

The Writing Center

The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Part 1: What Makes Good Writing?

At the Writing Center, we're often asked "What makes good writing?" or "What makes someone a good writer?" Instructors wonder whether anyone can really be taught to write and why their students don't know how to write by now. To begin to understand what makes writing, and writers, "good," we need to ask the larger question "What is writing?"

It's easy to agree on the definition of writing if we limit it to something like "putting pen to paper" or "typing ideas into a computer." But if we look more closely at the elements of the act of writing, the definition comes to life. The following paragraphs might prompt your thinking about how writing happens for your students and for you.

Writing is a response.

We write because we are reacting to someone or something. While writing can feel like an isolating, individual act—just you and the computer or pad of paper—it is really a social act, a way in which we respond to the people and world around us. Writing happens in specific, often prescribed contexts. **We are not just writing—we are always writing to an audience(s) for some particular purpose.** When we write, we do so because we want, need, or have been required to create a fixed space for someone to receive and react to our ideas. **Understanding this social or rhetorical context—who our readers may be, why they want to read our ideas, when and where they will be reading, how they might view us as writers—governs some of the choices we make.** The writing context requires writers to have a sense of the reader's expectations and an awareness of conventions for a particular piece of writing. The context of the piece further determines the appropriate tone, level of vocabulary, kind and placement of evidence, genre, and sometimes even punctuation.

Writing is linear.

In order to communicate effectively, we need to order our words and ideas on the page in ways that make sense to a reader. We name this requirement in various ways: "grammar," "logic," or "flow." While we would all agree that organization is important, the process of lining up ideas is far from simple and is not always recognized as "writing." We assume that if a person has ideas, putting them on the page is a simple matter of recording them, when in fact the process is usually more complicated. As we've all experienced, our ideas do not necessarily arise in a linear form. We may have a scattering of related ideas, a hunch that something feels true, or some other sense that an idea is "right" before we have worked out the details. **It is often through the act of writing that we begin to create the logical relationships that develop the idea into something that someone else may receive and perhaps find interesting.** The process of putting ideas into words and arranging them for a reader helps us to see, create, and explore new connections. So not only does a writer need to "have" ideas, but the writer also has to put them in linear form, to "write" them for a reader, in order for those ideas to be meaningful. As a result, when we are writing, we

often try to immediately fit our choices into linear structures (which may or may not suit our habits of mind).

Writing is recursive.

As we write, we constantly rewrite. Sometimes we do this unconsciously, as we juggle words, then choose, delete, and choose again. Sometimes we do this rewriting very consciously and conscientiously as we reread a paragraph or page for clarity, coherence, or simply to see what we've just said and decide whether we like it. Having read, we rewrite the same phrases or ideas to make a closer match to our intentions or to refine our discoveries through language. **The process of writing and then reviewing, changing, and rewriting is a natural and important part of shaping expression for an anticipated audience.** So while we are trying to put our words and ideas into a logical line, we are also circling round and back and over again.

Writing is both subject and object.

We value writing because it reveals the personal choices a writer has made and thereby reveals something of her habits of mind, her ability to connect and shape ideas, and her ability to transform or change us as readers. We take writing as evidence of a subject or subjective position. Especially in an academic environment, we read written language as individual expression (whether or not multiple voices have informed the one voice we privilege on the page), as a volley from one individual mind to another. That said, writing also serves as an object for us, a “piece” or a “paper” whose shape, size, and function are determined by genre and conventions. While we don't think of writing as technology, it is also that; it allows us to remove a person's ideas from the confines of her head and fix those ideas in another place, a place where they will be evaluated according to standards, objectively. Here is where our sense of what counts as “good” writing develops. We have created objective (although highly contextualized) ideals for writing that include measures of appropriate voice, vocabulary, evidence, and arrangement. So while writing is very personal, or subjective, it creates an objective space, a place apart from the individual, and we measure it against objective standards derived from the context. It creates space both for the individual (the subject) and the idea (the object) to coexist so that we can both judge the merits of the individual voicing the idea and contend with the idea on the page.

Writing is decision making.

It may seem obvious, but in order to get something on the page, a writer chooses the words, the order of the words in the sentence, the grouping of sentences into paragraphs, and the order of the paragraphs within a piece. While there is an ordinariness about this—we make choices or decisions almost unconsciously about many things all day long—with writing, as we have all experienced, such decision-making can be a complex process, full of discovery, despair, determination, and deadlines. **Making decisions about words and ideas can be a messy, fascinating, perplexing experience that often results in something mysterious, something the writer may not be sure “works” until she has auditioned it for a real reader.**

Writing is a process.

