

# Part I: The Writing Process

## Processes Used During Writing

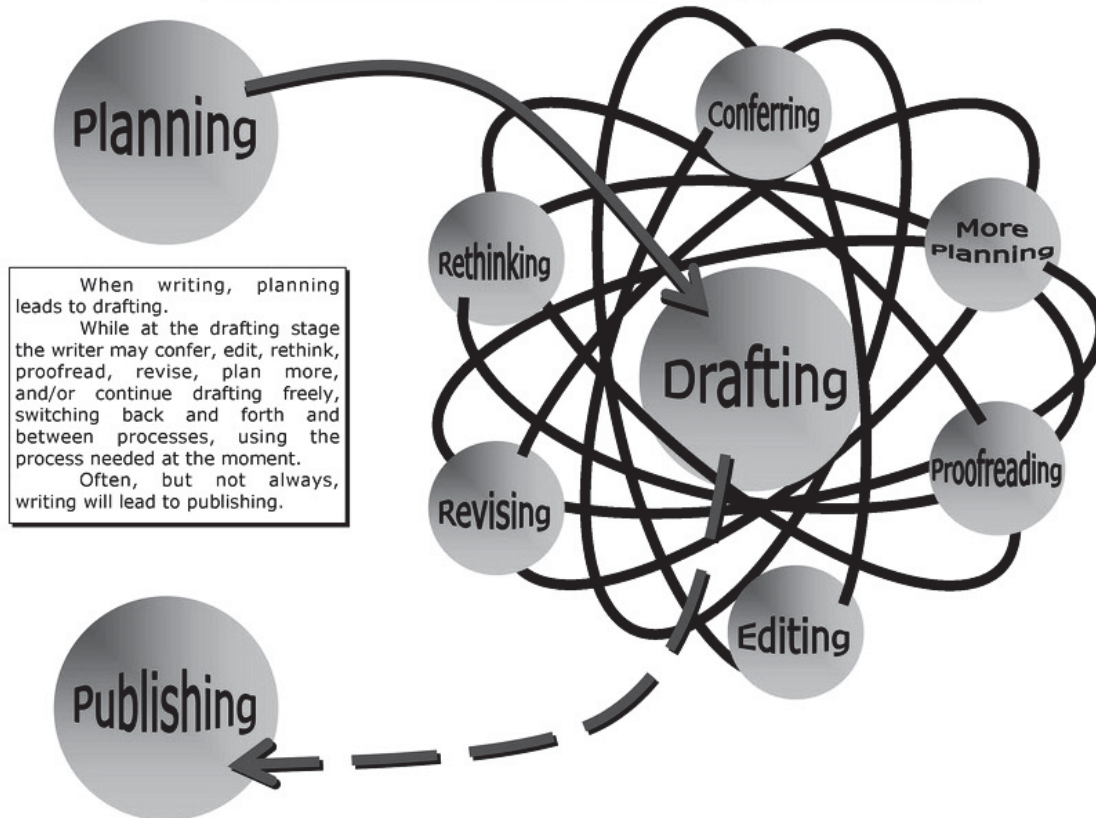


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## Introduction

The writing process is often considered complicated and often seems loosely defined. According to Webster's, writing is "the way you use written words to express your ideas or opinions." Although we may think of it as little more than arranging letters and words on a page, a few moments' reflection reveals that it is much more than that. On the one hand, writing is an art—we don't say Shakespeare's language is "correct" but rather that it is creative, unique, and artful. On the other hand, writing is a science—we want the instructions that came with our Blu-Ray player to be accurate, precise, and easy to understand.

Then there is the matter of what makes writing "good writing." Although we might say that both an instruction manual and a play are "well written," we appreciate them for different reasons. A play written in the clear, unambiguous language of an instruction manual would not be a hit on Broadway. In other words, writing must be judged according to its context—what is its purpose and audience? Finally, even readers with a great deal in common may not agree about the quality of any particular text, just as people's opinions differ about which bands are really great. We really don't know why

people have such preferences and can't make accurate predictions about what they will like or dislike. Simply put, writing isn't simple.

If writing is so complicated and mysterious, can it be taught? Since Aristotle, great teachers have taught complex processes by breaking them into smaller, more understandable processes. Aristotle thought that effective communication skills, like good math skills, can be learned and taught. Math teachers don't teach trigonometry to their elementary students; instead, they begin with addition and subtraction. Everything else builds on those simple processes. No one is born a mathematician. Similarly, while luck certainly plays a role in any successful writer's career, successful writers (or speakers) are not just born into the role—and everyone else is not just fated to flunk English. You can learn to write with substance and style. It takes work, but it is within your power. You have already taken the first step.

