

## 7: The Writing Process

### Chapter Objectives

The purpose of this chapter is to:

- Define the elements of the writing process
- Discuss the recursive nature of the writing process
- Explain how the elements of the writing process pertain to business writing
- Apply the writing process to business writing tasks

### Refining Your Unique Writing Process

#### "Accepted" Writing Process

Generally speaking, the accepted writing process includes:

##### Planning

The planning step of the writing process includes all tasks designed to help you draft a strong document. For instance, planning may include prewriting strategies such as outlining, brainstorming, mapping, and freewriting. It also includes time spent researching as strong research provides the raw materials necessary to "build" an effective written document. While planning usually occurs early in the writing process, writers return to these planning strategies many times throughout the writing process.

##### Drafting

The drafting step of the writing process includes time spent actively writing parts of the document. Drafting is often expected to be messy. It's the time when a writer gets the ideas on the page without immediate concern for the flawlessness of the ideas. It involves creating, grouping, and analyzing the raw materials (research, language, and ideas) of a written document. While drafting usually occurs as a middle step of the writing process, writers return to the drafting strategies any time a new idea or concept must be developed and included in the document.

##### Revising

The revising step of the writing process includes adding, rearranging, removing, and replacing words, sentences, paragraphs, and ideas. Revision refers to large changes in a written document. It is the time when a writer looks at the messy draft to critically analyze changes that must be made to better serve the purpose and audience. Revision must be done courageously; it may be difficult to make large changes to a document that is seemingly "complete." However, strong revision is necessary to strengthen a written document to its best form. Decisions made in the revision step may send the writer back to the planning or drafting stage.

##### Editing

The editing step of the writing process is the polishing stage. While the aforementioned steps are recursive, meaning you can move back and forth between them, the editing step should be kept to the end of the process to avoid writers spending too much time polishing a sentence or paragraph that may be removed in revision, for instance. Editing refers to the fine details of a document such as correcting spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Editing may also include changes to word choice and sentence structure.

#### Your Unique Writing Process

Although I've just explained the generally accepted writing process, it's important to realize that as you continue developing written documents, you are best served by learning how you write best, or in other words, your **unique writing process**.

As a young writer, I never understood the benefits of a formal outline with all of its letters - capital, lowercase, roman numeral. And if I had an A, did I have to have a B? And what did the A and B even mean in practical terms? In other words, a formal outline

was not part of my process. I also soon learned that my beginnings rarely worked. Until I completed the whole of what I had to say, the beginning didn't entirely fit. Therefore, I knew at the end of my writing process, I would have to take time to go back and revise the beginning heavily until it fit the rest of the document.

That's what I mean about your unique writing process. What works for you? What does not? I'm open to your exploration of this as wildly as you'd like it to be with one caveat - I will not accept that waiting until the last minute and then turning out a work of brilliance is your unique writing process. The process must allow for some planning, some drafting, some revising, and some editing. How you piece together that particular "process" is up to you.

As you continue reading this chapter, be thinking about your unique writing process. Feel comfortable questioning the concepts in the chapter and whether they are relevant to your own process. Feel comfortable asking your instructor about their process and sharing your own thoughts and experiences as well.

#### General Writing Process Tips

1. Allow your writing process to grow and change. Like your taste buds change over time, so too may your writing strengths and subsequently your writing process. For example, a new writer may rely heavily on outlining, but after outlining many writing tasks, structure may come more naturally to the writer, and a different strategy may serve that writer better.
2. Think about writing tasks you've completed recently. Once you read the assignment description, what did you do next? Explore his question with a freewriting exercise. Set a timer for three minutes, and don't stop writing. Walk yourself through all of the work you completed from the moment you read the assignment description to the moment you submitted the final document. After you do so, think critically about the work you completed in that writing assignment. What would you like to change about your writing process moving forward? What techniques would you like to experiment with to further understand and improve your unique writing process?
3. Talk to a friend, family member, colleague, or instructor about their writing process. What steps do they take? What has not worked for them? Consider speaking to multiple people, maybe 3-5. Ask them the same questions, and compare the differences in their responses. Are there any trends of strategies that work well? Trends of strategies that are not as successful? Are there any strategies you have not tried that you'd like to try in the future?

