

The Writing Process

The essays in this book will help you understand the elements of good writing and provide ample opportunity to practice writing in response to the model essays. As you write your own essays, pay attention to your writing process. This chapter focuses on the stages of the writing process — prewriting, writing the first draft, revising, editing, and proofreading. It concludes with a sample of one student’s writing process that you can model your own writing after, from start to finish. The strategies suggested in this chapter for each stage of the writing process will help you overcome many of the problems you may face while writing your own essays.

■ PREWRITING

Writers rarely rely on inspiration alone to produce an effective piece of writing. Good writers prewrite or plan, write the first draft, revise, edit, and proofread. It is worth remembering, however, that the writing process is not as simple and as straightforward as this. Often the process is recursive, moving back and forth among the five stages. Moreover, writing is personal; no two people go about it exactly the same way. Still, it is possible to learn the steps in the process and thereby have a reassuring and reliable method for undertaking a writing task and producing a good composition.

Your reading can give you ideas and information, of course. But reading also helps expand your knowledge of the organizational patterns available to you, and, consequently, it can help direct all your prewriting activities. In *prewriting*, you select your subject and topic, gather ideas and information, and determine the thesis and organizational pattern or patterns you will use. Once you have worked through the prewriting process, you will be ready to start on your first draft. Let’s explore how this works.

Understand Your Assignment

When you first receive an assignment, read it over several times. Focus on each word and each phrase to make sure you understand what you are being asked to do. Try restating the assignment in your own words to make sure you understand it. For example, consider the following assignments:

1. Narrate an experience that taught you that every situation has at least two sides.
2. Explain what is meant by *theoretical modeling* in the social sciences.
3. Write a persuasive essay in which you support or refute the following proposition: “Violence in the media is in large part responsible for an increase in violence in American society today.”

Each of these assignments asks you to write in different ways. The first assignment asks you to tell the story of an event that showed you that every situation has more than one perspective. To complete the assignment, you might choose simply to narrate the event, or you might choose to analyze it in depth. In either case, you have to explain to your reader how you came to this new understanding of multiple perspectives and why it was important to you. The second assignment asks you to explain what theoretical modeling is and why it is used. To accomplish this assignment, you first need to read about the concept to gain a thorough understanding of it, and then you’ll need to define it in your own words and explain its purpose and usefulness to your readers. You will also want to demonstrate the abstract concept with concrete examples to help your readers understand it. Finally, the third assignment asks you to take a position on a controversial issue for which there are many studies on both sides of the question. You will need to research the studies, consider the evidence they present, and then take a stand of your own. Your argument will necessarily have to draw on the sources and evidence you have researched, and you will need to refute the arguments and evidence presented by those experts who take an opposing position.

If, after reading the assignment several times, you are still unsure about what is being asked of you or about any additional requirements of the assignment, such as length or format, be sure to consult

with your instructor. He or she should be willing to clear up any confusion before you start writing.

