

Chapter 3: Drafting



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“Close the door. Write with no one looking over your shoulder. Don’t try to figure out what other people want to hear from you; figure out what you have to say. It’s the one and only thing you have to offer.” —**Barbara Kingsolver**

Overview of Drafting

Drafting is essential to the organization and flow of your paper. Drafting includes prewriting, editing, and reviewing. Once your general ideas are down on paper, writing out specific ideas and quotations can make the final writing process much easier. Each step of drafting brings the process a little closer to the final product. Always write down any ideas you have in the drafting process. It is much easier to cut content from your paper than it is to work on adding content. If you collect all your resources, quotations, facts, ideas, and come up with a thesis during the drafting process, your paper will show

it. The idea is to provide yourself with as much information as possible in order to create a solid and well thought-out piece. Do less worrying and more writing.

Drafting: The Process

“Fiction is based on reality unless you're a fairy-tale artist. You have to get your knowledge of life from somewhere. You have to know the material you're writing about before you alter it.”

—**Hunter S. Thompson**

The Thesis

It is not advisable to begin drafting without a thesis. The thesis statement is a roadmap for your essay, and at the drafting phase, it will help keep you on track. Make sure that you begin with a statement (not a question) that articulates (a) your topic, (b) what you plan to say about that topic, and that at least implies (c) why what you plan to say is significant enough to be worth writing about. What causes students the most trouble is (b) what you plan to say about the topic. What you plan to say must be debatable. You should not plan to say something people already know or can easily find somewhere else. What you plan to say about your topic must be something that a reader could question, but might not after reading the essay that will follow.

The First Draft

Prewriting will help you with drafting. Additionally, try writing in full sentences, try finding the best possible quotations, try mindmapping, or try writing out all of the data you have gathered. Weave these things together, and you may end up with a nice framework for your paper. Don't worry about being complete in your drafting. Disorganization and choppiness are fine here; you can smooth that out in later drafts. Drafts are **not** perfect. Drafts may contain grammatical and spelling errors and may lack detail. Rephrasing and expanding ideas may be a part of later drafts.

The Second Draft

The second draft is about organizing your information logically and effectively. If you created a thorough first draft, this should be easy. Organize the main points that you plan to make, find supporting evidence for each point, and spend a few sentences explaining what conclusions you are able to draw from the information. Don't be afraid to show off. Professors like it when students are able to draw conclusions on their own. Sometimes it weakens your argument to use softeners like “might” “I think” and “maybe,” so keep an eye out for these.

You will want to come up with an overall organizational strategy and stick to it. Parallelism is very attractive in a paper. However, there is also no quick and easy format that works for every topic. You may want to organize things chronologically, with fact and then opinion, or by order of importance.

The Third Draft and More

The third and any subsequent drafts are really about finesse. These are the drafts that will hook your reader and earn you an “A.” Try to write an attention-grabbing introduction as well as a conclusion that leaves the reader thinking about your paper. If you are still struggling with the overall flow of your paper, go back to your first draft and start rewriting. Often your main point will change by the time you get to this draft, and that is fine. However, you may need to go back to your first draft when this happens.

The elusive “show, don’t tell” expression comes into play in this draft. Your audience wants to be entertained, and they want more than just facts. You need to show the professor that you can think for yourself, that you know what you’re talking about, and that you can write in an engaging style. If you are bored reading the paper, chances are the audience will be, too. Add action verbs, remove passive ones, and use examples. Pretty soon you’ll be ready for a final draft.

Be sure to follow a timeline. Make sure that you start early to have enough time to go through many drafts. If you wait until the day before, you will have time for only one draft.

During the Drafting Process

Many writers often narrow—or expand—the topic as they write. Overly broad topics can be difficult to manage and can lead to summarization rather than descriptive explanation. Narrowing your topic will provide you with a more workable idea to focus on. Asking questions about what you want to know regarding your topic and what you want your readers to know will help focus your writing. If you choose to narrow your topic, first try to picture a larger context into which your thesis fits. Make a claim which forecasts the main point(s) of your thesis, then deliver the source which supports the argument. During this stage, scan for grammatically weak areas and unsupported claims. You may always add background information, term definitions, literature review, reasons for your assumptions, and counter-arguments to strengthen your own argument.

