

The Writing Process: A Discussion of Tips & Advice

UHCL Writing Center
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Why is writing a process?

- pro-cess (n.) a series of actions to produce something or that lead to a particular result
- Writers follow a process when writing, which can be unique to the type of writing as well as the writer
 - fiction—focus on an idea, develop characters, outline a plot, create complications and climactic elements, and end with a resolution
 - non-fiction—focus on an idea, research or draw on experience, define desired result, tailor information toward audience
 - autobiography—define which aspects are relevant, determine who to include or protect, and keep the focus on your story
- Academic writing is not much different—what steps do you follow to write a research paper?

Why is writing a process?

- Academic writing usually involves the following steps:
 - Define the requirements of the assignment to understand goals
 - Research the topic **LEARN NEW INFORMATION**
 - Choose a thesis
 - Outline the arguments **CONSIDER INFORMATION**
 - Write a first draft **PROCESS INFORMATION**
 - Reorganize information **UNDERSTAND/RECONSIDER INFORMATION**
 - Research for further support
 - Edit for a second draft (continue as needed)

“Writing and learning and thinking are the same process.”

–William Zinsser, Journalist

Start with the assignment

- Many students rush to begin an assignment without ensuring that they understand the assignment completely.
- Read the assignment and walk through each requirement carefully.
 - Is there a length requirement or a limit?
 - Must you follow a specific citation style?
 - How many sources are you required to use?
- Ask questions about the aspects that you do not understand.
 - I want to be certain that I understand the assignment—for this assignment should I...?
 - I am confused about this requirement. Can you explain it further?
 - For this part of the assignment, I was thinking of doing the following. Will that meet the requirement?
- Discuss the assignment with your peers to see if you are on the same page. If not, that is a good sign that you should meet with the professor or send an email to clarify the assignment.

Research your options

- Some assignments will leave the topic completely open, while others will limit to which area the topic must focus.
 - A biology class might require you to write about a species with unique defense mechanisms—you can choose any species meeting that criteria, but it must fall under that category.
 - A humanities class might require you to write about a religion—you can select any religion that interests you.
 - Most writing classes leave the topic open as long as you present an arguable thesis.
- Before choosing your topic, it is good to consider what your options are—can you choose any topic or are you limited—and to research the options you are considering.
 - Abortion—difficult to argue because some arguments are religiously-based, which might not be allowed.
 - Legalizing marijuana—difficult to argue certain views because there are negative effects that must be overcome to make it a positive consideration.
 - The positive impact of Humira on the initial stages of rheumatoid arthritis in young adults—difficult to argue because there is not enough research currently available.
- Research what you are considering writing about and see what you come up with.

Honestly consider your thesis

- Students often struggle to define their topic in the terms of a thesis that is both arguable and defensible.
 - arguable—it can be argued and is not an accepted fact
 - Weak: Humans cannot live on Earth without oxygen.
 - Strong: Oxygen is the most unstable aspect of humans' environment on Earth.
 - Weak: President X should not have been elected.
 - Strong: President X was better at foreign policy than President Y.
 - defensible—it is not simply an opinion and can be defended in a debate.
- Do not choose a thesis that is simply easy to support—it is likely weak and is either not arguable or not defensible.
- Do not choose a thesis that is already proved by another researcher—you must do your own arguments and research.
- Choose a thesis that requires you to think it through, put together your own arguments, and research to support those arguments.

Choose a thesis you will enjoy

It's that simple. You are going to have to research the topic, read articles about it, think about it, draft arguments for it, and write about it—sometimes for weeks through several different drafts.

Pick something you want to learn about or are interested in learning more about. It will make it much simpler.

Outline your arguments

- Once you have researched and have an idea of the arguments you will use to support your thesis (a minimum of three), create an outline to help you organize your thoughts.
- This is an optional step. Unless required by the professor, some writers are able to do this mentally and skip this step.
- Write down your primary arguments and number them. Under each argument, write a brief sentence explaining your support for each one.
- This allows you to see at a glance how well organized your arguments are and if you have any gaps you need to fill before writing the draft.
- Some writers benefit from waiting until after researching to create an outline if they are unfamiliar with the topic.