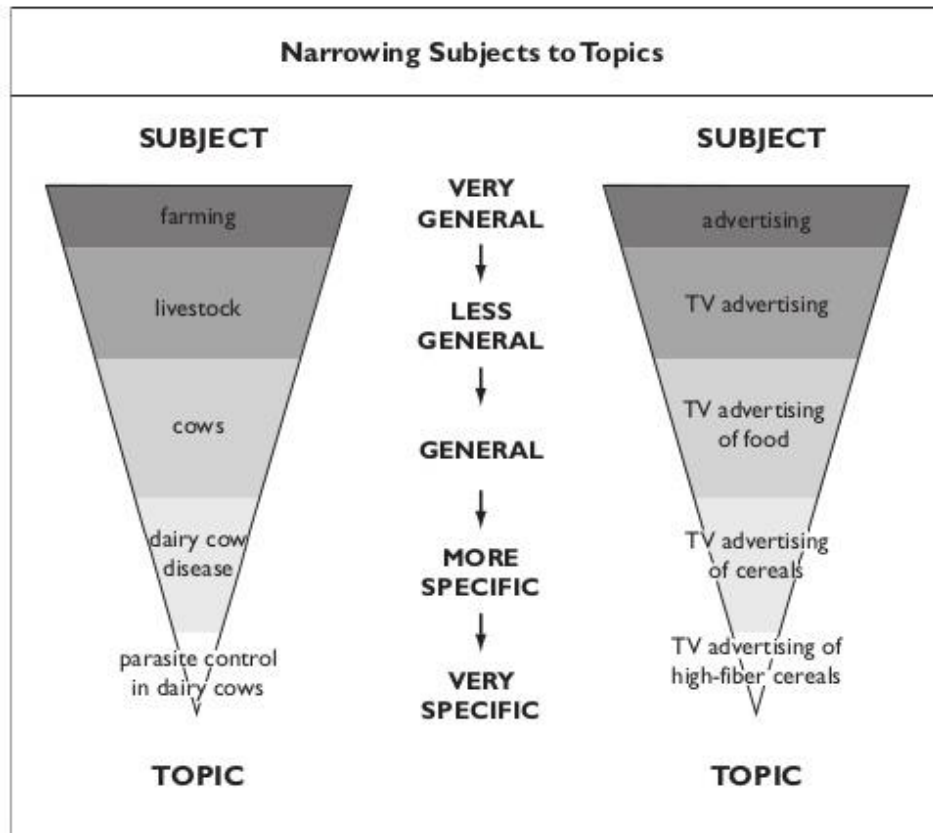
Choose a Subject Area, and Focus on a Topic

Although you will usually be given specific assignments in your writing course, you may sometimes have the freedom to write on any subject that interests you. In such a case, you may already have a specific idea in mind. For example, if you are interested in sports, you might argue against the use of performance-enhancing drugs by athletes. What happens, however, when you are free to choose your own subject and cannot think of anything to write about? If you find yourself in this situation, begin by determining a broad subject that you like to think about and might enjoy writing about—a general subject like virtual reality, medical ethics, amateur sports, or foreign travel. Also consider what you've recently read—essays in *Models for Writers*, for example—or your career ambitions when choosing a subject. Select several likely subjects, and let your mind explore their potential for interesting topics. Your goal is to arrive at an appropriately narrowed topic.

A topic is the specific part of a subject on which a writer focuses. Subjects such as the environment, literature, and sports are too broad to be dealt with adequately in a single essay. Entire books are written about these and other subjects. Start with your broad subject, and make it more specific. Thus if your subject is sports, you might choose as your topic rule violations in college recruiting, violence in ice hockey, types of fan behavior, the psychology of marathon runners, or the growth of sports medicine.

Suppose, for example, you select farming and advertising as possible subject areas. The examples on the following page illustrate how to narrow these broad subjects into manageable topics. Notice how each successive topic is more narrowed than the one before it. Moving from the general to the specific, the topics become appropriate for essay-length writing.

In moving from a broad subject to a particular topic, you should take into account any assigned constraints on length or format. You will also want to consider the amount of time you have to write. These practical considerations will affect the scope of your topic. For example, you couldn't adequately address subjects such as farming or



advertising in a five- to ten-page composition. These subjects are usually taken up in book-length publications.

Get Ideas and Collect Information

Once you have found your topic, you will need to determine what you want to say about it. The best way to do this is to gather information. Your ideas about a topic must be supported by information, such as facts and examples. The information you gather about a topic will influence your ideas about the topic and what you want to say. Here are some of the ways you can gather information:

1. *Ask questions about your topic.* If you were assigned the topic of theoretical modeling, for example, you could ask, what is *theoretical modeling*? Why, where, and by whom is theoretical

modeling used? What are the benefits of using it? Is it taught in school? Is it difficult to learn to use? Once the questioning starts, one question will lead to another, and the answers to these questions will be the stuff of your writing. Like a newspaper reporter going after a story, asking questions and getting answers are essential ways to understand a topic before trying to explain it to others.