“My starting point [in writing] is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice . . . I write because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I wish to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.” —**George Orwell**

Sometimes you will find that it is easier to write the introduction after you have written the body of your paper. Consider waiting to write the introduction until you have a definite sense of what direction you want your paper to take. Many times, if you write an introduction first, it can limit the information or collaboration of ideas for the bulk of the paper. If you do decide to save the introduction for later, go over what you have written and identify the main point, or points, of your paper. Next, craft an introduction with a thesis statement that forecasts what will follow. Be aware that you need to rework some of the body after you write the introduction. No matter what you choose to write first, it is important to stay on track. Emphasize several points that are related to your thesis by adding more information and going deeper into detail. It is important to gather sufficient information to support your thesis. You may be required to provide a reference or in-text citation, or you may find that you do not yet know enough about your topic, and more research is required. Research may be necessary for multiple reasons: to learn more about the topic, to provide examples for your thesis, or to use as support for your thoughts, opinions, and the overall direction of your paper.

Let It Flow

As you draft, do not stop to edit or look up small pieces of information; there will be time for precision later. Luke Sullivan, author of *Hey Whipple, Squeeze This*, suggests that you must “write hot and edit cold.” In other words, write off the top of your head and allow your thoughts to be spontaneous. You never want to leave a good idea out. However, when it comes to polishing the final product, become critical by taking out unnecessary words or ideas that stray from the main message. Do not keep text that distracts or causes misunderstandings. If you have a question, place it in brackets or make a note of it and refer back to it later. First, just get your ideas out without worrying about punctuation or spelling. Similarly, if you notice a big gap which requires more research, skip it

and work on other sections. The important thing is to let your ideas keep coming and make progress on the page. No matter how irrelevant your words may appear, keep writing. If you have to stop, be sure to end in a place where it will be easy to pick up from later. Don't get distracted when your initial drafts aren't "A" quality work. That's the reason they are drafts. The important thing is to get your ideas down on paper. You can spend time evaluating them later on.

“Write 1,000 words a day. That’s only about four pages, but force yourself to do it. Put your finger down your throat and throw up. That’s what writing’s all about.” —**Ray Bradbury**

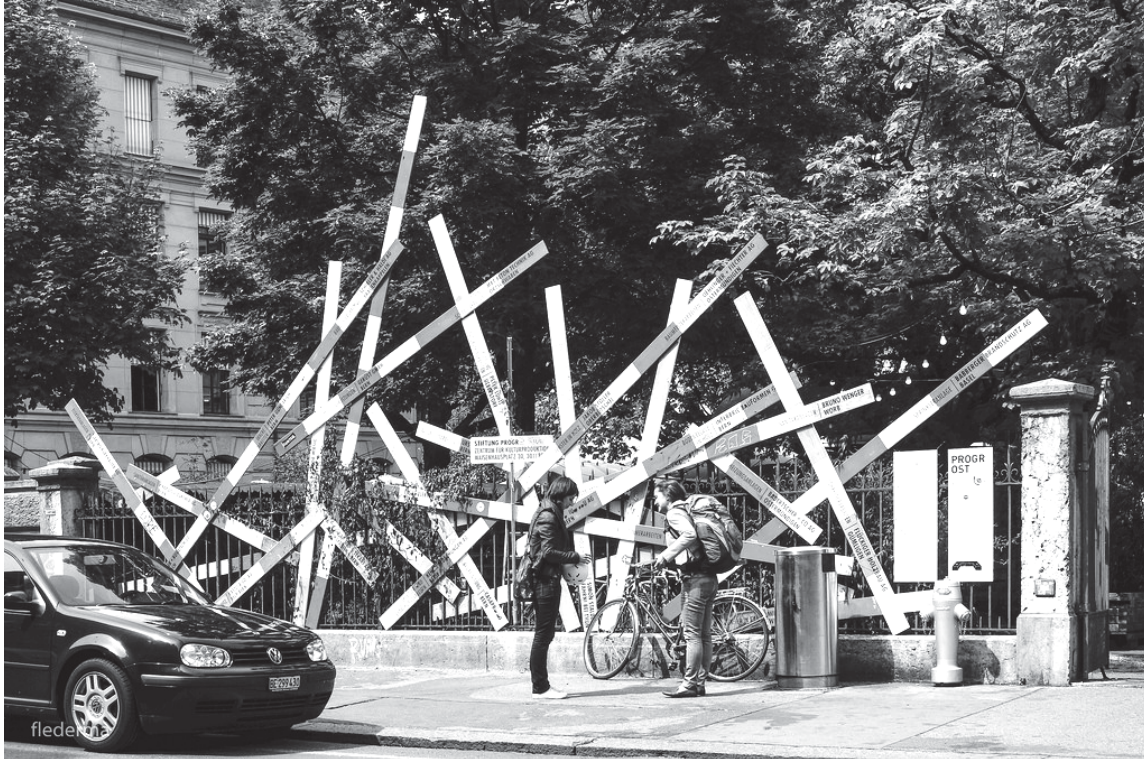


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Dealing with Writer's Block

Writer's block can occur at any point during the writing process. You may find yourself sitting down to write when you suddenly realize that you can't think of a single thing to say. Don't panic! It's a common problem with a variety of solutions.