## Identifying Your Rhetorical Situation

One of the most crucial steps early in the writing process is to first understand your rhetorical situation - or what it is you are setting out to do. It's important that writers identify the **audience** and the **purpose** of a piece of writing before they begin developing it. For instance, this text is for students of business writing. What if we did not take that audience into consideration before we started writing? What if the text had instructions for completing science labs? What if it generally shared personal anecdotes about our lives that have nothing to do with teaching, learning, or business writing?

Then, we would fail at identifying our rhetorical situation.

#### Purpose and Audience

To identify the rhetorical situation, or in other words, the purpose and audience of a piece of writing, writers should ask the following questions:

- Why is the writer writing this document? (PURPOSE)
- To whom is the writer communicating? (AUDIENCE)

Students often say they are writing for whomever is grading their work at the end. However, business writing is different. In business writing, writers develop documents for their colleagues, customers, supervisors, stakeholders, funding bodies, and so on. Business writing is a form of professional writing, and students should keep that goal of writing professionally in mind as part of their purpose.

Likewise, the goal of writing professionally should help student-writers consider their audience. Business documents should be flawless; the audience expects that. I know of hiring managers who reject job applicants based on a single error on their cover letter or resume. That may seem harsh, but keep in mind that the hiring manager is evaluating a candidate for a job that requires many tasks. Attention to detail is likely to be expected, so if a candidate cannot offer a high attention to detail for two pages, then how successful will the candidate be at performing attention to detail every day in many tasks?

### General Rhetorical Situation Tips

1. To begin identifying your rhetorical situation, ask yourself: What is my purpose? Is your purpose to inform? To persuade? Likewise, whom is your audience? Are you writing a report for your superiors? Are you sending an email to a colleague? Are you developing promotional materials for possible clients? Consider the concepts of purpose and audience together to better understand your rhetorical situation, so that you can move through the writing process in a way that serves the purpose and audience.
2. Think of a writing task you have to complete either for this class, for another course, or for your work or personal life. Set a timer for five minutes, and write down everything you can think of about your purpose and your audience. How might this information help you move forward with that writing task?
3. Reread your writing assignment description until you understand it. If you do not understand it, ask a classmate for clarification? If you still do not understand, ask your instructor for clarification. Until you fully understand what a writing assignment is asking you to achieve, you cannot understand your rhetorical situation. And without understanding of your rhetorical situation, you will struggle through the writing process and in completing the task to a high quality.

## Prewriting as Part of the Process

Prewriting is an essential activity for most writers. Through robust prewriting, writers generate ideas, explore directions, and find their way into their writing. When students attempt to write a document without developing their ideas, strategizing their desired structure, and focusing on precision with words and phrases, they can end up with a “premature draft”—one that is more writer-based than reader-based and, thus, might not be received by the audience in the way the writer intended.

In addition, a lack of prewriting can cause students to experience writer’s block. Writer’s block is the feeling of being stuck when faced with a writing task. It is often caused by fear, anxiety, or a tendency toward perfectionism, but it can be overcome through prewriting activities that allow writers to relax, catch their breath, gather ideas, and gain momentum.

### Goals of Prewriting

- Contemplating the many possible ideas worth writing about
- Developing ideas through brainstorming, freewriting, and focused writing
- Planning the structure of the document overall so as to have a solid introduction, meaningful body components, and a purposeful conclusion

## Prewriting Activities

Quick strategies for developing ideas include **brainstorming**, **freewriting**, and **bubble mapping**. These activities are done quickly, with a sense of freedom, while writers silence their inner critic. In her book *Wild Mind*, teacher and writer Natalie Goldberg describes this freedom as the “creator hand” freely allowing thoughts to flow onto the page while the “editor hand” remains silent. Sometimes, these techniques are done in a timed situation (usually two to ten minutes), which allows writers to get through the shallow thoughts and dive deeper to access the depths of the mind.

### Brainstorming

Brainstorming begins with writing down or typing a few words and then filling the page with words and ideas that are related or that seem important without allowing the inner critic to tell the writer if these ideas are acceptable or not. Writers do this quickly and without too much contemplation. Students will know when they are succeeding because the lists are made without stopping.