Most of what we know about writing is also true of speaking. Aristotle wrote a famous treatise on the subject of effective communication called *The Rhetoric*. This book is meant for speakers; however, teachers and students also have long used it to polish their writing. *The Rhetoric* is still widely read and applied today by people desiring to learn how to speak and write more convincingly to an audience. Your first-year composition course may even have the word “rhetoric” or “rhetorical” as part of its title. Aristotle taught us that rhetoric isn't just about winning arguments. Instead, rhetoric is the ability to choose from all the available means of persuasion at our disposal. Ultimately, it's up to you to determine the best course of action, but rhetoric helps you make this a more educated process.

Compared to speaking, writing is a much more recent phenomenon, and for many centuries it was assumed that the best way to learn to write well was either to pray, entreat the muses, or carefully imitate writings that were already considered great. Eventually, as more people wanted to write, teachers created rules to help them write “correctly.” Often, this heavy emphasis on correctness and writing with a narrow set of rules did little to improve student writing. Simply knowing how to write grammatically correct prose is important, but it is not enough, by itself, to make writing effective or persuasive. Indeed, too much attention to correctness can result in unintentionally rigid or even comical writing.

Since the 1970s, writing instructors have been teaching writing not as the following of fixed rules but rather as a dynamic process: a series of steps that writers follow to produce texts. Before the '70s, these steps were taught as a somewhat rigid sequence. Now, however, writing teachers emphasize “recursivity”—moving forward through some steps and then circling back to redo previous steps—as the more natural way that many successful writers work. In other words, while we still think of writing as a process taking place in a series of steps, we now understand that good writers tend to switch frequently among the different steps as they work. An insight gained while editing one chapter might convince the writer that an additional chapter is needed; as a result, she might start another drafting phase—or even decide to divide one chapter into two or three, and begin reorganizing and developing new drafts. Likewise, failure to satisfy a publisher—whether it is your boss looking at a pamphlet you've written or a book publisher deciding whether to print and sell your book—might lead the author all the way back to the idea-development or organizing stages. In short, while it is very useful to think of writing as a process, the process is not a clear, always-the-same series of steps. Instead, it is a sometimes messy, forward-and-backward process in which you strive for simplicity but try to appeal to your audience, create but also organize, enjoy yourself if possible but also follow some rules, and eventually create a product that works.

If this sounds difficult, it's not—at least, not if you learn a few lessons this book can teach you—and you practice, practice, practice. The more real writing you do, the more of a real writer you will become. If you are reading this book, then your first goal likely is to do well in a college (or upper-

level high school) “composition” or “rhetoric” class. In short, you want to learn how to write a good academic paper. There are a large number of tips and methods this book can show you. They will work best if, like the writing process itself, you go back and forth between reading this book and doing some actual writing: try some of these lessons by writing. And eventually, your goal is to write for your work—for your future profession.

## Five Evaluation Criteria

There are five criteria we can use to evaluate any piece of writing. These criteria are Focus, Development, Organization, Style, and Conventions.

**Focus.** What are you writing about? What claim or thesis are you defending? This criterion is the broadest, concerned with the context, purpose, and coherence of a piece of writing. Is your topic appropriate for an assignment? Do you stay on that topic or drift off on unhelpful tangents? Have you focused too minutely or too widely? For instance, an essay about the American Civil War in general is probably too broad for most college essays. You might be better off writing about a particular battle, general, or incident.

**Development.** Development is concerned with details and evidence. Do you provide enough supporting material to satisfy the expectations of your readers? A proper research paper, for instance, usually includes many references and quotations to many other relevant works of scholarship. A description of a painting would probably include details about its appearance, composition, and maybe even biographical information about the artist who painted it. Deciding what details to include depends on the intended audience of a piece. An article about cancer intended for young children would look quite different than one written for senior citizens.

**Organization.** Organization, often called “arrangement,” concerns the order and layout of a paper. Traditionally, a paper is divided into an introduction, body, and conclusion. Paragraphs are focused on a single main idea or topic (unity), and transitions between sentences and paragraphs are smooth and logical (coherence). A poorly organized paper rambles, drifting among unrelated topics in a haphazard and confusing fashion.

