The Writing Process & Topic Selection

The Writing Process: An Overview

Why is it necessary to analyze the process of writing?

You've likely heard the phrase "writing process" before, and the steps below may be familiar to you.

THE WRITING PROCESS

TOPIC   PREWRITE   EVIDENCE   ORGANIZE   DRAFT   REVISE   PROOFREAD

(https://fletcher.instructure.com/courses/194826/files/47867611/download?wrap=1)
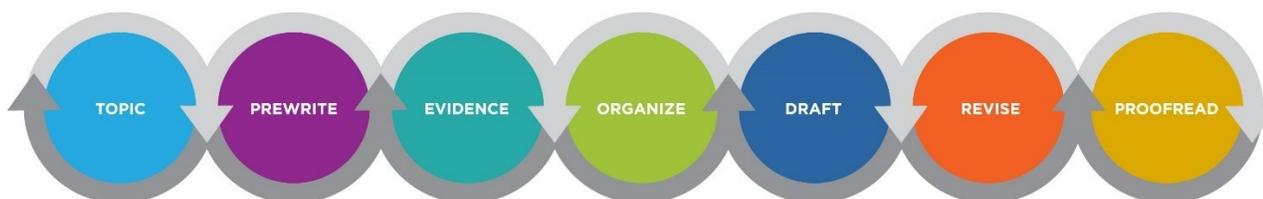
Though these steps are often talked about as separate tasks, they are actually much more fluid. Don't overlook the importance of the arrows around each item. These arrows indicate the most vital aspect of the writing process: it doesn't just go in one direction.

One step bleeds into the next. Sometimes an issue comes up late in the process, such as during revision, which requires going back to the prewriting stage for a bit. This kind of dance through the steps is expected, and healthy. You make your own path through the process.

The Writing Process, Illustrated

The video below is a beautiful example of one person's application of the writing process. He narrates the stages he goes through to complete blog entries for a course he's taking. Though you may not be writing the same kind of product, you can certainly analyze his process to see how it might be applied in other writing situations.

Writing Process Animation

▶
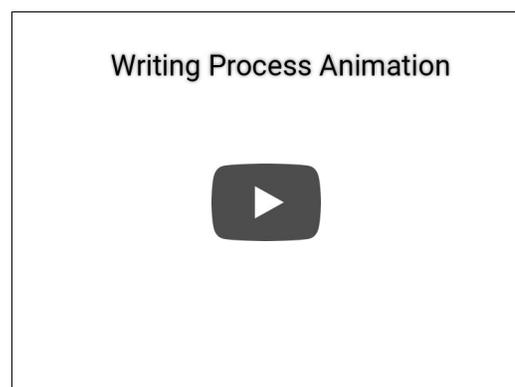
Transcript: **Writing Process Animation.pdf** **(https://fletcher.instructure.com/courses/194826/files/47867593** **/download?wrap=1)** **(https://fletcher.instructure.com/courses/194826/files/47867593/download?wrap=1)**

Were there steps in this video that surprised you? That seemed out of order to you? Would you be able to adapt his process to the next writing task you're faced with?

The rest of this module will address the individual stages of the writing process, and how they work together.

Topic Selection

Analyzing topic selection activities
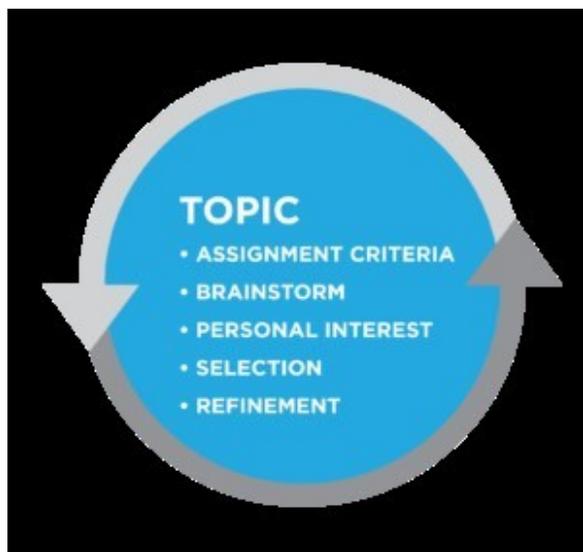
The main character in the movie *Misery* is a writer named Paul Sheldon, who after a serious car accident is "rescued" by his self-proclaimed "number one fan," Annie Wilkes. Annie holds him captive, withholding pain medications and torturing him mentally and physically while demanding that he write a novel that brings her favorite character, Misery Chastaine, back to life. The movie trailer for *Misery* reads,

