

Carleton College WAC Program

Writing Module 6: Process

Process: the series of steps a writer goes through to produce a polished piece of writing

Here's a scene that you've probably seen a dozen times before in movies and TV shows: a writer sits down to create an important piece of some kind (a novel, an advertising pitch, a speech... it really doesn't matter what it is). They're stare at a blank screen or piece of paper, frustrated. Perhaps we cut to a wastebasket filled with crumpled pieces of paper, indicating many rejected ideas and false starts. Eventually, though, inspiration strikes, and the writer begins *really* writing. Words flow from their fingers or their pen; montage shots show pages filling up as time goes by; and then, finally, they're finished, and a complete piece that will dazzle their audience and completely fulfill their purpose sits before them.

Real writing doesn't work like this. I'll say that again, because it's important: real writing *does not work like this*. Certainly, there may be moments when you sit at your keyboard and words flow effortlessly from your mind onto the page (if you're lucky). But that doesn't happen very often, and it's never the whole story. Movies rarely show writers making outlines or notes. They rarely show authors stopping to eat lunch halfway through a draft, and then spending an hour just trying to get back on track. And they *never* show authors revising. In the movies, authors write everything from beginning to end, they get it all right the first time, and the only feedback they ever receive from their peers or colleagues is "wow... this is brilliant!"

Real writing does not work like this. Nobody can sit down in front of a blank screen, with no notes, and produce their best work in one go. *Nobody*. The sooner you realize this, the sooner you can free yourself from the frustration of trying to live an impossible fantasy and learn how to actually write like a writer.

The Importance of Process

All veteran writers have a process that they go through to produce their work. The exact details and methods of this process are unique to each writer, but most authors go through the same basic stages in one way or another:

- 1) A *Prewriting* stage, where the author thinks through their ideas and plans out their work in a tangible way that they can consult later
- 2) A *Drafting* stage, where they produce a complete version of the text
- 3) A *Revision* stage, where they make significant changes to the draft—adding new material, cutting sections that don't work, and making sure that their ideas are consistent from beginning to end
- 4) An *Editing* stage, where they make sure the work is error-free and formatted correctly throughout

Successful writers who don't do all four of these things every time they write are like Bigfoot: they technically could exist, but I've never seen any proof of their existence, and I seriously doubt I would enjoy meeting one.

How the Stages Work

As I noted above, every writer eventually develops their own process, and most writers are constantly tweaking this process as they learn more about what practices work (or don't work) for them.

Since a writer's process encapsulates their personal approach to the practice of writing, I can't tell you exactly what it should look like for you. I can, however, explain a bit more about what each stage of the writing process needs to accomplish and offer some suggestions for how you might approach it.

Prewriting

1. Think it over

Before you write anything as concrete as an outline or a draft, you should spend some time simply thinking over the writing task before you. If you're writing for class, read over the assignment prompt carefully. Underline or highlight key phrases that establish the Discourse for this assignment. Consider a few different topics or approaches you could use, and think about how they would unfold. How might you engage the various parts of the assignment? What connections could you make to the course readings or the material you've discussed in class? What topics or approaches *interest* you the most?

There are a lot of names for this early thinking process—brainstorming, free-writing, idea mapping, etc.—and there are just as many ways to do it. Some people prefer to jot down notes. Some people use fancy idea-mapping apps. Some work it entirely in their heads. However you approach this abstract thinking step, though, you should try to develop a solid sense of what this piece of writing will be *about*. What, overall, do you want to *say*?

2. Make a detailed outline

An outline is simply a blueprint for a piece of writing. It can be a formal structure with letters and roman numerals, or it can simply be a roughly described sequence of ideas you plan to articulate. The structure doesn't really matter, as long as you have an outline to guide you through the drafting stage that follows. A good outline must enough detail to help you imagine what every major point in the essay will look like. An outline that only contains a handful of vague ideas will be almost useless when you get to the drafting stage.