Contending with the decision-making, linearity, social context, subjectivity, and objectivity that constitute writing is a process that takes place over time and through language. When producing a piece of writing for an audience, experienced writers use systems they have developed. **Each writer has an idiosyncratic combination of thinking, planning, drafting, and revising** that, for

him, means “writing” something. No matter how an individual describes his process (e.g., “First I think about my idea then dump thoughts onto the computer,” or “I make an outline then work out topic sentences”), each person (usually unconsciously) negotiates the series of choices required in his individual context and produces a draft that begins to capture a representation of his ideas. For most people, this negotiation includes trial and error (this word or that?), false starts (beginning with an example that later proves misleading), contradictions (I can’t say X because it may throw Y into question), sorting (how much do I need to say about this?), doubt about how the idea will be received, and satisfaction when they think they have cleared these hurdles successfully. For most people, this process happens through language. In other words, we use words to discover what, how, and why we believe. **Research supports the adage “I don’t know what I think until I read what I’ve said.”**

Altogether these elements make writing both an interesting and challenging act—one that is rich, complex, and valuable. What else is writing for you? Think about what the definitions discussed here miss and how you might complete the sentence “Writing is like…” From your experience as a writer, what else about writing seems essential? How is that connected to what you value about the process of writing and the final pieces that you produce?

Part 2: Writing Exercises for Students:

If you find yourself wishing your students would write more thoughtful papers or think more deeply about the issues in your course, this handout may help you. At the Writing Center, we work one-on-one with thousands of student writers and find that giving them targeted writing tasks or exercises encourages them to problem-solve, generate, and communicate more fully on the page. You’ll find targeted exercises here and ways to adapt them for use in your course or with particular students.

Writing requires making choices. We can help students most by teaching them how to see and make choices when working with ideas. We can introduce students to a process of generating and sorting ideas by teaching them how to use exercises to build ideas. With an understanding of how to discover and arrange ideas, they will have more success in getting their ideas onto the page in clear prose.

Through critical thinking exercises, students move from a vague or felt sense about course material to a place where they can make explicit the choices about how words represent their ideas and how they might best arrange them. While some students may not recognize some of these activities as “writing,” they may see that doing this work will help them do the thinking that leads to easier, stronger papers.

EXERCISES

Brainstorming

In order to write a paper for a class, students need ways to move from the received knowledge of the course material to some separate, more synthesized or analyzed understanding of the course material. For some students this begins to happen internally or through what we call “thinking,” unvoiced mulling, sorting, comparing, speculating, applying, etc. that leads them to new perspectives, understanding, questions, reactions about the course material. This thinking is often

furthered through class discussion and some students automatically, internally move from these initial sortings of ideas into complex, logical interpretations of material at this point. But, for more students, their thinking will remain an unorganized, vague set of ideas referring to the subject. Many will have trouble moving beyond this vague sense or simple reaction toward ideas that are more processed, complex, or what we often call “deep.” We can foster that move to a deeper understanding by providing opportunities to externalize and fix their ideas on paper so that they may both see their ideas and then begin to see the relationships between them. The following activities will help students both generate and clarify initial responses to course material:

- *Free-writing* Find a clock, watch, or timer to help you keep track of time. Choose a topic, idea, question you would like to consider. It can be a specific detail or a broad concept- whatever you are interested in exploring at the moment. Write (on paper or on a computer) for 7-10 minutes non-stop on that topic. If you get stuck and don't know what to say next, write “I'm stuck and don't know what to say next...” or try asking yourself “what else?” until another idea comes to you. Do not concern yourself with spelling, grammar, or punctuation. Your goal is to generate as much as you can about the topic in a short period of time and to get used to the feeling of articulating ideas on the page. It's ok if it's messy or makes sense only to you. You can repeat this exercise several times, using the same or a variety of topics connecting to your subject. Read what you have written to see if you have discovered anything about your subject or found a line of questioning you'd like to pursue.
- *Clustering/Webbing* Find a clock, watch, or timer to help you keep track of time. Put a word you'd like to explore in the center of a piece of paper and put a circle around it. As fast as you can, free-associate or jot down anywhere on the page as many words as you can think of associated with your center word. If you get stuck, go back to the center word and launch again. Speed is important and quantity is your goal. Don't discount any word or phrase that comes to you, just put it down on the page. Jot words for between 5-10 minutes. When you are finished you will have a page filled with seemingly random words. Read around on the page and see if you have discovered anything or can see connections between any ideas.
- *Listing* On a piece of paper list all the ideas you can think of connected to subjects you are considering exploring. Consider any idea or observation as valid and worthy of listing. List quickly and then set your list aside for a few minutes. Come back and read your list and do the exercise again.
- *Cubing* This technique helps you look at your subject from six different points of view (imagine the 6 sides of a cube and you get the idea). Take your topic or idea and 1) describe it, 2) compare it, 3) associate it with something else you know, 4) analyze it (meaning break it into parts), 5) apply it to a situation you are familiar with, 6) argue for or against it. Write a paragraph, page, or more about each of the six points of view on your subject.
- *Journalistic questions* Write these questions down the left hand margin of a piece of paper: Who? What? Where? When? How? And Why? Think about your topic in terms of each question.