2. *Brainstorm*. Jot down the things you know about a topic, freely associating ideas and information as a way to explore the topic and its possibilities. (See pp. 33–34 for an example.) Don't censor or edit your notes, and don't worry about spelling or punctuation. Don't write your notes in list form because such an organization will imply a hierarchy of ideas, which may hamper your creativity and the free flow of your thoughts. The objective of *brainstorming* is to free up your thinking before you start to write. You may want to set aside your notes and return to them over several days. Once you generate a substantial amount of brainstormed material, you will want to study the items, attempt to see relationships among them, or sort and group the entries by using different colored highlighters.
3. *Cluster*. Another strategy for stimulating your thinking about a topic is *clustering*. Place your topic in a circle, and draw lines from that circle to other circles in which you write related key words or phrases. Around each of these key words, generate more circles representing the various aspects of the key word that come to mind. (See p. 34 for an example.) The value of clustering over brainstorming is that you are generating ideas and organizing them at the same time. Both techniques work very well, but you may prefer one over the other or may find that one works better with one topic than another.
4. *Research*. You may want to add to what you already know about your topic with research. Research can take many forms beyond formal research carried out in your library. For example, firsthand observations and interviews with people knowledgeable about your topic can provide up-to-date information. Whatever your form of research, take careful notes so you can accurately paraphrase an author or quote an interviewee. Chapters 10 and 22 (see pp. 238–79 and 642–90) will help with all aspects of researching a topic.
5. *Think creatively*. To push an idea one step further, to make a connection not easily recognized by others, to step to one side of your topic and see it in a new light, to ask a question no one else would,

or to arrive at a fresh insight is to be creative. Don't be afraid to step outside conventional wisdom and ask a basic or unorthodox question. Take risks. Such bravery can add creativity to your writing.

Establish Your Thesis

Once you have generated ideas and information, you are ready to begin the important task of establishing a controlling idea, or *thesis*. The thesis of an essay is its main idea, the point the writer is trying to make. The thesis is often expressed in one or two sentences called a *thesis statement*. Here's an example:

The so-called serious news programs are becoming too much like tabloid news shows in both their content and their presentation.

The thesis statement should not be confused with your purpose for writing. Whereas a thesis statement makes an assertion about your topic and actually appears in your essay as such, your purpose is what you are trying to do in the essay—to express, to explain, or to argue. For example, the purpose behind the preceding thesis statement might be expressed as follows:

By comparing the transcripts of news shows like the *CBS Evening News* and tabloid shows like *Entertainment Tonight*, I will show troubling parallels in what the two genres of programs find “newsworthy.”

This type of purpose statement should not appear in your essay. In other words, it's not a good idea to tell your readers what you are going to do in an essay. Just do it.

A thesis statement should be

- The most important point you make about a topic,
- More general than the ideas and facts used to support it, and
- Focused enough to be covered in the space allotted for the essay.

A thesis statement should not be a question but rather an assertion. If you find yourself writing a question for a thesis statement, answer the question first, and then write your statement.

How to Write a Thesis Statement

An effective method for developing a thesis statement is to begin by writing, “What I want to say is that . . .”

What I want to say is that unless language barriers between patients and healthcare providers are overcome, the lives of many patients in our more culturally diverse cities will be endangered.

Later, when you delete the formulaic opening, you will be left with a thesis statement:

Unless language barriers between patients and healthcare providers are overcome, many patients' lives in our more culturally diverse cities will be endangered.

A good way to determine whether your thesis is too general or too specific is to consider how easy it will be to present information and examples to support it. If you stray too far in either direction, your task will become much more difficult. A thesis statement that is too general will leave you overwhelmed by the number of issues you must address. For example, the statement, "Malls have ruined the fabric of American life" would lead to the question "How?" To answer it, you would probably have to include information about traffic patterns, urban decay, environmental damage, economic studies, and so on. You would obviously have to take shortcuts, and your paper would be ineffective. On the other hand, too specific a thesis statement will leave you with too little information to present. "The Big City Mall should not have been built because it reduced retail sales at the existing Big City stores by 21.4 percent" does not leave you with many options to develop an argument.