For a standard academic essay, I recommend that your outline contain a thesis and a rough breakdown of what each paragraph in the essay will do. You might go as far as to write the first sentence of paragraph, so you know what all of your major claims will be. You should also decide exactly what major pieces of evidence you will include to support each claim. If your outline contains all of that, you'll have a solid foundation for your first draft.

Drafting

1. Follow your outline, but don't be too attached to it.

As you write your first draft, you should try to stick to your outline as much as possible. If you wander away from it, you may find yourself halfway through the draft with no idea where you want to go next. If you come up with new ideas or discover that some of the ideas in the outline aren't working out, pause, change the outline accordingly, and move on. However, if you discover mid-draft that your outline simply doesn't work or doesn't represent the text you're writing anymore, it pays to take a few minutes and write a new one, rather than continue your draft with no plan at all.

2. *Feel free to skip around in the outline and write your points in any order.*

This is especially helpful if you have points in the middle of the essay that are a bit under-planned. If you skip past these points and write the rest of the draft, then you'll have a stronger sense of your argument when you come back to them.

3. *Any time you take a break, leave yourself a clear and easy place to get started when you come back.*

This could be a few sentence fragments that sketch out your next paragraph or perhaps a transcribed quote from one of your sources that you'll build your next point around. This "entry point" will make it much easier to build up some momentum when you sit back down to write again.

4. *Resist the urge to revise as you write.*

If you get halfway through your draft and think of a change that you *absolutely must* make to something you wrote earlier, go back a jot down a few notes, so you'll remember that idea at the revision stage. If you try to go back and seriously revise something before the draft is finished, though, you risk getting stuck in a loop where you just work and rework the same points, and the whole draft never gets finished.

5. *Don't despair if the words come slowly.*

Drafting can be a hard, slow process, even for the most experienced writers. Good planning and a good outline can help, but sometimes the words don't come to you, and you spend more time staring a blank page or screen than you do producing text. This is undeniably frustrating, but it's also frustratingly common. Don't despair, and don't read it as a sign that you're a terrible writer or that there's something fundamentally wrong with the project you're working on. Sometimes, it's just hard.

6. *Give yourself permission to write a shitty first draft.*

Remember Ann Lamott's advice: first drafts are usually shitty, and that's okay. A shitty first draft still gives you somewhere to go in your revision.

Revising

1. *Revision isn't editing*

Revising doesn't mean just looking for grammar errors or badly phrased sentences and "fixing" them. That's *editing*, and it's an important stage of the process, but it's not revision. To revise something literally means to *re-envision* it; it means going back to the beginning and rethinking what you want this essay to be. What is the overall point you're trying to make? What points have you decided to make along the way, and how do they fit into your argument? Keep in mind that your answers may not be the same as they were when you started writing the draft—in fact, they probably won't be. That is what makes re-envisioning the essay so important: you need to decide *what* you're really trying to say with an essay before you can figure out how to make the essay say that.

2. *Reread, look for the moment of clarity*

The best way to begin the revision process is simply to read what you've already written. Most people skip or blaze through this step because reading your own writing can be pretty painful, especially when it's a rough draft. The best way to get around this is to focus on the positive. Look for things that you really like about your draft. These may be sentences and paragraphs that feel smart or well written to you, or places where you really feel that you nailed the point you were trying to make. Either way, if you identify the parts

of your essay that really work and figure out why they work, it will be much easier to revise the rest of the essay to match.

Don't just identify these parts in your head, either. Use the comment function on your word processor (or, even better, a pencil on a clean, printed copy of your draft) to actually *write down* the places where you feel your writing is the strongest *and why you think they're the strongest*. Otherwise, it will all get lost when you start seriously revising.

3. *Have a plan*

Once you know what you like about the essay and have a solid sense of what you want to accomplish with it, you can form a plan to get the essay where it needs to go. And I mean "plan" in the most literal sense—you should put down *in writing* exactly what you want to do to make the essay better. Your plan can be a simple "to-do" list (e.g., focus thesis; revise ending of paragraphs 2 and 3; rewrite or cut paragraph 5), but having something on paper will help focus your efforts and keep you on track.