- *What? So What? Now what?* To begin to explore an idea first ask yourself, “What do I want to explore?” and write about that topic for a page or more. Then read what you have written and ask “So what?” of the ideas expressed so far. Again, write for a page or more. Finally ask yourself, “Now what?” to begin to think about what else you might consider or where you might go next with an idea.
- *Defining terms* Although this suggestion is simple and may seem obvious, it is often overlooked. Write definitions for key terms or concepts in your own words. Find others’ articulations of the terms in your course readings, the dictionary, or through conversations and compare the definitions to your own. Seek input from your instructor if you can’t get a working definition of a term for yourself.
- *Summarizing positions* Sometimes it’s helpful to simply describe what you know as a way to solidify your own understanding of something before you try to analyze or synthesize new ideas. You can summarize readings by individual articles or you can combine what you think are like perspectives into a summary of a position. Try to be brief in your description of the readings. Write a paragraph or up to a page describing a reading or a position.
- *Metaphor writing* Metaphors or similes are comparisons sometimes using the words “like” or “as.” For example, “writing is like swimming” or the “sky is as blue as map water” or “the keyboard wrinkled with ideas.” When you create a metaphor, you put one idea in terms of another and thereby create a new vision of the original idea. Sometimes it may be easier to create a metaphor or simile may help you understand your view of an idea before you can put it fully into sentences or paragraphs. Write a metaphor or simile and then explain to someone why your metaphor works or what it means to you.
- *Applying ideas to personal circumstance or known situations* Sometimes ideas come clearest when you can put them in a frame that is meaningful to you. Take a concept from your reading assignments and apply it to a situation in your own life or to a current event with which you are familiar. You may not end up using this application in your final draft, but applying it to something you know will help you to understand it better and prepare you to analyze the idea as your instructor directs.

Organizing

Once students have something on the page to work with, they can begin the decision-making process crucial to developing a coherent idea or argument. At this point, students will choose which ideas most appeal to them, which ideas seem to fit together, which ideas need to be set aside, and which ideas need further exploration. The following activities will help students make decisions as they shape ideas:

- *Drawing diagrams* Sometimes it helps to look for the shape your ideas seem to be taking as you develop them. Jot down your main ideas on the page and then see if you can connect them in some way. Do they form a square? A circle? An umbrella with spokes coming down? A pyramid? Does one idea seem to sit on a shelf above another idea? Would equal signs, greater or less signs help you express the relationships you see between your ideas? Can you make a flow chart depicting the relationships between your ideas?

- *Making charts or piles* Try sorting your ideas into separate piles. You can do this literally by putting ideas on note cards or scraps of paper and physically moving them into different piles. You can do this on the page by cutting and pasting ideas into a variety of groups on the computer screen. You can also make charts that illustrate the relationships between ideas. Common charts include timelines, author' around a dinner table, and comparison/contrast charts.
- *Scrap pile* Be prepared to keep a scrap pile of ideas somewhere as you work. Some people keep this pile as a separate document as they work; others keep notes at the bottom of a page where they store scrap sentences or thoughts for potential use later on. Remember that it is sometimes important to throw out ideas as a way to clarify and improve the ones you are trying to develop along the way.
- *Shifting viewpoints (role-playing)* When you begin to feel you have some understanding of your idea, it sometimes help to look at it from another person's point of view. You can do this by role-playing someone who disagrees with your conclusions or who has a different set of assumptions about your subject. Make a list or write a dialogue to begin to reveal the other perspective.
- *Applying an idea to a new situation* If you have developed a working thesis, test it out by applying it to another event or situation. If your idea is clear, it will probably work again or you will find other supporting instances of your theory.
- *Problem/Solution writing* Sometimes it helps to look at your ideas through a problem-solving lens. To do so, first briefly outline the problem as you see it or define it. Make sure you are through in listing all the elements that contribute to the creation of the problem. Next, make a list of potential solutions. Remember there is likely to be more than one solution.
- *Theory/application writing* If your assignment asks you to develop a theory or an argument, abstract it from the situation at hand. Does your theory hold through the text? Would it apply to a new situation or can you think of a similar situation that works in the same way? Explain your ideas on paper of to a friend.
- *Defining critical questions* You may have lots of evidence or information and still feel uncertain what you should do with it or how you should write about it. Look at your evidence and see if you can find repeated information or a repeated missing piece. See if you can write a question of a series of questions that summarize the most important ideas in your paper. Once you have the critical questions, you can begin to organize your ideas around potential answers to the question.
- *Explaining/teaching idea to someone else* Sometimes the most efficient way to clarify your ideas is to explain them to someone else. The other person need not be knowledgeable about your subject-in fact it sometimes helps if they aren't familiar with your topic-but should be willing to listen and interrupt you when he or she doesn't follow you. As you teach your ideas to someone, else you may begin to have more confidence in the shape of your ideas or you may be able to identify the holes in your argument and be more able to fix them.