The thesis statement is usually set forth near the beginning of the essay, although writers sometimes begin with a few sentences that establish a context for the piece. One common strategy is to position the thesis as the final sentence of the first paragraph. In the opening paragraph of an essay on the harmful effects of quick weight-loss diets, student Marcie Turple builds a context for her thesis statement, which she presents in her last sentence:

Americans are obsessed with thinness—even at the risk of dying. In the 1930s, people took dinitrophenol, an industrial poison, to lose weight. It boosted metabolism but caused blindness and some deaths. Since then dieters have used hormone injections, amphetamines, liquid protein diets, and, more recently, the controversial fen-phen. What most dieters need to realize is that there is no magic way to lose weight—no pill, no crash diet plan. *The only way to permanent weight loss is through sensible eating and exercise.*

—Marcie Turple, student

Does Your Thesis Hold Water?

Once you have selected a possible thesis for an essay, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does my thesis statement take a clear stance on an issue? If so, what is that stance?
2. Is my thesis too general?
3. Is my thesis too specific?
4. Does my thesis apply to a larger audience than myself? If so, who is that audience?

For a list of guidelines that will help you check the validity of your thesis, see the box above. For more on the various ways to build an effective thesis, see Chapter 3, Thesis (pp. 81–83).

Know Your Audience

Although it is not always possible to know who your readers are, you nevertheless need to consider your intended audience. Your attitude toward your topic, your tone, your sentence structure, and your choice of words are just some of the important considerations that rely on your awareness of audience. For a list of questions to help you determine your audience, see the box below.

Audience Questions

1. Who are my readers?
2. Is my audience specialized (for example, all those in my geology lab) or more general (college students)?
3. What do I know about my audience's age, gender, education, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, and political attitudes?
4. What do my readers need to know that I can tell them?
5. Will my audience be interested, open-minded, resistant, objective, or hostile to what I am saying?
6. Is there any specialized language that my audience must have to understand my subject or that I should avoid?
7. What do I want my audience to do as a result of reading my essay?

Determine Your Method of Development

Part Four of *Models for Writers* includes chapters on the various types of writing most often required of college students. Often these types of writing are referred to as *methods of development*, *rhetorical patterns*, or *organizational patterns*.

Studying these organizational patterns and practicing the use of them are important in any effort to broaden your writing skills. In *Models for Writers*, we look at each pattern separately because we believe this is the most effective way to introduce them, but it does not necessarily mean that a well-written essay adheres exclusively and rigidly to a single pattern of development. Confining yourself exclusively to comparison and contrast throughout an entire essay, for instance, might prove impractical and result in a formulaic or stilted essay. In fact, it is often best to use a single pattern to organize and develop your essay and then use the other patterns as your material dictates. For a description of what each method of development involves, see the box below. As you read the model essays in this text, you will find that many of them use a combination of patterns to support the dominant pattern.

Methods of Development	
Illustration	Using examples to illustrate a point or idea
Narration	Telling a story or giving an account of an event
Description	Presenting a picture with words
Process Analysis	Explaining how something is done or happens
Definition	Explaining what something is
Division and Classification	Dividing a subject into its parts and placing them in appropriate categories
Comparison and Contrast	Demonstrating likenesses and differences
Cause and Effect	Explaining the causes of an event or the effects of an action
Argument	Using reason and logic to persuade someone to your way of thinking

Combining organizational patterns is probably not something you want to plan or even think about when you first tackle a writing assignment. Instead, let these patterns develop naturally as you organize, draft, and revise your materials. The combination of patterns will enhance the interest and effect of your writing.

If you're still undecided or concerned about combining patterns, try the following steps:

1. Summarize the point you want to make in a single phrase or sentence.
2. Restate the point as a question (in effect, the question your essay will answer).
3. Look closely at both the summary and the question for key words or concepts that suggest a particular pattern.
4. Consider other strategies that could support your primary pattern.

Here are some examples:

SUMMARY: Venus and Serena Williams are among the best female tennis players in the history of the game.

QUESTION: How do Venus and Serena Williams compare with other tennis players?

PATTERN: Comparison and contrast. The writer must compare the Williams sisters with other female players and provide evidence to support the claim that they are “among the best.”

SUPPORTING PATTERNS: Illustration and description. Good evidence includes examples of the Williams sisters' superior ability and accomplishments and descriptions of their athletic feats.

SUMMARY: How to build a personal Web site.