"Now Paul Sheldon must write as if his life depended on it . . . because it does."

This is no one's ideal writing scenario, nor is it a common one, but the direct association of writing and suffering will not seem far-fetched to anyone who writes. Based on a Stephen King novella of the same name, *Misery* suggests that even a prolific writer like King, who has written screenplays, novels, short stories, and essays for the past thirty-five years, finds writing difficult, even painful.

Chances are, if you have ever written a paper, you've experienced the uneasiness caused by the combination of a blank page and a looming deadline. Though it may seem counterintuitive, one way to make the process of getting started on a new assignment easier is to look for something that troubles you. Seek out difficulty, find problems. All academic disciplines require students to identify, mull over, and sometimes solve challenging problems.

We all deal with problems of varying complexity on a daily basis. If we are successful in dealing with life's challenges, it's likely that we follow a particular process for meeting these challenges, whether we are conscious of it or not. Here is an example of this process:

Problem: My car broke down.

Questions that emerge from this problem: Can I fix it myself? If not, where should I take it to get it fixed? Whom can I trust? Could I get a recommendation from someone? How will I get around while my car is in the shop? In light of the estimate, is it worth getting it fixed or should I trade it in and buy another car?

What is at stake?: If you don't reflect on these questions and instead take your car to the first dealer you see, you might choose a mechanic who is notorious for overcharging or for sloppy work. Or you might be without wheels for awhile and

unable to get to work. Precious time and your hard-earned cash are at stake here. In order to make an informed decision, we must sit with a problem and weigh our options.

Problems are an expected part of life, and our ability to deal with them can help determine our personal and professional success. In fact, recent studies suggest that the ability to wrestle with problems is what makes a successful leader. Successful leaders, according to Roger Martin, Dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, have one thing in common: the power of "integrative thinking." Martin borrows the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, author of *The Great Gatsby,* to define integrative thinking as "the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." According to Fitzgerald, integrative thinking is a sign of "first-rate intelligence"; according to Martin, who examined 50 successful managers for his book *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking,* it is the sign of a successful leader. Integrative thinkers embrace complexity. They sit with problems, and don't accept only the easy answers. They tap into the tension between two opposing ideas to produce a third idea. And, ultimately, they produce new insights and develop new alternatives. This habit of mind can and should be cultivated (Martin 62).

Identifying the right topic, and the right problem, is the first part of this habit of mind.

What You Will Learn to Do

- analyze strategies for personalizing an assigned topic
- analyze strategies for finding a focus for an unassigned topic
- analyze strategies for moving from general to specific

Problems as Process

Let's focus further on how you might use problems to begin a writing assignment. Despite the fact that writing assignments vary from class to class, discipline to discipline, and university to university, looking for trouble can be an effective approach regardless of the assignment. In fact, sometimes writing prompts or essay questions direct you toward trouble. Here is an example of one such prompt:

Although Hegel differs from Rousseau in his hostility toward the notion of the noble savage and his rejection of origin stories, both Hegel and Rousseau are keen to understand contemporary civilization in light of historical processes. What is it, then, that allows them to come to such different conclusions about the present, with Hegel suggesting that freedom is on the march and Rousseau arguing that freedom is in retreat? (Prominent European philosophers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712– 1778) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) are credited with laying the groundwork for Marxism).

This essay question does the work of problem finding for the students.