### Freewriting

To freewrite, writers must silence the inner critic and the “editor hand” and allow the “creator hand” a specified amount of time (usually from 10 to 20 minutes) to write nonstop about whatever comes to mind (Elbow). The goal is to keep the hand moving, the mind contemplating, and the individual writing. If writers feel stuck, they just keep writing “I don’t know what to write” until new ideas form and develop in the mind and flow onto the page. Focused freewriting entails writing freely—and without stopping, during a limited time—about a specific topic. Once writers are relaxed and exploring freely, they may be surprised about the ideas that emerge.

### Bubble Mapping

Bubble mapping begins with writing down the central idea or concept of your writing task then circling it. Draw a line from that word or concept to other concepts connected to it in some way. Circle those secondary concepts. Then, draw a line from the secondary concepts to additional concepts or ideas. Continue expanding the ideas and concepts until the page is full of mapped circles and ideas. You may then use the concepts and ideas to develop keyword searches in the research step of the process or to develop a general structure for the written document itself.

These are just a few prewriting activities you might try to develop ideas for a writing task. Consider others by searching online or talking with friends and colleagues about their writing processes.

It should also be noted that a crucial prewriting activity is research, which will be discussed later in the text. If you struggle with the prewriting activities, it may be because you have not done enough research to explore the concepts to an appropriate depth. Think of the prewriting exercises above as recursive with researching strategies.

**If you struggle with prewriting activities, complete more research. If you struggle with research, complete more prewriting activities.**

### Structure Techniques

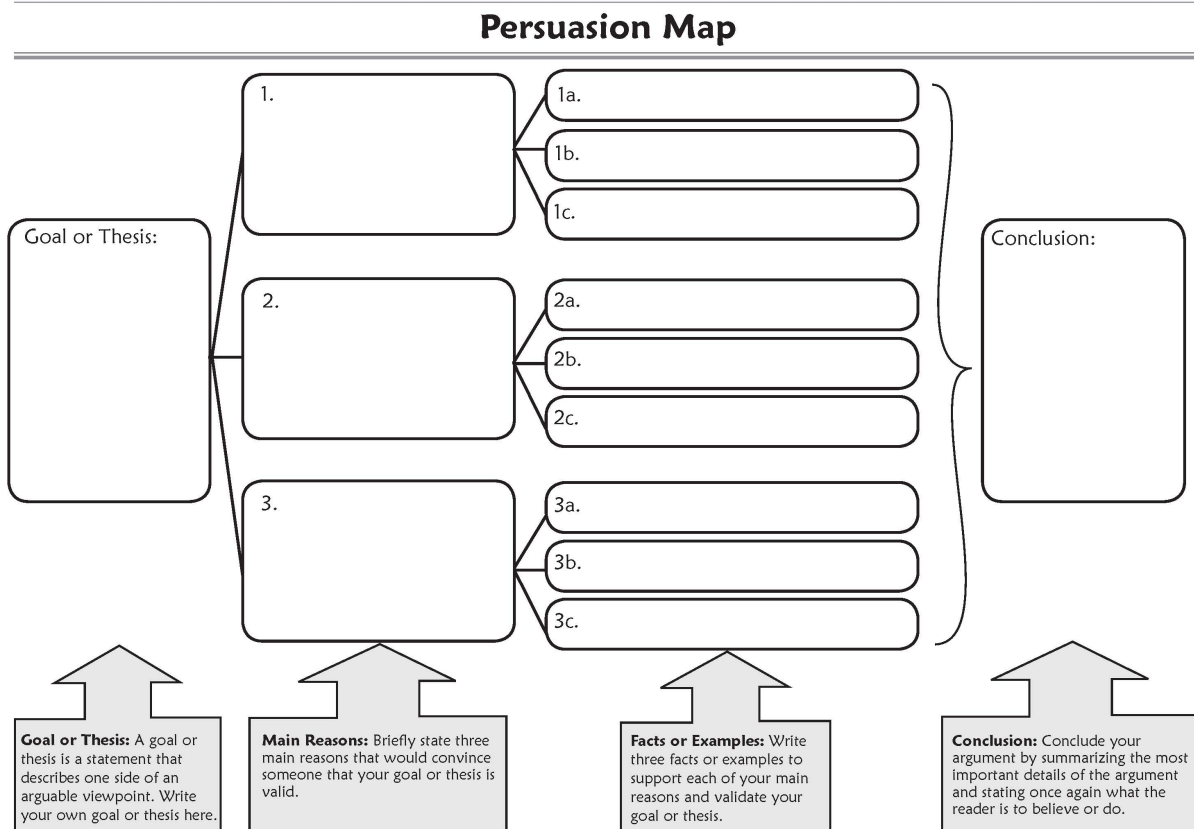
Before writing a first draft, writers find it helpful to begin organizing their ideas into chunks so that they (and readers) can efficiently follow the points as organized in an essay. There are many ways to plan an essay's overall structure, including mapping and outlining.