QUESTION: How do you build a personal Web site?

PATTERN: Process analysis. The word *how*, especially in the phrase *how to*, implies a procedure that can be explained in steps or stages.

SUPPORTING PATTERNS: Description. It will be necessary to describe the Web site, especially the look and design of the site, at various points in the process.

SUMMARY: Petroleum and natural gas prices should be federally controlled.

QUESTION: What should be done about petroleum and natural gas prices?

PATTERN: Argument. The word *should* signals an argument, calling for evidence and reasoning in support of the conclusion.

SUPPORTING PATTERNS: Comparison and contrast and cause-and-effect analysis. The writer should present evidence from a comparison of federally controlled pricing with deregulated pricing as well as from a discussion of the effects of deregulation.

These are just a few examples showing how to decide on a pattern of development and supporting patterns that are suitable for your topic and what you want to say about it. In every case, your reading can guide you in recognizing the best plan to follow.

Map Your Organization

Once you decide what you want to write about and you come up with some ideas about what you might like to say, your next task is to jot down the main ideas for your essay in an order that seems both natural and logical to you. In other words, make a scratch outline. In constructing this outline, if you discover that one of the organizational patterns will help you in generating ideas, you might consider using that as your overall organizing principle.

Whether you write a formal outline, simply set down a rough sequence of the major points of your thesis, or take a middle ground between those two strategies, you need to think about the overall organization of your paper. Some writers make a detailed outline and fill it out point by point, whereas others follow a general plan and let the writing take them where it will, making any necessary adjustments to the plan when they revise.

Here are some major patterns of organization you may want to use for your outline:

- Chronological (oldest to newest, or the reverse)
- Spatial (top to bottom, left to right, inside to outside, and so forth)
- Least familiar to most familiar
- Easiest to most difficult to comprehend
- Easiest to most difficult to accept
- According to similarities or differences

Notice that some of these organizational patterns correspond to the rhetorical patterns in Part Four of this book. For example, a narrative essay generally follows a chronological organization. If you are having trouble developing or mapping an effective organization, refer to the introduction and readings in Chapter 5, Organization. Once you have settled on an organizational pattern, you are ready to write a first draft.

■ WRITING THE FIRST DRAFT

Your goal in writing a first draft is to get your ideas down on paper. Write quickly, and let the writing follow your thinking. Do not be overly concerned about spelling, word choice, or grammar because such concerns will break the flow of your ideas. After you have completed your first draft, you will go over your essay to revise and edit it.

As you write your draft, pay attention to your outline, but do not be a slave to it. It is there to help you, not restrict you. Often, when writing, you discover something new about your subject; if so, follow that idea freely. Wherever you deviate from your plan, place an X in the margin to remind yourself of the change. When you revise, you can return to that part of your writing and reconsider the change you made, either developing it further or abandoning it.

It may happen that while writing your first draft, you run into difficulty that prevents you from moving forward. For example, suppose you want to tell the story of something that happened to you, but you aren't certain whether you should be using the pronoun *I* so often. Turn to the essays in Chapters 11 and 14 to see how the authors use diction and tone and how other narrative essays handle this problem. You will find that the frequent use of *I* isn't necessarily a problem at all. For an account of a personal experience, it's perfectly acceptable to use *I* as often as you need to. Or suppose that after writing several pages describing someone who you think is quite a character, you find that your draft seems flat and doesn't express how lively and funny the person really is. If you read the introduction to Chapter 13, you will learn that descriptions need lots of factual, concrete detail; the selections in that chapter give further proof of this. You can use those guidelines to add details that are missing from your draft.

If you run into difficulties writing your first draft, don't worry or get upset. Even experienced writers run into problems at the beginning. Just try to keep going, and take the pressure off yourself. Think

about your topic, and consider your details and what you want to say. You might even want to go back and look over the ideas and information you've gathered.