Of course, your plan might change over time—for example, once you change the thesis you might decide that paragraph 2 works just fine but paragraphs 3 and 4 need to be completely rewritten. This is fine, but you should keep your written plan updated. If you don't, then you're likely to forget what you were planning to do, and this will force you to backtrack and rethink the whole operation every time you lose focus or take a break.

4. *Take advice seriously*

Seriously consider any feedback you get from your peers, your friends, or (especially) your instructor. The purpose of writing is to communicate, so the best way to figure out what works and doesn't work in a piece of writing is to ask your audience. No matter how clear and effective you think your writing is, if your readers don't get it, then it doesn't work.

That being said, you don't necessarily have to take every piece of advice that a reader gives you; you just have to consider everything. This is especially true when readers give you contradictory advice or mutually exclusive suggestions. If one reader tells you to spend more time analyzing your quotes and another tells you that you have too many quotes, then only you can decide how to use (or ignore) that advice in a way that fits into your overall plan for the essay.

5. *Don't let your readers do all the work*

On that note, keep in mind that it's not your readers' job to spot every flaw in your essay or suggest every way to make it better. Reader feedback (even when it comes from your instructor) is only there to help you form a plan of your own. Ultimately, it's your responsibility to decide what you need to do to improve the essay.

6. *It's not a salvage operation*

It's frustrating to complete an essay only to throw out half or more of what you wrote and start over again in revision, but that's how revision sometimes goes. Novice writers spend most of their energy trying to save as much of their original prose as possible. They ask themselves questions like: "How can I tweak this paragraph to make it fit my argument?" or "How can I revise my thesis so it includes all of my points?" Experienced writers, on the other hand, ask questions like "Do I need this paragraph at all? What could I replace it with?" and "What points do I need to cut and what points do I need to add now that I've changed my thesis?"

This isn't simply because veteran writers are willing to put more effort into their revisions than novices are (though that's part of it—see below). It's also because veteran

writers understand two important things about revision: First, they know that just because you like a point or an idea or a paragraph doesn't mean it belongs in an essay. Second, they know that it's usually easier to cut something that doesn't work than it is to try to beat it into shape, and the final results are usually better.

7. Look for Ways to Improve on What Works

On a similar note, just because you're happy with a particular paragraph or section of your essay doesn't mean that you should leave it alone. In fact, sometimes the best way to start your revision is by looking at the parts of your essay that already seem to work and thinking about ways to make them better. Could you make a given point stronger by bringing in evidence from a secondary source? Could you support a claim more effectively by using another example to support it? Approaching revision this way allows you to expand the parts of your essay that you like best, which can make it a lot less painful to cut that parts that you don't like as much.

8. Get Started as Soon as Possible

The most common mistake that beginning writers make with revision is not allowing themselves the time they need to do it right. If you don't even start your revision until the night before an essay is due, or if you insist on doing it entirely in one sitting, then there's virtually no chance that you'll be able to seriously rethink and improve the essay. You need to go into revision with the understanding that it will take a while and that it's best done over a period of time (that's why I give you at least a week to do it). If you don't accept and plan for this, then it doesn't matter how dedicated you are—your writing will never be as polished as it should be.

One additional note here: when you schedule your revision conference with your instructor, try to schedule at least 30-45 minutes of quiet time immediately afterward to begin working on your revised draft. That way, you can out some of the changes that you discuss with your instructor into action, rather than letting all of your ideas drift around in your mind until you get a chance to work with them.

9. Don't short-change revision because it's hard

Revision isn't easy. Generally speaking, revising an essay should take *more* time than it took you to write your first draft. That's because truly revising an essay means questioning every aspect of it, from the overall ideas to the individual words and sentences, and asking yourself how you can make all of it better. That takes time and effort, and there's no way around it if you want to write well.

Editing

1. Editing isn't revision

By the time most people reach the editing stage, the deadline is looming, their energy is waning, and they need be *done* with the project at hand. This is not the time to make serious changes to your draft or your argument. This is the time to polish your writing, find the errors in your grammar and phrasing, and make sure the ideas in your draft, whatever they may be, are expressed as effectively as possible.