### Mapping

Mapping (which sometimes includes using a graphic organizer) involves organizing the relationships between the topic and other ideas. Figure 1 provides an example of **a graphic organizer** that could be used to write a basic, persuasive document such as a proposal or report:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



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Figure 1: Persuasion Map. Copyright 2013 IRA/NCTE. All rights reserved. ReadWriteThink materials may be reproduced for educational purposes.

## Outlining

Outlining is also an excellent way to plan how to organize a document. Formal outlines use levels of notes, with **Roman numerals** for the top level, followed by **capital letters**, **Arabic numerals**, and **lowercase letters**. Here's an example of an outline for a report that discusses the importance of business writing for managers.

### 1. Introduction

1. Background information about entry level positions, general managerial tasks, and a summary of the kinds of writing entry level managers complete.
2. Thesis: While securing an entry level management position may be relatively simple, to advance within the career field, a manager must possess strong writing skills particularly in writing reports and communicating both internally and externally.

### 2. Body Paragraphs

1. Main Point: Entry level managers complete different writing tasks than senior managers.
  1. Supporting Detail 1: Information from Source 1—Supporting Sentences
    1. Subpoint
    2. Subpoint
  2. Supporting Detail 2: Information from Source 2—Supporting Sentences
    1. Subpoint

2. Subpoint

2. Main Point: Senior managers must write persuasive, complete reports and other documents.

1. Supporting Detail 1: Information from Source 3—Supporting Sentences

1. Subpoint

2. Subpoint

2. Supporting Detail 2: Information from Source 4—Supporting Sentences

1. Subpoint

2. Subpoint

3. Main Point: Senior managers must communicate effectively within their organization, especially with subordinates and supervisors, as well as outside their organization, especially with customers and stakeholders.

1. Supporting Detail 1: Information from Source 5—Supporting Sentences

1. Subpoint

2. Subpoint

2. Supporting Detail 2: Information from Source 6—Supporting Sentences

1. Subpoint

2. Subpoint

3. Conclusion (Revisit thesis).

**Informal outlines** can be created using lists with or without bullets. What is important is that main and sub-point ideas are linked and identified. An informal outline might look something like this:

Introduction - Background information about entry level positions, general managerial tasks, and a summary of the kinds of writing entry level managers complete.

Thesis: While securing an entry level management position may be relatively simple, to advance within the career field, a manager must possess strong writing skills particularly in writing reports and communicating both internally and externally.

Main Point 1: Entry level managers complete different writing tasks than senior managers. (Include a few supporting details).

Main Point 2: Senior managers must write persuasive, complete reports and other documents. (Include a few supporting details).

Main Point 3: Senior managers must communicate effectively within their organization, especially with subordinates and supervisors, as well as outside their organization, especially with customers and stakeholders. (Include a few supporting details).

Conclusion (Revisit thesis).

#### General Prewriting Tips

1. Use 10 minutes to freewrite with the goal to “empty your cup”—writing about whatever is on your mind or blocking your attention on your classes, job, or family. This can be a great way to help you become centered, calm, or focused, especially when dealing with emotional challenges in your life.
2. Before each draft or revision of assignments, spend 10 minutes freewriting an introduction and a thesis statement that lists all the key points that supports the thesis statement. Use the key points to develop body paragraphs to support your thesis.
3. Create a metacognitive, self-reflective journal: Freewrite continuously (e.g., 5 times a week, for at least 10 minutes, at least half a page) about what you learned in class or during study time. Document how you used your study hours this week, how it felt to write in class and out of class, what you learned about writing and about yourself as a writer, how you saw yourself learning and evolving as a writer, what you learned about specific topics. What goals do you have for the next week?
4. For each of the writing tasks you have assigned to you in the next couple weeks, attempt each of the Prewriting Activities and Structure Techniques here. Which work best for you? Does the success of the strategy vary by the task's purpose and audience? How will the knowledge you've gained shape your unique writing process?

