

The Writing Process Learning Module
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Overview

We want students to see writing as a process that involves thinking, planning, drafting, revising, editing, and ultimately, producing a final document. However, they are usually more concerned with the result of that process—the paper, report, or homework assignment that they have to turn in—than with the process itself. After all, it's generally the final product that gets the grade. But experienced writers know that as they move ahead, they also circle back, revising their initial plan, thinking about new ideas, and maybe even shifting the focus of their work. Beginning writers must be guided through this process.

Students should try a variety of approaches to invention, planning, drafting, revising, and editing, so that they see which strategies work best for particular assignments, and which strategies work particularly well for them.

Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this learning module, a student should be able to:

- 1) read assignments to assess the writing situation
- 2) assess their research needs
- 3) practice effective invention strategies
- 4) plan before they begin drafting
- 5) write a rough draft
- 6) write effective opening and closing paragraphs
- 7) write effective body paragraphs
- 8) respond to rough drafts—content
- 9) respond to rough drafts—grammar
- 10) revise and edit
- 11) manage peer review
- 12) write an accurate self assessment

Activities:

Teaching and Learning Components in Class

- 1) Assess the writing situation with students: Discuss the key elements of the writing situation, including subject, sources of information available, purpose, audience, and constraints (length, document design, review sessions, and deadlines).

2) Assess research needs: Ask students to write down everything they already know about their topics. Once they arrive at a research question, have students work in groups. Each person in the group should ask three questions about the research questions of their peers in their groups (three to five in a group). This will guide writers in the direction they need to research. Or, ask relevant questions about the topic (this can also be done in groups), such as who, what, where, when, why, and how?

3) Practice invention strategies: Ask students to list simple ideas about their subject, putting them down in the order in which they occur to them. To cluster ideas, write a topic on the board, draw a circle around it, and surround that with related ideas connected to the topic.

Another invention strategy is free writing. In the purest form, free writing is simply nonstop writing. You set aside ten minutes or so and ask students to write what they know about their topics (what they don't know is what they will have to research) or whatever comes to them, without pausing to think about word choice, spelling, or even meaning. If they get stuck, tell them that they can write about being stuck, but they should keep their pencils moving. The point is to loosen up, relax, and see what happens.

Talking and listening are also early stages of the writing process. Group work can be used for brainstorming, debating a point, or getting feedback for revising. Talking is another good way to help students to get to know their audience. Also, listening is a good way to get different points of view. Conversation can deepen and refine ideas.

Teaching and Learning Components Outside of Class

Sketch out an informal outline: Ask students to keep a journal to collect personal, exploratory writings. An entry in a journal can be any length—from a single sentence to several pages—and is likely to be informal and experimental. Take risks. Suggest that students use their journal to plan papers and explore issues that are of concern to them. They can also use the journal as a sourcebook of ideas to draw on in present and future writings.

Rough out an initial draft: Ask students to draft an introduction that includes a thesis. Move from general points to more specific points that lead up to their thesis. Advise them that they have to assert their central, debatable idea for the writing assignment in one sentence. A good lead should hook the reader, so suggest that they try using a startling statistic, a vivid example, a description, a paradoxical statement, a quotation or bit of dialogue, a question, an analogy, or a joke or anecdote.

Draft the body of the paper to support the thesis; however, before drafting the body, take a careful look at the introduction, especially the thesis. If the thesis is specific yet complex and sketches out a plan (which it should), try to get students to block out their paragraphs according to the main points in their thesis. As readers move into a paragraph, they need to know where they are—in relation to the whole essay—and what

to expect in the sentences to come. A good topic sentence, a one-sentence summary of the paragraph's main point, acts as a signpost pointing in two directions: backward toward the thesis of the essay and forward toward the body of the paragraph. Sentences that do not support the topic sentence and topics sentences that do not support the main thesis destroy the unity of the paragraph and the paper, so make sure to emphasize to students that they need to stick to the point.