Here are a few...

- Staring at a blank screen can be intimidating. Try writing out your dilemma in the form of a question: “What is it I’m trying to say?” “What are my goals?” Then brainstorm to answer these questions.
- Take a break. Ten minutes away from your work will usually recharge your creativity.
- Review the literature on your topic to see what other people are saying. Even opposing views can be inspiring.
- Bounce ideas off someone else. Speaking about your writer's block with friends, family, and fellow students may help untangle ideas or generate new ones.
- Read aloud what you've already written to see if the juices start flowing again.

Experiment

How do you start your draft? While the occasional flash of inspiration can lead you to scribble out great work on the back of an envelope with a stubby pencil, paying brief attention not only to “what you write,” but “how you write,” can inspire you to write differently or even more effectively.

If you start drafting from the conclusion, for example, it could be like having a “Guiding Star” for your paper. Or you could leave the introduction and conclusion blank until the end. With that said, you can make up your own approach to create your own way of writing. All the technological tools you have access to make it possible for you to write virtually anytime, anywhere, and however you want. Take advantage of it. Type on your computer, do research on it, record your own voice if the pen is slowing down your thinking. Many people find it helpful to brainstorm; start writing for an extended period of time without stopping and see what you can come up with. Charting can be a good way to come up with ideas and see connections you may not otherwise notice; when you chart, you write down a topic in the center of the paper. Then write other words or ideas that fit in with the topic. Draw lines that connect the related ideas. Experiment with your approach to writing.

Meeting the Minimum Word Count

If you are having trouble meeting the minimum page length, look over your paper again and see if you can find spots that could use additional detail. Also, look at your assignment sheet again to see if you met the assignment’s requirements. It is okay to add more detail to certain sections; for instance, is “a blue car” sufficient, or would “a 2007 Malibu Blue Mazda Miata” work better? But be careful not to make your paper too wordy. Remember that quality is more important than quantity. Just adding needless words to add to the word count keeps you from actually developing your ideas and strengthening the content of the paper.

Titling your Essay

Coming up with a good title for your essay might seem difficult, but there are several techniques that can help. Although some writers start with a good title and write a paper to fit it, others (and probably most) worry about coming up with a good title after they’re finished with the draft. The advantage of waiting until the end to work on the title is that you know exactly what you’ve written.

Many academic writers prefer a two-part title structure separated by a colon. The “catchy” bit goes before the colon, whereas the latter part is a straightforward description of the paper, for example, “Cutting out the Cut and Paste: Why Schools Should Use Plagiarism Detection Software.”

Here are some tips for coming up with good titles:

- Get inspiration from best-selling books or well-known essays, particularly those closely related to your topic (e.g., “Men are from Mars, Women are from Snickers: Candy Bars and the Obesity Epidemic.”)
- Look through your paper and see if you can identify some “key words” or special phrases that might serve as part of a title (i.e., “Edit this Page: How Wikis Enable Collaborative Writing” or “The Blue Screen of Death: How to Respond to Technical Difficulties During a Presentation.”)
- Consider poetic devices, such as repeating consonant sounds (e.g., “The Cost of Caring”).
- Get inspiration from famous quotations or song lyrics (e.g., “I Shaved My Legs for This?: A Feminist Perspective on Country Music.”)

If you can’t come up with a good title right away, walk away from your screen and think about other things for a while. If you just can’t come up with anything clever, just remember that a clear and

precise title is much better than none at all. A title like “The Use of Skull Imagery in Hamlet” may not sound profound, but at least the reader will know what the paper is about.

“When you get an idea, go and write. Don’t waste it in conversation.” —**Kenneth Koch**

Final Thoughts on Drafting

Here’s a quick summary of the key guidelines in drafting:

- Don’t worry about your audience before you draft. Your audience may dictate the style and tone of your writing, but it is more important to get a good start before adding potential complications to the mix.
- You may need to narrow or expand your topic as you develop your paper.
- If you are stumped about how to start the introduction, it might be helpful to simply skip it and come back to it later. The bigger picture might become clearer as you approach completion.
- While drafting, keep all of your research close at hand. This will prevent the need to stop writing to look something up, which could break your concentration.
- Writing in 30-minute stretches, or longer, will establish momentum, making your job as a writer much easier.
- If you come across a small detail that you are unsure about, simply write yourself a note and come back to it later.
- The first draft will not be perfect. Your priority should be getting your thoughts out on paper (or on-screen). Leave the fine-tuning for later.
- If you must stop writing, be sure to end in a place where you have a good idea of what comes next. Make a brief note for yourself so you’ll be able to pick up the thread more easily. You will be able to pick it up again more easily.