## Researching as Part of the Process

Unlike quick prewriting activities, researching is best done slowly and methodically and, depending on the project, can take a considerable amount of time. Researching is exciting, as students activate their curiosity and learn about the topic, developing ideas

about the direction of their writing. The goal of researching is to gain background understanding on a topic and to check one's original ideas against those of experts. However, it is important for the writer to be aware that the process of conducting research can become a trap for procrastinators. Students often feel like researching a topic is the same as doing the assignment, but it's not.

### Researching Pitfalls

The two aspects of researching that are often misunderstood are as follows:

1. Writers start the research process too late so the information they find never really becomes their own setting themselves up for way more quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing the words of others than is appropriate for the 70% one's own words and 30% the words of others ratio necessary for college-level research-based writing.
2. Writers become so involved in the research process that they don't start the actual writing process soon enough so as to meet a due date with a well written, edited, and revised finished composition.

Being thoughtful about limiting your research time—and using a planner of some sort to organize your schedule—is a way to keep yourself on task with research. The value of research should not be underestimated in the writing process. Often, it's the students who take the time to research effectively that develop the most appropriate documents for their rhetorical situations.

This can't be overstated.

Student-writers who prioritize research usually produce the best documents.

Student-writers sometimes think that if they visited the library in a former English course, they know how to use the library. However, a specific research might require specific tasks and specific sources that you might not be familiar with. Asking a librarian for help will save you a lot of time and help you locate much better sources. Remember that librarians are the experts. And, they are available to you at no cost. I cannot urge you enough - **for every writing task you have in your academic and professional life, ask a librarian for advice.**

### General Researching Tips

1. Schedule an appointment to discuss your writing assignment with a librarian. Appointments can be face-to-face, online, or over the phone. Or you can email a librarian (remember to develop an effective professional email as described in this text). Share the assignment description with the librarian, and be clear about what kinds of help you'd like. You might ask questions such as: What are the best databases for me to search? What electronic books or movies are available about my topic? What keywords will yield the best results? Be sure to thank the librarian for their time!
2. Consider unexpected forms of research. Student-writers often look to online searches for research, but what about other options? Some business writing tasks in particular rely on research that cannot be found in databases or books. Let's say, for instance, your writing task is to develop a set of instructions. You could look to personal blogs from people in the career field you're researching. Perhaps they have written a blog post with a similar set of instructions. Or you could watch Youtube videos for examples of instructions. You can also interview people to ask for their insight. A word of caution though - when looking at how others have written documents, **take extra care not to model your document similarly.** Their work is copyrighted; you must honor copyright, or you could lose your job or worse. In the academic setting, academic dishonesty consequences might apply as well.
3. Cite your information as you research and write. Often, student-writers will wait until late in their writing process to figure out citations. That is a flawed approach though because you could miss a citation or several, also leading to issues and consequences of academic dishonesty. An annotated bibliography is a great way to keep track of the sources you research and why you think they might be valuable to your writing. However, you could develop a less formal note-taking strategy.

## Drafting as Part of the Process

Once you have spent time and effort preparing to write by gathering ideas, researching concepts, and organizing content, you are ready to begin drafting.

Many instructors recommend a practice that is referred to as fast drafting, in which the student writes under the pressure of a time limit, much like freewriting. This allows students to create without their inner critic undermining their momentum. It empowers the “creator hand” to work with agency, while silencing the “editor hand.”



To do fast drafting, you first need to set up the conditions that will help in your success and is appropriate to your abilities to focus. The following are easy steps writers follow:

- Create a block of time in which there are no interruptions. This should be a realistic length, given a writer's ability to focus, from 10 minutes at a time to 75 minutes or longer.
- Decide on the goal: Write a paragraph in 10 minutes, 2 pages in 1 hour, or a complete document in 1 hour and 15 minutes.

For some, 75 minutes is a good length, but some students find that after 30 minutes they can no longer concentrate. If that is the case, plan on several shorter sessions of distraction-free time.

During this time, students should turn off their phones and social media, let the dog outside, and ensure that it's time for children to be asleep. **This needs to be quiet, concentrated time.**

Let go of your worries about good and bad ideas. There will be time to rethink, rephrase, and rework during the revision process.

