More to Writing than Just “Writing”

By John Appeldorn

Many students tend to forget the second word of the phrase “writing process.” The whole act of academic writing is a time-consuming one that involves much more than putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. The following is a brief overview of approaches to the writing process, and, in a way, a demonstration of how there is more to writing than just “writing.”

Pre-Writing & Time Management

Oftentimes, the anticipation of starting a writing project gets the better of us. In this way, pre-writing or the compiling of ideas and research materials might be overlooked as a disposable part of the writing process. Pre-writing allows the writer to put all the chaos of rough ideas and thoughts on scratch paper, rather than on the white 8” by 11” that will be turned in to the professor. Allow considerable time ahead for brainstorming and research so that when it’s time to write, you won’t have to do the process and the product simultaneously.

Drafting: Actually Writing the Paper

Perhaps the most common fear associated with writing is that of the red pen. The last sight any writer wants to see is a paper returned with more red ink than black on the pages. Striving for perfection is a good approach for any goal, but with writing it does not start or stop with drafting. When drafting a paper, it is crucial to create a list of writing priorities. The first should be to get the writing into a singular body, either from an outline or other drafting method. The paper may undergo many different drafts, depending on how in-depth the subject may be.

Revision: Batting Cleanup

Most writers would agree that the revision process is crucial, yet tricky to manage. When the actual writing is done, or when the page or word limit is met, the pressure of completing the assignment is often lifted slightly. Sometimes a quick once-over is not enough to catch the mistakes or the ambiguity in the drafting stages. Letting the mind rest allows for writers to approach drafts with a fresh set of eyes, free from the mental strain of finishing a word or length requirement.

The writing process as a whole varies among writers. Some require more or less time in specific areas, and some find certain stages easier to approach. However, what is common is that writing works best as a process, as a combined set of purposes and goals. The finished product, then, barely scratches the surface of what the writer has truly achieved.

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Discovering What You Want to Say
By Sabrina Brown
Writing can be tricky. Sometimes the struggle lies in trying to find the right word, remembering where to put a comma, or the perfect way to finish a paragraph; however, there are times when the most difficult part of the writing process is simply figuring out what you want to write about.

While it can be difficult, brainstorming is a necessary stage of the writing process; it can include anything from thinking about your topic to creating a detailed outline, or often both.

Before starting a paper, getting your thoughts in order is a necessary stage of the process. This can be achieved in a number of ways, one of the easiest being free writing.

Free writing is a means to discover your own thoughts. If you have a general topic in mind, just start writing about your topic. Don’t worry about whether it’s a literary masterpiece or dissertation worthy, just start exploring the ideas you have. If you find yourself running out of thoughts about something after one or two sentences, it may not be the best paper topic, but if you find that you can’t get the words out fast enough, that may very well be a good direction for your paper.

If you want something a bit more organized and systematic than free writing, mind mapping is often a good way to go. Also called a thought web, mind mapping allows you to get out your thoughts by using a series of thought bubbles, so to speak.

We all probably did these in grade school: you put one idea in the middle, and then have ideas that branch off of that, then off of that, etc. It might seem a bit childish to use mind mapping as a way to brainstorm for your senior thesis, but just like juice boxes, naps, and Goldfish, it shouldn’t be left behind in our elementary school days. Take 20 minutes and mind map your next paper; you may find it’s much more useful than you expected.

These initial ways of brainstorming then flow quite well into a common, well-organized way of brainstorming and preparing to write one’s paper: outlining.

Some of us are avid outliners; every paper we have, even a short, one-page reflection has a detailed outline that accompanies it. I should be frank here— I’m not one of those people.

It’s easy to sit down to write your paper, sure that you’re going to remember every thought you’ve wanted to include on the topic. Spoiler alert: you won’t.

When it’s two a.m. and you’re trying to hash out one last page of a philosophy paper, you won’t remember that fleeting idea you had two days ago, but you might if it were in an outline. Outlines don’t just help organize your thoughts; they give you a place to develop all the thoughts you’ve had. Maybe you won’t include that one Descartes quote when it comes down to it because you talked about Kant for an extra page, but it’s good to have options. It’s much easier to choose not to include something than try to come up with something new on the spot.

At the end of the day, whether you have eight steps to your brainstorming process or merely think about your topic over Frosted Flakes in the caf, it’s necessary to have a game plan before you start a paper. After all, it’s unwise to go into battle unprepared.

Revision and Rough Drafts
By Hannah Barker
What is revision? In the 1980s, Nancy Sommers wrote the article “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers.” In her article, she describes her study, which found that student writers often have a misunderstanding of revision. Students think they can solve most of their writing issues by re-wording. They assume that “the meaning to be communicated is already there, already finished, already produced, ready to be communicated, and all that is necessary is a better word ‘rightly worded’” (382). Revision, though, involves more than using a thesaurus to spruce up language. More accurately, revision involves being critical of your writing—looking at your paper as a whole and recognizing the different layers in it to which you have to pay attention.

Rarely, if ever, can writers produce a masterpiece (or an A paper) on their first draft.
Revision

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Writing is a process, and revision is a necessary part of the process. To revise, you have to be flexible and objective. Don’t fall so much in love with your paper that you’re unwilling to rewrite the parts that need clarified or expanded. Below are a few revision tips that you should keep in mind when reviewing your paper:

Before you revise, give your paper some space. Ideally, you’ll let it sit for a few days before you look at it again. If you write your paper the night before, you should at least let it sit for a few hours; the more you distance yourself from it, the more likely you are to be an objective critic of it.