Develop and organize the paper. Require students to provide enough evidence to support their thesis and suggest that they present *examples, illustrations, narration, description, process, comparison and contrast, analogy, cause and effect, classification and division, and/or definition* depending on the purpose of the paper and the audience.

Draft a conclusion. Guide students on the purpose of a conclusion—that it should echo the main idea, without dully repeating it. Often the concluding paragraph can be relatively short. By the end of the essay, readers should already understand the main point: the conclusion simply drives it home and perhaps suggests its significance by answering “so what?”

Teaching and Learning Components in Class

Respond to rough drafts—content: First, go over the criteria with the class and write each main point on the board (lead, thesis, support, organization, analysis, transitions, conclusion, etc.). Focus on one aspect of the paper at a time. Perhaps copy a sample introduction from a student's essay (after removing the student's name and securing the student's permission, of course) and walk the class through the paper by reading it aloud and modeling for them how you want them to respond to the draft. Always comment on the content first and the positive aspects of the paper, then move to what needs revision. Comments are best written in the form of questions (what do you mean? How so? Could you give an example? What does this have to do with your thesis? Etc.). Once students are clear on the criteria and how to respond, put them in groups of three to five. Ask them to exchange, read, and comment on each other's papers. Each reader should initial his or her comments. Positive comments should be written as well as questions to guide further development of the paper. Response sheets with guided questions could also be used in group work.

Respond to rough drafts—grammar: Focus only on the grammar in the paper. Ask students to work in small groups, as they did when responding to content. Instead of writing comments, ask each student to choose a sentence from the paper that they feel needs revision based on grammar. Ask each student to underline that sentence. They should continue to read the paper and underline any sentence that needs revision due to grammar issues. Have each student write down, on a separate piece of paper, one of the incorrect sentences underlined from the peer's paper. They should then discuss how to revise the sentence with the group. Each group should then identify the most difficult sentence to correct, or a sentence that represents a common error for all writers in their group, and write that sentence on the board. If there are twenty students in a class and five groups, there should be five sentences written on the board. The class can then

discuss each sentence and how to edit it for correctness and clarity. Grammar rules could also be noted in the handbook that relate to the problems in the sentences. This exercise is called a mini lesson, and it rises out of the content of student writing.

Managing peer review: Introduce an approach to peer review called *inquiry and collaboration*. Students should first comment on what is working in the paper, and then move to what is unclear and needs revision. Comments on revision should be made in the form of questions. Sometimes these questions can be written in the margin of the paper, but often, it is best to ask questions orally. Advise student readers to listen closely to the writer's answers. Often, the oral answer to a reader's question provides the clarity that is needed on the page. If this is the case, simply ask the reader to suggest to the writer that he/she write down the answer given in response to the reader's question.

Teaching and learning Components outside of Class

Students should revise and edit based on reader's comments. They should also carefully proof read their final drafts. Sometimes this is best done by reading the paper aloud, or reading the paper the following day, after getting some distance from the last revisions.

Note: For more details on writing process see *Part I, The Bedford Handbook, Sixth Edition* by Diana Hacker.

Assessment

Portfolio Assessment—Ask students to turn in drafts along with their final paper. If the instructor has held a writing conference with the student (which all instructors should do on each writing assignment) or if the student has received feedback from the Writing Center and/or peer writing workshops in class, these drafts should be included in the final portfolio. Any drafts that show comments from readers will reflect what suggestions were made for revision. These suggestions can then be reviewed in the context of the final draft to see how well students are responding to feedback. A two-pocket folder works best for portfolio assessment: the left pocket for all drafts, the right pocket for the final draft and self evaluation (see below for information on self evaluation).

Portfolio Checklist for final drafts

1. Has the writer clearly conveyed the main idea, problem, or issue(s) in the piece? (Is the **focus** established?)
2. Does the piece show a clear sense of purpose and audience?
3. Is the piece of writing **well developed**? In other words, does the writer provide enough explanation and information to treat the topic he or she is writing about clearly?