- *Lining up evidence* If you think you have a good idea of how something works, find evidence in your course material, through research in the library or on the web that supports your thinking. If your ideas are strong, you should find supporting evidence to corroborate your ideas.
- *Rewriting idea* Sometimes what helps most is rewriting an idea over the course of several days. Take the central idea and briefly explain it in a paragraph or two. The next day, without looking at the previous day's writing, write a new paragraph explaining your ideas. Try it again the next day. Over the course of three days, you may find your ideas clarifying, complicating, or developing holes. In all cases, you will have a better idea of what you need to do next in writing your draft.

Drafting

As students have been working with their ideas, they have been making a series of choices about their ideas that will lead them to feel “ready” to put them in a more complete, coherent form; they will feel “ready to write” their ideas in something closer to the assignment or paper form. But for most, the tough moments of really “writing” begin at this point. They may still feel that they “have ideas” but have trouble “getting them on the page.” Some will suddenly be thrust into “writing a paper” mode and be both constrained and guided by their assumptions about what an assignment asks them to do, what academic writing is, and what prior experience has taught them about writing for teachers. These exercises may ease their entry into shaping their ideas for an assignment:

- *Clarify all questions about the assignment.* Before you begin writing a draft, make sure you have a thorough understanding of what the assignment requires. You can do this by summarizing your understanding of the assignment and emailing your summary to your TA or instructor. If you have questions about points to emphasize, the amount of evidence needed, etc. get clarification early. You might try writing something like, “I’ve summarized what I think I’m supposed to do in this paper, am I on the right track?”
- *Write a letter describing what the paper is going to be about* One of the simplest, most efficient exercises you can do to sort through ideas is to write a letter to yourself about what you are planning to write in your paper. You might start out, “My paper is going to be about...” And go on to articulate what evidence you have to back up your ideas, what parts still feel rough to you about your ideas. In about 20 minutes, you can easily have a good sense of what you are ready to write and the problems you still need to solve in your paper.
- *Write a full draft* Sometimes you don’t know what you think until you see what you’ve said. Writing a full draft, even if you think the draft has problems, is sometimes important. You may find your thesis appears in your conclusion paragraph.
- *Turn your ideas into a five-minute speech* Pretend you have to give a 5 minute speech to your classmates. How would you begin the speech? What’s your main point? What key information would you include? How much detail do you need to give the listener? What evidence will be most convincing or compelling for your audience?

- *Make a sketch of the paper* Sometimes it helps to literally line up or order your evidence before you write. You can do so quickly by making a numbered list of your points. Your goal is something like a sketch outline—first I am going to say this; next I need to include this point; third I need to mention this idea. The ideas should flow logically from one point to the next. If they don't—meaning if you have to backtrack, go on a tangent, or otherwise make the reader wait to see the relationship between ideas, then you need to continue tinkering with the list.
- *Make an outline* If you have successfully used formal outlines in the past, use one to structure your paper. If you haven't successfully used outlines, don't worry. Try some of the other techniques listed here to get your ideas on the page.
- *Start with the easiest part* If you have trouble getting started on a draft, write what feels to you like the easiest part first. There's nothing magic about starting at the beginning—unless that's the easiest part for you. Write what you know for sure and a beginning will probably emerge as you write.
- *Write the body of the paper first* Sometimes it's helpful NOT to write the beginning or introductory paragraph first. See what you have to say in the bulk of your draft and then go back to craft a suitable beginning.
- *Write about feelings about writing* Sometimes it's helpful to begin a writing session by spending 5-10 minutes writing to yourself about your feelings about the assignment. Doing so can help you set aside uncertainty and frustration and help you get motivated to write your draft.
- *Write with the screen turned off* If you are really stuck getting starting or in the middle of a draft, turn the monitor off and type your ideas. Doing so will prevent you from editing and critiquing your writing as you first produce it. You may be amazed at the quantity and quality of ideas you can produce in a short time. You'll have to do some cleanup on the typos, but it may be well worth it if it allows you to bang out a draft.
- *Write in alternatives (postpone decision-making)* You may need to test out more than one idea before you settle into a particular direction for a paper. It's actually more efficient to spend time writing in several directions i.e. trying out one idea for awhile, then trying out another idea, than it is to try to fit all of your ideas into one less coherent draft. Your writing may take the form of brief overviews that begin, "If I were going to write about XYZ idea, I would..." until you are able to see which option suits the assignment and your needs.
- *Write with a timer* Sometimes what you need most is to get all of your ideas out on paper in a single sitting. To do so, pretend you are taking an essay exam. Set a timer for an appropriate amount of time (1 hour? 3 hours?) depending on the length of your draft. Assume that it will take you approximately 1 hour per page of text you produce. Set a goal for the portion of your draft you must complete during the allotted time and don't get up from your seat until the timer goes off.