It helps to think of editing and revising as two completely separate thought processes. When you're revising, you should be prepared to change anything and everything about your draft in order to make the final product better. When you're editing, though, you should think of your essay as largely finished, and only make changes that will allow you to express the ideas that are currently on the pages as effectively as possible.

2. *Edit with fresh eyes*

Editing your own work is hard, because your brain tends to skip over errors on the page and fill in the words that it knows are *supposed* to be there. Time and distance make this much easier, which is why you should always try to leave yourself at least 24 hours between the point where you finish major revisions and the time you sit down to edit the final draft.

3. *Know your weaknesses*

If you have a solid sense of your strengths and weaknesses as a writer, then you can concentrate on looking for the kinds of changes you're most likely to make in the editing process. Do you have a problem with grammar? (If so, where *specifically* do you tend to make mistakes—prepositions, subject/verb agreement, etc?) Do you have trouble with citations? Do you tend to have run-on sentences or sentence fragments? If you train yourself to look specifically for the kinds of problems you're most likely to find, you'll get better at spotting them.

4. *Get feedback, but make sure it's the right kind*

Professional editors exist because most writers are bad at editing their own work. You may not have access to a professional editor, but you do have access to people that can help you edit. Bring your work to the Carleton Writing Center, or ask a friend that you trust to read it over and look for problems. Just make sure that your readers know what kind of feedback you're looking for—do you want serious comments on the content of the essay or just superficial comments on the grammar, formatting, phrasing, and general clarity? If your readers don't know what you want from them, then they're less likely to give you the kind of feedback you need at your current stage in the process.

A Word about Time Management

The single biggest mistake that novice writers make is not giving themselves enough time to complete all four stages of writing productively. It's one thing to know that you're *supposed* to make an outline, write a complete draft, revise thoroughly, and then perform a final round of editing, but if you don't have enough space in your schedule to actually *do* those things, then they're still not going to happen.

In order to avoid this, you need to have a realistic and concrete sense of how long the full writing process will take you, and schedule your time accordingly. This will, of course, vary from one assignment to the next and one writer to the next, but here are a few rules of thumb that will help you to manage your time:

Step 1) Ask yourself, realistically, how much time it will take you to complete the *drafting* phase. That is, once you have a working outline, how long will it take you to complete a full version of that paper with a beginning, middle, and an end?

Step 2) Whatever amount of time you anticipate you'll need for drafting, anticipate you'll need half that much time again for *prewriting*. So, if you think you can write a draft in three hours, anticipate you'll need an hour to write your outline—so, three hours total for both stages. (You can, of course, start thinking about your assignment long before this, but it's still important to schedule some time just to write your outline.)

Step 3) Anticipate that you will need to spend the same amount of time *revising* as you do drafting. So, if you'll need two hours to create a draft, you'll need another two hours to revise that draft.

Step 4) Anticipate you'll need around $\frac{1}{4}$ of the time you spent drafting to *edit* the final draft. So, a two-hour draft will take roughly 30min to edit. (This assumes you have a

solid grasp of English grammar and the citation system you'll be using. If that's not the case, you may need to double or even triple this amount.)

Step 5) With these numbers and your deadline in mind, figure out exactly *when* and *where* you'll go through these stages. Schedule these writing sessions as concretely as possible—put them in your calendar, and avoid making other commitments at those times!

Step 5a) As you schedule, keep a few things in mind:

-How long can you realistically spend writing before you burn out and need a break?

For short assignments, you may be able to complete the whole process inside a day or an evening, but for longer assignments you'll probably need to break things up over several days.

-When and from whom will you receive feedback on your writing? If you're planning to schedule time with the Writing Center or your instructor, you'll want to plan your revising and editing schedule so that you'll be able to take advantage of that feedback.

-What physical location will you use for your writing, and how well will you be able to concentrate there? If you have a noisy roommate or hall mates, for example, you shouldn't plan to write in your dorm when they're likely to be around.

The more concretely you plan out your writing process, the more likely you are to actually complete the process fully, and thus to produce work that reflects your full abilities as a writer.