

4.2: The Writing Process for Literary Essays

Why Follow the Writing Process?

Even the most talented writers rarely get a piece right in their first draft. What's more, few writers create a first draft through a single, sustained effort. Instead, the best writers understand that writing is a process: it takes time; sustained attention; and a willingness to change, expand, and even delete words as one writes. Good writing also takes a willingness to seek feedback from peers and mentors and to accept and use the advice they give. In this book, we will refer to and model the **writing process**, showing how student writers like yourself worked toward compelling papers about literary works. Watch the video below where author Salman Rushdie talks about some misconceptions new writers sometimes have about what it takes to write effectively. Though he is discussing novels specifically, the same concepts apply to literary essays.

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The following are a few famous writers' pieces of advice when it comes to following the writing process:

- "For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts"—Anne Lamott
- "The key to writing is concentration, not inspiration"—Salman Rushdie
- "By the time I am nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread and altered and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times. I am suspicious of both facility and speed. Good writing is essentially rewriting. I am positive of this." —Roald Dahl (Vander Hook)
- "I don't write easily or rapidly. My first draft usually has only a few elements worth keeping. I have to find what those are and build from them and throw out what doesn't work, or what simply is not alive." —Susan Sontag (Lee)

Take it from the writing experts: following the writing process is the key to writing success. Following this process can be liberatory in the sense that you don't have to feel an immense pressure to write brilliantly. The best writing takes time, incremental effort, and resilience.

As I often tell my students:

"There is no such thing as bad writers, only writers who give up too soon. There is no such thing as bad writing, just writing in need of revision." This means anyone can write a strong essay if they follow the writing process!

Your process

1. How do you typically approach writing assignments in your classes? When do you start working? Do you employ any prewriting techniques?
2. Have you ever been given the chance to revise your writing after receiving feedback from your peers or your instructor? How did the act of revising change your relationship to your paper?

Good writing takes, above all, planning and organization. If you wait until the night before a written assignment is due to begin, your hurrying will supersede the necessary steps of prewriting, researching, outlining, drafting, revising, seeking feedback, and re-revising. Those stages look something like this:

The Writing Process Steps

Reading

First, read the work of literature you plan to write about. This may seem like an obvious step, but some students think they can write an effective essay by just reading the SparkNotes or Shmoop. While some students may be able to get away with writing a passing essay this way, most cannot. Besides, by completing the readings, you actually learn!

Prewriting

Many of the questions and activities peppered throughout sections of this book will be **prewriting** activities. We'll ask you to reflect on your reading, to make connections between your experiences and our text, and to jot down ideas spurred by your engagement with the theories presented here. It's from activities like these that writers often get their ideas for writing. The more engaged you are as a reader, the more engaged you'll be when the time comes to write.

Researching

This book will also help you start the research process, in which you hone in on those aspects of a given literary text that interest you and seek out a deeper understanding of those aspects. Literary researchers read not only literary texts but also the work of other literary scholars and even sources that are indirectly related to literature, such as primary historical documents and biographies. In other words, they seek a wide range of texts that can supplement their understanding of the story, poem, play, or other text they want to write about. As you research, you should keep prewriting, keeping a record of what you agree with, what you disagree with, and what you feel needs further exploration in the texts you read.

Outlining

To write well, you should have a plan. As you write, that plan may change while you learn more about your topic and begin to fully understand your own ideas. However, papers are easier to tackle when you first sketch out the broad outline of your ideas, a general arc or path you want your paper to follow. Committing those ideas to paper will help you see how different ideas relate to one another (or don't relate to one another). Don't be afraid to revise your outline — play around with the sequence of your ideas and evidence until you find the most logical progression.

Drafting

The most important way to improve your writing is to start writing! Because you're treating writing as a process, it's not important that every word you type be perfectly chosen, or that every sentence be exquisitely crafted. When you're drafting, the most important thing is that you get words on paper. Follow your outline and write. If ideas come to you as you're writing, but do not quite fit in that section of the paper, make note of it! You don't have to use it, but few things are more frustrating than forgetting an idea that might work perfectly for your paper.