4. Is the piece **well organized** or do the sentence and paragraphs seem unrelated to each other or only vaguely related.
5. Does the writer provide convincing and appropriate support for the point s/he is making (**evidence**: examples, facts, statistics, stories, results of interviews, details from experience)?
6. Has the writer chosen precise words that clearly convey the intended meaning?
7. Are any words too vague or general, given the points the writer is trying to make?
8. Are there unnecessary words—words that might make a reader angry or amused when that is not the writer’s intention?
9. Are the sentences clear: that is, does each sentence get its point across as effectively and powerfully as possible?
10. Has the writer paid attention to conventions of “public discourse” such as punctuation, grammar, and spelling?
11. Do the introductory and concluding paragraphs seem to work in the context of the rest of the piece? Or, for example, is the introductory paragraph lacking in usefulness because it does not “get into” the subject of the piece soon enough?
12. is the conclusion effective? For instance, if the writer has suggested that he or she will offer solutions to a problem, has this happened?
13. Does the concluding paragraph simply “trail off” without saying very much?
14. Does the piece have an effective title?

Student Self Evaluation—Write a letter to your instructor that describes your progress. Refer to the holistic scoring criteria used to grade the essay and the assignment. Explain what’s working in your final draft (4) and what’s not working.

Holistic Scoring Criteria

HOLISTIC SCORING GUIDE

A: A paper in this category will complete all the tasks set by the assignment. It will be distinguished by clear and orderly thinking – and may even introduce an original interpretation of the writing topic. It will be virtually free from errors in mechanics, usage, sentence structure, and there will be evidence of excellent control of language.

A- & B: A paper in this category may be slight, but not ignore, the primary task of the assignment or deal with it only by implication, but the writer will demonstrate a clear

understanding of the writing topic. It may not be as thoughtful or as carefully reasoned as an A paper, but it will not be characterized by mere statement and restatement of ideas at a high level of generality. Although the paper may have minor weaknesses in paragraphing, it will contain evidence of the writer's ability to organize information into unified and coherent units. It will be largely free from serious errors in mechanics usage, and sentence structure, and it will be generally well written, characterized by clarity if not by excellence of expression.

B & C: Although a paper in this category may accomplish the assignment less completely or less systematically than an A or B paper does, the paper will come to terms with the basic task of the assignment. The reasoning may be less precise and less discriminating than one would expect to find in an A or B paper, but it will not contain serious errors in logic. It may insufficiently develop a point or two, but it will give evidence of the writer's ability to support key ideas. It will be organized and paragraphed well enough to allow the reader to move with relative ease through the discourse, though there may be some disjointedness and lack of focus. It may contain errors in mechanics, usage and sentence structure, but not so frequently as to call into question the writer's command of the conventions of Standard English or to distract consistently the reader from the content. The paper will show generally accurate use of language.

C & D: A paper will fall into this category if it shows serious difficulty managing the task of the assignment; OR if it shows definite weakness in analytic thinking; OR if the paper is so markedly underdeveloped that key ideas stand virtually without illustration; OR if errors in sentence structure, usage, and mechanics seriously interfere with readability. There may be distinctive weaknesses in paragraphing and organization, but the total effect will not be chaotic. The writer's control of language may be uncertain.

D: A paper in this category may fail to come to terms with the assignment; that is, the primary task may be ignored, misconstrued, badly mishandled, or redefined to accommodate what the writer wants to say or is able to say. There is also likely to be a combination of the following defects: serious errors in reasoning, little or no development of ideas, and no clear progression from one part to the next. There may be serious and frequent errors in sentence structure, usage and mechanics, giving the impression of distinctly inferior writing.

D-: This category is reserved for the paper in which a combination of errors, conceptual confusion, and disorganization creates the impression of ineptitude. There are, however, definite indications of the writer's attempt to deal with the topic.

F: This paper is obviously "off-topic" by intention, whatever its writing quality. It does not deal with the topic, and it does not fulfill the assignment.

Adapted from Teaching and Assessing Writing, by Edward M. White, Josey-Bass Publisher, San Francisco, 1985.

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