**Style.** Style is traditionally concerned with clarity, elegance, and precision. An effective stylist is not only able to write clearly for an audience, but can also please them with evocative language, metaphors, rhythm, or figures of speech. Effective stylists take pains not just to make a point but to make it well.

**Conventions.** This criterion covers grammar, mechanics, punctuation, formatting, and other issues that are dictated by convention or rules. Although many students struggle with conventions, the knowledge of where to place a comma in a sentence is usually not as important as whether that sentence was worth writing in the first place. Nevertheless, excessive errors can make even a brilliant writer seem careless or ignorant, qualities that will seldom impress one’s readers.

## Stages of the Writing Process

Although we’ve mentioned that writers often work recursively—that is, frequently switching between drafting, editing, proofreading, and so on—it is useful to break the writing process into different functions or activities. To that end, we have divided it into eight smaller processes: Prewriting and Organizing, Researching, Drafting, Editing, Reviewing, Revising, and Publishing.

## Prewriting and Organizing

Writers generally plan their documents in advance. This stage, often called “prewriting,” includes everything from making a tentative outline, brainstorming, or chatting with friends or peers about the topic. For some writers, the prewriting stage is mostly mental—they think about their projects, but do not write until they are ready to start the actual document. Others plan extensively and map out exactly how they want their document to look when it's finished.

This chapter describes common planning and prewriting strategies and should help you “hit the ground running” when starting out your writing projects.

## Researching

Writers frequently require reliable information to support their documents. A writer's personal opinions and experience are sufficient evidence for many types of documents, but audiences will often demand more. Seeking out the information required to support your writing is called “research,” and it comes in many forms.

One form of research is the interview, in which you call up or meet with someone who has information on the topic you are pursuing. Another type, “field research,” involves travel to places where the topic can be studied first-hand. You might also circulate a survey. These three examples are all part of what is called “primary research”—research you conduct yourself.

While many writing teachers assign primary research to their students in the process of writing a “research paper,” much of the research that writing at the college level asks you to do is “secondary research”—exploring other people's writing in the form of books, scholarly journals, newspapers, magazines, websites, and government documents.

This chapter describes different research strategies and provides you with the tools you'll need to properly back up the claims you make in your writing.

## Drafting

Drafting means writing or adding to a piece of writing—composing it. It may seem like a straightforward process but can often be made difficult by writer's block or other anxieties.

## Revising and Editing

Revising is making the changes you or your reviewers determine are necessary during the writing process. Revising is hard work, but it's probably some of the most valuable work you can do to become a better writer. Dive into the task with the willingness to wrestle with your writing and bring out the best in it, and you will learn why revising is often considered the “meat” of the writing process.

You can't edit what hasn't been written. That's why editing comes after drafting. For our purposes, it's important to distinguish between deciding what needs to be improved and actually making the changes. We'll call the decision-making process “editing” and making the changes the “revising” process. Unlike publishers, who hire professional editors to work with their writers, student writers do most of their own editing, with occasional help from peer reviewers.

This chapter examines the revision and editing process and identifies some strategies that will help you improve your documents and reduce the likelihood of creating even bigger problems. This

chapter will also cover proofreading, or carefully scanning a document for typos and other simple errors and provides strategies for improving your text.

## Reviewing

Having other people review your writing is essential to producing the best piece you possibly can. We often don't make the best readers of our own work because we are so close to it. Reviewers, on the other hand, bring valuable perspective we can't get any other way. A reviewer is anyone who is willing to look at your work and provide feedback. You're a reviewer, too—of others' texts.

This chapter explains how to successfully review a document as well as how to make the most of the feedback you receive from other reviewers.

## Publishing

What's the point of writing if no one will ever read it? Though some of us are content to write diaries or notes to ourselves, most writers desire for others to read and hopefully enjoy or benefit from their documents. This is where publishers come in: They help connect writers to readers. The Internet has introduced countless new ways for writers to publish their own documents electronically, but print publishing is still the preferred avenue for most professional writers. Of course, getting your documents accepted for publication can be a long and frustrating ordeal. We've all heard the stories of now-famous novelists who were rejected time and time again by unimaginative or overly-cautious publishers. In lower-level college classes, "publishing" is most likely to be in the form of submission to instructors. At the graduate level, however, many students do seek to publish their theses and dissertations.