When revising, don’t get distracted “proofreading.” You can save comma and fragment issues for another time. Revising deals with the big picture of your paper: your thesis, your ideas, and your organization.

Make sure everything you’ve written is necessary and clear for the reader. Though there isn’t a formula for a “good paper,” writing should almost always include a thesis (overall argument or goal) and points supporting that thesis (examples, citations, etc.). Look at your paper as a whole, and also review each paragraph. Ask yourself questions like the following: How does each paragraph contribute to the overall goal of my paper? Can the reader understand how each example relates to proving the thesis? Do my points fit with the thesis I originally wrote?

Challenge your claims: How is this shown? What do I mean by that? Why is this the case? If you think of the ways a reader can challenge your argument, then you’ll be prepared to make a stronger argument before that reader has the chance to challenge you.

It’s always easier to revise when you have a truly objective reader pointing out areas that need clarification, better examples, or refinement (cue the Xavier Writing Center); however, it’s important that you, as a writer, also learn to revise your papers on your own. Your ability to be objective will help you with any future writing.

According to Sommers, experienced writers “seek to discover (to create) meaning in the engagement with their writing, in revision” (386). Revision is key to quality writing. Think about your audience. Predict how they’ll interpret and understand your claims. When you are willing and able to be critical of your own writing, it will only get better.

Work Cited


Writing in Community: The Power of Peer Review

By Sarah Nimmo

I’d be willing to bet that most of you think of writing as a solitary activity. Tell me if this sounds familiar: you’re sitting alone in Gallagher, hunched in front of a laptop, headphones plugged in. You type a sentence or two, then delete them. Two hours and a couple of YouTube breaks later, you’re so sick of getting nowhere with your paper that you quickly compose a passable four pages, stream-of-consciousness style, and curse yourself for waiting until the last minute. Again.

It’s a depressing picture, to say the least.

The reality is that writing is a process that involves many different people and interactions, more interaction than just you and a computer. When you write, you write for an audience. You write with the expectation that someone is going to read your writing, whether that person is a professor, a friend, or a future employer. That alone creates a community, albeit a small one: the community of writer and reader. One cannot exist without the other; the two participate in a mutual relationship.

However, the existence of such a relationship means that you as a writer have certain responsibilities to your reader. To transfer your ideas to your reader, you have to articulate them, and you have to do it well. That’s where most of us get stuck: putting our ideas down on paper in a way that will make them understandable to our readers. Trust me, I’ve been there.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, the way to make your writing readable is to let it be read.

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The Power of Peer Review

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Many English professors utilize peer review in their classes. If you’ve never experienced a peer review session, it’s basically one class period set aside the week before a paper is due for you and your classmates to read, edit, and comment on each others’ writing. Some people find it intimidating; others simply find it unhelpful.

However, peer review is an opportunity for you to engage with others about your writing. It helps you get out of your own head. Talking with someone about a difficult concept or an idea you’re struggling with can work wonders. The act of thinking out loud or verbalizing your thoughts to another person helps you refocus and gain a better sense of what you really want to say in your paper. Engaging in these kinds of conversations can also clear up any confusion for the reader. Once your reader knows what you are trying to express, he or she can give you suggestions on how to make the ideas clearer. There is a special kind of satisfaction to be gained from peer review that is difficult to achieve when you’re writing by yourself in Gallagher.

Now what do you picture when you hear the word “writing”? Hopefully you’re thinking of engaging with others and actually talking about your ideas. These are necessary components of the writing process, but they are tough to accomplish all on your own. Peer review is an excellent way to explore these aspects of the writing process.

And for those who still doubt me, keep this in mind: even if you don’t end up getting any helpful feedback on your paper, at least you’re getting some human interaction.

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500 Words

By Rachael Benedict

When I was seventeen, I attended writing camp at a college in Pennsylvania. After a few days there, we were told that we were going to write something new. They handed out the prompt: “Please write a short story in 500 words, no more and no less. The story should revolve around a lie.”

I stared at the prompt in horror. Seriously? 500 words? How was I supposed to write the next great American short story in only 500 words? Didn’t they know I needed space to set up a background for my characters, develop insightful dialogue, and resolve the heart wrenching conflict? This was going to be impossible.

I sat down at my computer, completely frustrated. I didn’t even have a story idea, and I definitely wasn’t thinking about the writing process. Despite that, it crept up through my entire experience. I began to brainstorm, writing things down about lying, ideas, bits of dialogue a character may say, etc. Finally, I came up with a topic. Feeling confident, I sat down to write. An hour later, I looked at my word count: 1000 words. And I hadn’t even resolved the conflict yet.

“Ugh!” I cried with frustration. I printed out a copy of what I had and took a pen to it. I changed long-winded descriptions. I tried to make sure I was showing rather than telling. I used dialogue to get my characters from point A to point B. At each step, I had to decide the best word possible. I needed my readers to understand the story in my head, but I also needed to be concise. After hours of cutting and multiple drafts later, I finally had a short story that was exactly 500 words and that I was proud of.

The next day when I sat down to workshop my piece, my group members gave helpful feedback. They offered suggestions about how to even better convey some of my ideas. After applying their criticism, tinkering with flow and word choice, I was left with a short story that came alive on the page – and was only 500 words long.