Create a Title

What makes a good title? There are no hard-and-fast rules, but most writers would agree that an effective title attracts attention and hooks the reader into reading the essay, either because the title is unusual or colorful and intrigues the reader or because it asks a question and the reader is curious to know the answer. A good title announces your subject and prepares your reader for the approach you take. You can create a title while writing your first draft or after you have seen how your ideas develop. Either way, the important thing is to brainstorm for titles and not simply use the first one that comes to mind. With at least a half dozen to choose from, preferably more, you will have a much better sense of how to pick an effective title, one that does important work explaining your subject to the reader and that is lively and inviting. Spend several minutes reviewing the titles of the essays in *Models for Writers* (see table of contents, pp. xii–xxii). You'll like some better than others, but reflecting on the effectiveness of each one will help you strengthen your own titles.

Focus on Beginnings and Endings

The beginning of your essay is vitally important to its success. Indeed, if your opening doesn't attract and hold your readers' attention, readers may be less than enthusiastic about proceeding.

Your ending is almost always as important as your beginning. An effective conclusion does more than end your essay. It wraps up your thoughts and leaves readers satisfied with the presentation of your ideas and information. Your ending should be a natural outgrowth of the development of your ideas. Avoid trick endings, mechanical summaries, and cutesy comments, and never introduce new concepts or information in the ending. Just as with the writing of titles, the writing of beginnings and endings is perhaps best done by generating several alternatives and then selecting from among them. Review the box on page 20 and Chapter 6 for more help developing your beginnings and endings.

Notes on Beginnings and Endings

Beginnings and endings are important to the effectiveness of an essay, but they can be difficult to write. Inexperienced writers often think that they must write their essays sequentially when, in fact, it is better to write both the beginning and the ending after you have completed most of the rest of your essay. Pay particular attention to both parts during revision. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does my introduction grab the reader's attention?
2. Is my introduction confusing in any way? How well does it relate to the rest of the essay?
3. If I state my thesis in the introduction, how effectively is it presented?
4. Does my essay come to a logical conclusion, or does it just stop short?
5. How well does the conclusion relate to the rest of the essay? Am I careful not to introduce new topics or issues that I did not address in the body of the essay?
6. Does the conclusion help underscore or illuminate important aspects of the body of the essay, or is it just another version of what I wrote earlier?

■ REVISING

Once you have completed a first draft, set it aside for a few hours or even until the next day. Removed from the process of drafting, you can approach the revision of your draft with a clear mind. When you revise, consider the most important elements of your draft first. You should focus on your thesis, purpose, content, organization, and paragraph structure. You will have a chance to look at grammar, punctuation, and mechanics after you revise. This way you will make sure that your essay is fundamentally solid and says what you want it to say before dealing with the task of editing.

It is helpful to have someone—your friend or member of your writing class—listen to your essay as you read it aloud. The process of reading aloud allows you to determine if your writing sounds clear and natural. If you have to strain your voice to provide emphasis, try rephrasing the idea to make it clearer. Whether you revise your work on your own or have someone assist you, the questions in the

box below will help you focus on the largest, most important elements of your essay early in the revision process.

Questions for Revising
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have I focused on my topic? 2. Does my thesis make a clear statement about my topic? 3. Is the organizational pattern I have used the best one, given my purpose? 4. Does the topic sentence of each paragraph relate to my thesis? Does each paragraph support its topic sentence? 5. Do I have enough supporting details, and are my examples the best ones that I can develop? 6. How effective are my beginning and my ending? Can I improve them? 7. Do I have a good title? Does it indicate what my subject is and hint at my thesis?

■ EDITING

Once you are sure that the large elements of your essay are in place and that you have said what you intended, you are ready to begin editing your essay. At this stage, correct any mistakes in grammar, punctuation, mechanics, and spelling because a series of small errors can add up and distract readers. Such errors can cause readers to doubt the important points you are trying to make.

In this section we provide sound advice and solutions for the editing problems instructors have told us trouble their students most. For more guidance with these or other editing or grammar concerns, refer to your grammar handbook or ask your instructor for help. To practice finding and correcting these and many other problems, go to bedfordstmartins.com/models and click on “Exercise Central.”

Run-ons: Fused Sentences and Comma Splices

Writers can become so absorbed in getting their ideas down on paper that they often combine two independent clauses (complete sentences that can stand alone when punctuated with a period) incorrectly,