The instructor highlights the problem in the question by juxtaposing Rousseau's and Hegel's ideas and theoretical approaches. Most of you are probably familiar with the compare and contrast paper; this assignment essentially asks students to compare and contrast Rousseau and Hegel. By identifying a specific problem and posing a question, this instructor helps students avoid a common pitfall of the unsuccessful compare and contrast essay. Unsuccessful compare and contrast essays simply catalogue similarities and differences without developing an argument. While it is possible that your high school teacher did not expect you to develop an argument in a compare and contrast essay, your college professor expects you to do so, whether or not the assignment explicitly says so.

Sometimes it will be your responsibility to locate a problem. Here is an example of an assignment that specifically asks students to find a problem:

Identify and examine a human rights topic about which you would like to know more. You are welcome to consult with your instructor for ideas. You should use Internet, library, and other sources to gather information on this topic; this is not a full-scale research paper, so you need to find a small number of adequately comprehensive sources. Your essay should:

1. identify the issue
2. describe its scope and frequency in geographic, regime-type, temporal, socio-demographic, or other terms, as

     appropriate

3. identify the sense in which it is a human rights violation (of what article of what covenant)
4. tell us what you have been able to learn about its causes
5. identify political, social, cultural, economic or other factors that appear to contribute to its increase or decrease. You should critically assess biases or shortcomings in the information sources you used to research your topic.

While the prompt does not specifically use the term "problem," it is clear that students are meant to focus on human rights "issues" or "violations" rather than successes in the area of human rights. In other words, these students have been sent out to look for trouble related to human rights.

Other writing assignments will not even hint at problems. For example:

Food plays a significant role in Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence.* For this paper you should construct a persuasive argument in which you consider how the depictions of food and the rituals surrounding it reflect and promote the larger themes of the novel. Consider the following questions: Who is depicted eating and why? What do they eat and how? What is Wharton doing with acts of eating in her text? How does she use depictions of food to create narrative effects? What are these effects? What narrative effects does she use depictions of food to create?

While there is no direct or indirect mention of a problem in this particular assignment, your process and your product will benefit from a focus on a specific problem.

At this point, you may be wondering "What's all this about problems? What about thesis or argument?" Problems motivate good papers, and good problems will lead you to your thesis or argument. Theses do not fall from the sky. Finding a rich problem can be a big step in the direction of developing a compelling thesis.

Strategies for Narrowing a Topic

Once you've settled on a problem to address for a writing assignment, the next step is to narrow it down to an appropriate focus.

Narrowing a topic can be done in various ways. Most of the time you will need to use two or more of the following strategies. However, the requirements and scope of your assignment will determine which ones you use.

To narrow a topic, ask yourself the following questions.

Can you focus your project on a specific aspect of the topic?

Most issues or concepts can be subdivided into narrower issues or concepts. If you can't subdivide your topic, then, most of the time, your topic is as narrow as it can get. In addition, it is probably better suited to a short or small project than a long or substantial one.

In some cases, you might find you need to expand, rather than narrow, a topic selection.

Can you narrow your topic to a specific time period?

- Restricting your topic to a specific time period can narrow most topics. Many activities or things exist through time. Restricting yourself to that activity or thing within a specific time period reduces the amount of material you have to cover.

For example, armies and soldiers have existed from before recorded history. Restricting yourself to "Army life during World War II" or "Army life in Ancient Egypt" reduces the scope of what you need to cover.

HINT: there is likely to be a lot more primary and secondary material on army life in World War II than there is on army life in ancient Egypt simply because more information from recent centuries has survived than from ancient centuries.

Can you narrow your topic to a specific geographic area?

Many topics can be limited to a specific region of the country or the world.

For example, "Wolves" can be limited to "Arctic Wolves."

Can you narrow your topic to a specific event?

Restricting your topic to a specific event is another way to narrow a topic. However, the amount of information available on a specific event will depend upon the relative importance of that event.

For example, you will find more information on the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki than you will on the bomb used by robbers to blow up the safe of a bank.

Once you've reviewed this section, click Next to complete a brainstorming assignment.