“You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair . . . . You can come to the act with your fists clenched and your eyes narrowed . . . . You can come to it because you want [someone] to marry you or because you want to change the world. Come to it any way but lightly. Let me say it again: *you must not come lightly to the blankpage.*”

– Stephen King

Timothy P. Goss, Tanya C. Klatt, & Alexander V. Ames, Ph.D.
“Begin at the beginning,” the King advises the White Rabbit in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (2000), “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.” (p. 121). While that sounds like good advice, and probably is in most situations, writing tends to work differently. Rarely does a writer manage to craft a story, an essay, or even a letter in a straight line from beginning to end. Though there are identifiable things to conquer along the writing path, we don’t tend to find ourselves moving toward them in any measurable succession—we tend to backtrack, skip over, move backward and forward, and even hyper-focus on some points while ignoring others. More often than not, we write in fits and starts—a little here, a bit there—and many times, the last thing we compose in an essay is the beginning. Sometimes it’s alarming just how closely the writing process actually resembles Wonderland.

Ann E. Berthoff (2009), a leader in the field of Composition Studies, says it best when she makes the claim that “part of learning to write is learning to tolerate ambiguity” (p. 649). In other words, when figuring out this thing called writing, we find that there really isn’t a right or wrong way to approach and carry out a writing task. Sometimes we just have to trust our instincts, feel our way through the process, and hope for the best. The more you write, and the more you understand about writing, however, the better your instincts will get. Our goal throughout this class is to help you to develop those instincts so that your journey through the writing process is more efficient and productive.

Despite the inconsistencies in the writing process, we’ll attempt to make some sense of what steps we can take to make our writing more efficient—we’ll even attempt to place these steps in a usable order. More importantly, we hope to challenge you to think about your own writing process, to reconsider what you already know about writing, to reevaluate it—perhaps for the first time in your life. Throughout the process, we will try to expose you to several different ways to approach the writing process in the hope that one or two of them might work for you. After all, how you write is a personal endeavor; the process is as individual as you are.

**Writing is . . .**

Writing, like your cell phone, your iPod, and the computer on which you are reading this, is a technology. Just like any technology, writing is built on some basic, *agreed upon* principles. It is
important to understand that, because writing is a human construction, it is not esoteric, meaning that there are not certain people who are blessed with a natural ability to write and others who will never be able to parse a sentence. Writing must be and, more importantly, can be learned.

Certainly, writing is often the means by which we communicate our ideas to an audience, but writing is not limited to that. Writing is also a tool that can help us to separate ourselves from our ideas so we can examine them outside of our current mode of thinking. When we write, we learn things about ourselves: what type of people we are, what we know about and care about in our world, and what we think and feel about the issue or issues we are examining. The mind is chaotic; writing allows us to make some sense from that chaos. Simply put, writing is therapy; writing is connecting; writing is an important part of what it means to be human.

The Writing Process

Writing is a journey, and, like any journey, it begins with a question. The first travelers likely asked, “What’s over the horizon?” or “Where exactly is this end of the Earth we’ve heard so much about?” The first astronomers probably asked questions like, “What are these lights in the night sky?” The first naturalists might have asked questions like, “What happens if I eat this plant?” or “Do tigers make good pets?” Of course, writing an essay doesn’t always work to change the way we see the Earth, the universe, or life as we know it on such a large scale, but it still works to find an answer to something.

When we write, we need to start with a topic—something we believe needs to be explored or that we would like to know more about. This should be something we’re interested in; the more interested we are, the better we tend to write. Once we have our topic, we need to start to define what it is we’d like to know about that topic. We do this by asking questions: who, what, where, when, why, and how.

What these particular questions entail varies from writing project to writing project, but here are some questions worth considering:

