

Drafting

Analyzing Drafting Activities

Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking. – Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers*

According to Elbow, the best way to accomplish deep thinking is a series of drafts which come together to produce an emerging “center of gravity” that then translates into the main focus on the work. This process should be a holistic process, not a linear process. Elbow’s reasoning behind this concept of multiple drafts follows the idea that, “if [a writer] learns to maximize the interaction among his own ideas or points of view, he can produce new ones that didn’t seem available to him.”

In other words, it’s difficult to predict where your thoughts and your argument will end up when working on an essay draft. And that’s a good thing.

This is the reason that writing assignments are so common in higher education: they develop a deep level of thinking that’s only possible through this process.

Video: Moving From Outline to Draft

At this point in the writing process, you’ll have accomplished quite a lot of work. It may feel pretty scattered across notes you’ve made, sources you’ve pulled together, and different trains of thought in your head. That’s fine!

You’ll have some sort of outline at this point: some plan for what sections you’ll need, and an idea of their order. This may be a very formal Roman numeral outline, a more informal list of ideas, a mind map, a Powerpoint outline—whatever is comfortable for you.

The next step is a big one: starting to flesh out those pieces of an outline into a substantial essay draft.

Consider this guidance from an English professor. She’s talking about a specific essay assignment for her students, but the general concepts of the video apply to all writing situations. Professor Pell’s best advice is to **not** write the sections of your paper in order. Instead, take advantage of the outline to skip around to the parts that are easiest to develop first, and that will have the biggest impact of your paper overall.

Transcript: [Moving from Outline to Draft.pdf](#) 

While you'll have different sections of your paper, the concept still applies. Decide for yourself what order will be most effective to write in, and free yourself up to put off the difficult parts until last!

The First Draft is the Ugliest

If one is the loneliest number, the first draft is the ugliest draft. The end. There's no way around it. If you can accept that reality, carry on. If you can't, writing will be an ever-frustrating task. You will struggle to find joy in doing the work.

Consider the truth a sort of Jedi mind trick. It frees you from having to write something "golden" every time you come to the page. The pressure eases. You can write terribly. You can use clichés and jargon and run-on sentences. Don't worry about any of it. You can – and should – revise and edit later.

Let the words fill the page. If no words come, use a writing exercise. Steal a line from someone (cited, of course). Get your writing muscles working, and your mind will follow suit. It will start to make connections.

Stop waiting to "feel" like writing and do the hard work of writing. Feelings more often follow actions rather than the other way around. Waiting to feel like writing is the same thing as waiting for inspiration. Neither typically happen unless you're working.

Don't be afraid of the horrible, no-good words. At least you have words. That's an accomplishment. Many give up before even getting that far. You didn't. You have an ugly first draft.

Now get to work on the second. It'll still be ugly but much less so than the first.

Revising and Writing a Second Draft

You've written a draft. It's likely that you saw ways to improve it as you were building it, or knew there were parts that would need more attention later. You may have also refined as you went, looping back through parts multiple times before moving on to the next.

In that sense, the term "second draft" can be misleading, since there often is no clear line between first, second, and later drafts. It's all an ongoing process.

If you hit a point where you're not sure what the next step should be, here are three key questions to ask.

1) Does the argument hold together?

Does your essay move convincingly from one point to the next? Maybe you decide to move your key points around and change the structure of the essay.

Do your paragraphs carry the argument clearly? You might want to look at the links between paragraphs to make the relationships between them more clear.

2) Is your argument supported by evidence?

Every point you make should have some evidence to support it. Maybe there's still some reading you need to do to find the evidence you need.

3) Does the essay have an effective introduction and conclusion?

At this stage, you have a good idea of what the essay as a whole will look like. So now is the time to write and refine your introduction and your conclusion. These are much easier to write at this second stage than straight off at the start of your work on the essay.