out at you as important? Do you notice any themes or preoccupations? Underline those points that you repeat or that you think are important. Then, think about how you might put those points into a descriptive paragraph of how you write. You'll probably want to include both what works for you as a writer, and what you might do to change your writing practices to make them more effective. Write a brief vertical outline of a four- or five-sentence paragraph about your writing practices. Don't worry if you come up with more details than you originally came up with in prewriting-that growth in your ideas is the point of the writing process.
3. **Writing:** Take the details and phrases in your outline and form them into sentences. Your paragraph should be descriptive-a picture of how you write and how you'd like to change your writing practices to make it easier to write more effectively. If the order of your outline doesn't seem to make sense for your paragraph, change it or add more detail as you go.
4. **Revising:** Reread your descriptive paragraph of yourself as a writer, and think about how you can turn it into a plan of action. For this step, you'll be including some of the same details, but really focusing on the types of things you can do to improve the conditions under which you write. Do some more prewriting to develop these ideas or to briefly sketch out a new outline before you write the sentences.
5. **Editing:** After you're happy with the ideas in your plan, read the sentences one by one. Make sure that each is one is grammatically sound and clear. Keep your eye out for vagueness and awkwardness in your sentences. Read the paragraph out loud to see how it sounds, and backwards if you want. Make sure each sentence is error-free.

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Lesson 4 Assessment(s)

- (early in the week) Complete *3.04 Discussion: How Do You Write?*
- (midweek) Complete *3.04 Discussion: Developing a Thesis and Evidence*
- (end of the week) Complete *3.04 Graded Assignment: Responding in Writing*
- (end of week) Complete *3.04 Quiz: The Writing Process*