- Who am I writing for?
- What do I hope to learn from this essay?
- Where do I expect my readers to encounter my work?
- When do I need to complete this project?
- Why am I writing this? Why do I care? Why will my readers care?
- How do I approach my subject?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps in the Process</th>
<th>Question(s) to Ask</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Understanding the Assignment</strong> (read grading rubric and criteria sheet several times throughout the writing process. Bring questions to your instructor.)</td>
<td>Who am I writing for? What am I writing? When should it be finished? Why am I writing it? How will it be evaluated?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Choosing a General Topic</strong> (remember, the more you’re interested in the subject, the better you will be able to write it.)</td>
<td>What am I interested in? Will my audience be interested in this topic, too? Will I be able to find enough information?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gathering Preliminary Information</strong> (Wikipedia is a great place to start—just don’t use it for a final source.)</td>
<td>Where can I find general information on my subject? What key terms can I use to help me have more productive searches?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Free Writing</strong> (setting a time limit—writing in ten-minute increments—is a good plan here.)</td>
<td>What do I already know about my subject and what is it about my subject that really interests me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Refining the Topic</strong> (you’re not likely to change the world through a composition essay. The smaller the topic, the better.)</td>
<td>What specifically am I going to write about? (i.e. not abortion, but the effects of teen abortion on the American high-school male)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thesis</strong> (often changes throughout the writing process—use it to guide your research and organization.)</td>
<td>In a single sentence, what exactly is my essay going to be about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thesis Statement</strong> (usually written very late in the writing process.)</td>
<td>In a sentence or two, what is my organizational plan, what are my key points, and what is my research question?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research</strong> (more than you need is always better than not enough.)</td>
<td>Where am I going to find what information to direct my essay or to prove my thesis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drafting</strong> (draft early and often. Have someone read your drafts. Read them aloud—this really helps you to find potential errors in the text.)</td>
<td>Does this draft seem clear enough for my readers? Is there enough information? Are there any surface-level errors (grammar, usage, etc.) that might hinder the effect of my essay?</td>
</tr>
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</table>

In academic writing, we need to understand the assignment with which we are working. Once again, we need to ask who our audience is, what our instructor wants us to accomplish through the writing of this essay, what type of writing is going to be asked of us (see rhetorical modes chart in this chapter), what factors need to be addressed (i.e. page length, organization, style, etc.), when the assignment is due, and how the essay is going to be evaluated. Throughout the next few pages, we’ll begin to break down these types of questions.
Audience

There are a multitude of things that writing can do to affect our lives. It can help us to understand things, to make decisions, and to organize our world. At its core, writing is a means of communication. Because of that, a writer needs an audience (even if that audience is the author him/herself). Effective writers take their audience into close consideration at every stage of the writing process.

For instance: you are writing a letter to your neighbor, Joe, to ask him to join in a community revitalization project you are starting. The first thing you need to consider is who Joe is; after all, no person is simply one thing. Joe is a neighbor, someone’s friend, potentially a father, husband, or uncle. He’s definitely someone’s son and might be a doctor, a soldier, a priest, or a florist. But there’s more to Joe than that. Maybe he is an avid windsurfer, a poet, a world champion ice-sculptor, or he plays a mean guitar. Maybe he reads Russian novels, likes to think of the world as one giant logarithm, puts corn in his pancakes, or dreams in Portuguese.

When we write, we need to consider that different people are made up of a lot of different internalized personalities. This is our audience, but simply understanding who they are isn’t enough. Now we have to consider the things we share with our audience: culture, history, shared knowledge. Perhaps we go to the same college, live in the same country, work at the same place, or are both left-handed, and so on. Sound like a lot of work? It is, but as you progress in your writing, you’ll start to find ways to approach these audiences. The trick is to try to identify which “Joe” you’re going to write to so you know how to appeal to that side of your audience. You should also consider what traits you share with your audience so you can draw a personal connection with him/her/them.

Throughout this class, start by assuming your classmates and your instructor are your audience. Assume we know very little about your topic, but that, if given enough of the right motivation, we are capable of understanding what you’re sharing with us. Through the discussion forums, we will get to know each other. That way, we can begin to see a small, but interesting cross-section of a typical audience and can begin to understand what we can do to draw them into our essays and keep them reading. If we understand our audience, we will have a much easier time convincing people like our neighbor, Joe, to share in our ideas and plans.

It should be noted that in future classes, you will likely encounter varying opinions about how formal or casual your writing should be. That’s the nature of writing classes, of academia, and of life. To some extent, you’ll always have to test the waters before you dive in, but that doesn’t mean you can’t dramatically improve your butterfly stroke with every lesson. For now, let your instructor set the tone.
Types of Writing

After we’ve chosen our general topic and considered our audience, we need to think about the type of writing we’ll be doing. In the academic environment, your instructor will likely inform you of the elements of the essay they assign you. For the most part, that essay will fit into one or more of the rhetorical modes.

Rhetorical modes are categories in which we place individual writings according to their purpose. When we understand how these modes work, we enter writing projects much better prepared to do the writing we intend to do, and because of that, we are more likely to write more efficiently and effectively.