Revising

After you've committed words to paper (or, more accurately, to your computer screen), you can go back and shape them more deliberately through **revision**. Cognitive research has shown that a significant portion of reading is actually remembering. As a result, if you read your work immediately after writing it, you probably won't notice any of the potential problems with it. Your brain will "fill in the gaps" of poor grammar, misspelling, or faulty reasoning. Because of this, you should give yourself some time in between drafting and revising—the more time the better. As you revise, try to approach your text as your readers will. Ask yourself skeptical questions (e.g., Are there clear connections between the different claims I'm making in this paper? Do I provide enough evidence to convince someone to believe my claims?). Revisions can often be substantial: you may need to rearrange your points, delete significant portions of what you've written, or rewrite sentences and paragraphs to better reflect the ideas you have developed while writing. Don't be afraid to cut the parts of your paper that aren't working, even if you like a particular fact or anecdote. Don't be afraid to, as they say, "Kill your darlings." Everything in your paper should, on some level, work towards the purpose of your claim. Most importantly, you should revise your introduction several times. Writers often work into their strongest ideas, which then appear in their conclusions but not (if they do not revise) their introductions. Make sure that your introduction

reflects the more nuanced claims that appear in the body and conclusion of your paper.

Seeking Feedback

Even after years of practice revising your writing, you'll never be able to see it in an entirely objective light. To really improve your writing, you need feedback from others who can identify where your ideas are not as clear as they should be. You can seek feedback in a number of ways: you can make an appointment in your college's writing center, you can participate in class peer-review workshops, or you can talk to your instructor during his or her office hours. If you will have a chance to revise your paper after your instructor grades it, his or her comments on that graded draft should be considered essential feedback as you revise.

Re-revising

Once you've garnered feedback on your writing, you should use that feedback to revise your paper yet again. You should not, however, simply make every change that your colleagues or instructor recommended. You should think about the suggestions they've made and ensure that their suggestions will help you make the argument you want to make. You may decide to incorporate some suggestions and not others. Not all feedback is helpful or applicable. It takes some critical thinking to determine whether the feedback will improve the essay. When you treat writing as a process, it should become a genuine dialogue between you and your readers.

Publishing

Finally, you will submit your paper to an audience for review. As college students, this primarily means the paper you turn in to your instructor for evaluation.

Writing Process Not Linear, But a Cycle

The preceding categories suggest that writing is a linear process — that is, that you will follow these steps in the following order:

prewriting → researching → outlining → drafting → revising → feedback → re-revising → publishing.

The reality of the writing process, however, is that as you write you shuttle back and forth in these stages. For example, as you begin writing your thesis paragraph, the beginning of your essay, you will write and revise many times before you are satisfied with your opening; once you have a complete draft, you will more than likely return to the introduction to revise it again to better match the contents of the completed essay. This shuttling highlights the recursive nature of the writing process and can be diagrammed as follows:

prewriting ↔ researching ↔ outlining ↔ drafting ↔ revising ↔ feedback ↔ re-revising ↔ publishing.

This is a good thing. If you are too rigid in your process, it's easier to get stuck on insisting an idea or claim that might not be working, rather than discovering one or coming to an informed, well-reasoned conclusion. Furthermore, you should be aware that each writer has a unique writing process: some will be diligent outliners, while others may discover ideas as they write. There is no right way to write (so to speak), but the key is the notion of process — all strong writers engage in the writing process and recognize the importance of feedback and revision in the process.

Your process

1. Describe your current writing process.
2. Do you normally engage in the stages listed previously?
3. If not, why? If so, what part of the process do you find most helpful?

Share your process with the class to discover the variety of approaches writers take. Always be willing to try new methods of approaching the writing process. You might find a new tool or habit that works well for you!

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