Revising

As students use language to shape ideas, they begin to feel the need to test their ideas or move beyond their own perspectives. Sometimes we have ideas that make good sense to us, but seem to lose or confuse readers as we voice them in conversation or on the page. Once students have a complete draft of a paper, they need ways to share their ideas to learn points where their ideas need further development. With feedback from an audience, students are better able to see the final decisions they still need to make in order for their ideas to reach someone. These decisions may be ones of word choice, organization, logic, evidence, and tone. Keep in mind that this juncture can be unsettling for some students. Having made lots of major decisions in getting their ideas down on the page, they may be reluctant to tackle another round of decision-making required for revising or clarifying ideas or sentences. Remind students that ideas don't exist apart from words, but in the words themselves. They will need to be able to sell their ideas through the words and arrangement of words on the page for a specific audience.

- *Talk your paper* Tell a friend what your paper is about. Pay attention to your explanation. Are all of the ideas you describe actually in the paper? Where did you start in explaining your ideas. Does your paper match your description? Can the listener easily find all of the ideas you mention in your description?
- *Ask someone to read your paper out loud to you* Ask a friend to read your draft out loud to you. What do you hear? Where does your reader stumble? Sound confused? Have questions? Did your reader ever get lost in your text? Did ideas flow in the order the reader expected them to? Was anything missing for the reader? Did the reader need more information at any point?
- *Share your draft with your instructor* If you give them enough notice, most instructors will be willing to read a draft of a paper. It sometimes helps to include your own assessment of the draft when you share it with a teacher. Give them your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the draft, as you see it, to begin a conversation.
- *Share your draft with a classmate* Arrange to exchange papers with a classmate several days before the due date. You can do so via email and make comments for revision using Word's comment function.
- *Look at your sentences* Often you will need to analyze your draft of the sentence level. To do so, break your paper into a series of discrete sentences by putting a return after each period or end punctuation. Once you have your paper as a list of sentences, you can more easily see and solve sentence level problems. Try reading the sentences starting with the last sentence of the draft and moving up. Doing so will take them out of context and force you to see them as individual bits of communication rather than familiar points.
- *Discuss key terms in your paper with someone else* After you have completed a draft, it's sometimes helpful to look back at the key terms you are using to convey your ideas. It's easy, in the midst of thinking about an idea, to write in loaded language or code in which certain key words come to have special meaning for you that aren't necessarily shared by a reader. If you suspect this is the case, talk about your key terms with a friend, and ask them to read your draft to see if the idea is adequately explained for the reader.

- *Outline your draft* After you have a complete draft, go back and outline what you have said. Next to each paragraph write a word or phrase that summarizes the content of that paragraph. You might also look to see if you have topic sentences that convey the ideas of individual paragraphs. If you can't summarize the content of a paragraph, you probably have multiple ideas in play in that paragraph that may need revising. Once you have summarized each paragraph, turn your summary words into a list. How does the list flow? Is it clear how one idea connects to the next?
- *Underline your main point* Highlight the main point of your paper. It should probably be (although it will depend on the assignment) in one sentence somewhere on the first page. If it's not, the reader will likely be lost and wondering what your paper is about as he or she reads through it. Your draft should not read like a mystery novel in which the reader has to wait until the end to have all the pieces fit together.
- *Ask someone without knowledge of the course to read your paper* You can tell if your draft works by sharing it with someone outside of the context. If they can follow your ideas, someone inside the class will be able to as well.
- *Ask a reader to judge specific elements of your paper* Share your draft with someone and ask them to read for something specific i.e. organization, punctuation, transitions. A reader will give more specific feedback to you if you give them some specific direction.

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