The most common of these rhetorical modes are: narration, description, example, comparison and contrast, process analysis, analysis, classification, cause and effect, definition, and argument/persuasion. The chart on the following page should help you begin to break down the individual elements of each of these modes. Understanding these modes will prepare you, not only for the essays in this class, but throughout your academic and professional careers. We will practice writing in some of the more popular of these modes throughout this class.

Organization

Most writing you’ll do throughout college will include an introduction, a few body paragraphs, and a conclusion. The following paragraphs are meant to introduce you to these conventions.

Introduction

An introduction introduces your topic, the position or direction you are going to take through the essay, and should include a thesis statement (a map of your essay including the points you are about to make in the same order you will make them), and some language to help your readers understand the significance of what you’re about to say. An introduction is important because it orients readers; it prepares them for the mental categorization of what they’re about to absorb. The thesis statement gives readers a basis for considering how the rest of the paper contributes to your main point.

Body

The body of an essay includes the points you need provide to prove your position. Generally, there is one major point per paragraph. Each point needs to be introduced, explored, and related to the other points and the thesis of the paper. Paragraphs within the body of the paper should follow a logical order and transition smoothly from the previous paragraph into the paragraph that follows. Many writers start the writing process in the body paragraphs and then expand to the introduction and conclusion sections. The body of the paper should follow the thesis statement directly, so most writers write the thesis statement toward the end of the writing process.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To tell a story or use an analogy to explain something to readers.</td>
<td>Narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To explain something by appealing to one or more of the senses.</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide proof of something by identifying instances where it occurs.</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To explain or evaluate something by showing the similarities and differences between it and another subject.</td>
<td>Comparison and Contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To inform readers of how something works or how the series of actions lead to a particular result.</td>
<td>Process Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To draw a conclusion about a subject by deconstructing its parts.</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To demonstrate order in your subject by showing how it fits into a certain group or groups.</td>
<td>Classification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To explain why something has happened or may happen.</td>
<td>Cause and Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To explore the boundaries and distinctions of a subject in order to assign it a meaning.</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To convince an audience to do or not to do something or to think about something in a different way.</td>
<td>Argument/Persuasion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

The conclusion is the last paragraph of your essay and is used to explain what you’d like to have your readers do with the information you’ve presented. In a narrative essay, for instance, your conclusion ends the story and asks the reader to take the events they’ve read about into their own lives. In an argument paper, the conclusion contains a call to action or a statement that summarizes the highlights of the argument and relates the reader back to the thesis.

The Process Revisited

In a nutshell, the writing process works like this:

- Understand the assignment
- Choose a topic
- Gather some basic information
- Write down what you know and/or want to know about the topic
- Make the topic specific
- Write a working thesis (may change as you research and write)
- Research
- Begin drafting (generally beginning with the body paragraphs)
- Write your thesis statement
- Write your introduction and conclusion
- Revise (reading it aloud is a great strategy)
- Have someone read your work
- Revise some more
- Reread the assignment just to make sure you’ve covered everything
- Revise some more
- Submit your essay online to your instructor
General Advice about Academic Writing

- The purpose of writing is to extend, reshape, and/or clarify your topic. You don’t have to have better ideas than others who have written about your topic (though we would hope that you attempt to make them so)—just different ideas. Academic writing should do more than simply relay an idea from one essay to another; the topic should be changed in some real and discernible way.

- Final drafts should be free from errors in spelling, punctuation, and usage and should be well-organized. Nothing hurts the transmission of great ideas quite so much as simple errors in grammar and/or format. Still, understand that grammar is one of the last things you should think about throughout the writing process; get your ideas down and clean them up later. We pair our chapter readings with both an APA Guide and a Grammar and Usage Guide to help you increase your understanding of grammar and format.

- Your essays should show a real effort. This is not to say that you need to suffer through them. Have fun with your essays. Explore the limits of your writing, but demonstrate that you have really engaged yourself with the assignment.

- For every essay, you need to find at least one genuine question about your topic. For example, don’t just write about how helping your neighbor is good or how shoplifting is bad; construct your paper around a question about helping your neighbors or shoplifting.

- Your essay needs to show that you’ve thought about the subject in depth. Start early so you can have time to really play with your ideas and anticipate potential barriers such as writer’s block.

- Don’t panic. It’s okay if your ideas aren’t perfectly formed or if your writing demonstrates that you have struggled through the concept. This lack of unity, however, should reflect that you have put forth an effort to write your paper, not that you were winging it. Your instructors are much more interested in seeing you attempt something new and fall short than in seeing you constantly playing it safe. This class is about growing as a writer, not about demonstrating that you can write (Elbow, 2000, pp. 416-419).
References