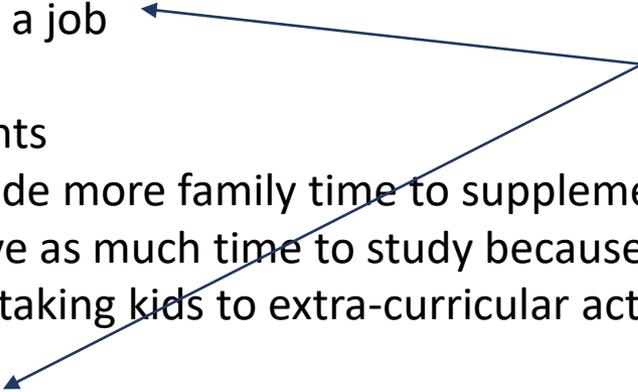
Outline your arguments

Thesis: Single parents should be allowed to take fewer college hours to be considered full-time for financial aid.

I. Financial responsibilities

- a. tend to be single-handedly responsible for more financials than married parents
- b. usually cannot attend school at 12-hour full-time status while working a job

These argue the same point. The arguments must be developed further.



II. Family commitments

- a. must provide more family time to supplement the missing parent
- b. do not have as much time to study because of family obligations, such as taking kids to extra-curricular activities

III. Work obligations

- a. often have to work full-time or multiple jobs
- b. takes away time from school obligations

Research, research, research

- Some topics and theses will lend themselves well to organizing your thoughts and arguments before doing extensive research, especially if you are already familiar with the topic.
- If you are unfamiliar with the topic, however, you will need to research—and you should research more information than you will need to use in your paper.
- Consider terms that relate to your topic and research those areas on the library database to gather as much information as possible to develop your arguments.
- For example, if you were to research the oil market and its relationship to recession in the U.S., you could look for articles with any cross-reference to the following terms:

oil prices

U.S. recession causes

American oil business

U.S. oil market

gas prices

American oil influences

recession effects

oil economy

Writing a draft

- Many individuals want to create their arguments in advance, organize their paper, and leave research as the last step to integrate solely when they are writing a draft. This is dangerous because you are using research to write what you want, not writing what the research is telling you.
- After researching the topic, begin writing the areas you are most confident about. If you find that you are struggling to write about some areas more than others, perhaps you need to take time to outline your arguments or do more research—or even discuss the topic with a tutor to help you get your thoughts together.
- After you have a basic draft written, go through it to see if it is flowing well. You might find that information needs to be moved around or some areas are underdeveloped. Don't panic...

Writing a draft (cont.)

- If you have trouble writing on an argument or particular section, leave it until the end. Perhaps writing the rest will help you organize your thoughts.
- If you do not have enough research to support a section, write all that you can and come back later with more research to fill in the gaps. Sometimes writing out everything you have helps you identify where you need more research or information.
- If you cannot figure out where a particular section should go in the paper, first ask yourself if it is necessary information or if you are just using it for filler. If it is necessary, look for a connection to other information. Whichever aspect most easily relates to the section is likely to identify where in the paper you need to put that section.

MYTH: You do not have to write your paper in the order it will be read. Many good writers leave their introductions until the very end and write them after they have finished everything else.

Rewriting: Reorganize, delete, add, and edit

- Writers rarely, if ever, meet their objectives with their first drafts—*that is why we call them drafts*: they are meant to be revised, edited, and reorganized until a final version is achieved.
- Once you have a first draft finished, following these steps to help you improve your paper and rewrite it:
 - Check the organization of your arguments—do they flow well from one to the next? Are your thoughts easy to follow? Would the paper benefit from you reordering the sections?
 - Ensure that your thesis is supported throughout your paper—do you stray and go off-topic? Are all of your points necessary and relate to your thesis?
 - Be honest about filler—was there any information you included simply to take up space and reach the word requirement? If so, delete it. Your professor will notice it, and it only weakens your paper.
 - Look for weaknesses—are there some areas that need more explanation or examples? Will adding information or research to some areas strengthen the paper? If so, start writing again.
 - Check for mechanics and grammar issues—did you use punctuation, especially quotation marks, correctly? Is your writing clear or confusing because of grammar?

Writing is a process...

...that is constantly going to change.

The Writing Center believes that all writing can be improved, and we aim to help all writers become better at this craft, regardless of their current skills and abilities. If you want help with any part of this process, come visit us, and a tutor will help you one-on-one with the aspects that are most concerning for you.

It is important to remember, however, that, while all writing can be improved, there is a time at which a writer must decide to stop rewriting and be content with what she has. We can help you make that decision as well.