#### General Drafting Tips

1. When a writer struggles without direction of what to write, it is usually due to a lack of prewriting or researching. Remember researching provides the raw material to "build" a written document. And prewriting helps to develop those raw materials further. Also remember the writing process is recursive. If you have reached the drafting stage but are struggling to complete a 20-minute drafting session to get ideas onto the page, consider a strategy from the prewriting or researching stage.
2. Use placeholders as you draft. When I write, if I'm not sure what I want to say on a topic, I use /// to mark that section. For instance, I might write ///need to find data to support this claim/// and then continue writing. That keeps me focused on getting all of my ideas on paper while I have them. Later, I can use the "Find" search in my word processing program and search for ///. That will remind me of any sections that require further development. This is also a good technique for citations. If you're unsure how to cite a source, use a placeholder, and come back to that task later.
3. Draft early. Student-writers almost always report to me after completing a writing assignment that they wished they would have started earlier. Start early. Don't procrastinate. Ideally, you will complete your draft and then step away from it for a day or two at least. Then when you look back at it, you will have fresh eyes to critically analyze the content, so you can revise appropriately.

### Revising as Part of the Process

Revision literally means to re-see or re-envision a piece of writing. Too often, student-writers may be so pleased to have completed an assignment that they skip revision and instead jump to editing. Or, student-writers may be too busy and overwhelmed with life to give revision the attention it deserves.

Trust this fact, though ***-good writing is made in the revision part of the process.***

No writer gets it right the first time.

That is why revision is so crucial.

#### The House Analogy

I once had a writing professor in college who described the revision and editing steps of the writing process similarly to beautifying your home. Editing is akin to straightening the pictures on the shelves, perfecting the setting of the table, and making sure things are just so. Revision is all the other stuff - knocking down walls, remodeling rooms, replacing or moving furniture, or sometimes deciding to pick up and move altogether.

To skip revision is like putting a beautiful wreath on the front door of a construction zone. It will not succeed in the having the desired effect on your audience.

When you revise, you may have to re-frame the focus of your message. You may have to delete entire sections or majorly rewrite them. You may have to decide your topic is not working, which is a brave decision to make once you have already begun. In fact, **revision is about courage.** Have you ever heard the saying, you must kill your darlings? Even if you love something you've written or a piece overall, if it does not fit the rhetorical situation - in other words, if it does not meet the expectations of your assignment's purpose and honor the needs and expectations of your audience - you are best to kill it in revision.



Earlier in the chapter, I asked you to use critical analysis while researching. Therefore, research relies on your ability to critically analyze someone else's information. **Revision relies on your ability to critically analyze your own information.**

### Practical Tools for Revision

Revision may involve **adding, rearranging, removing, and replacing (ARRR)** words, sentences, paragraphs, and ideas. Since writing is recursive, revising may require revisiting the prewriting stage.

#### Adding

What else does the reader need to know? If the essay doesn't meet the required word or page count, what areas can be expanded? Where would further explanation help key points to be more clear? This is a good time to go back to the prewriting notes and look for ideas which weren't included in the draft.

#### Rearranging

Even when writers carefully plan their writing, they may need to rearrange sections for their essays to flow better.

#### Removing

Some ideas just don't work or don't contribute enough to the overall goal of the essay. Often when writers delete excess words or paragraphs, the ideas become clearer.

#### Replacing

Vivid details help bring writing to life. Writers need to look for strong examples and quotable passages from outside sources to support their arguments. If particular paragraphs aren't working well, writers need to try rewriting them.

### Other Useful Strategies for Revision

There are many tips and tricks to help you move into a critical mind frame, so you are able to analyze your own writing. Here are a few that might help you, but as a continued exploration of further understanding your unique writing process, never be afraid to turn to search engines to ask such questions as: what are the best ways to revise? What are revising tricks that work? You could also look to social media and ask friends and colleagues about their writing process and the tools that work best for them!

#### Reverse Outlining

In reverse outlining, the student reads through the written text and notes, noting down the topic of each paragraph. This way, the student can review if each paragraph has a clear focus and if each paragraph fits the overall organization of the paper. More on reverse outlining is available at *The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)*, "[Reverse Outlining: An Exercise for Taking Notes and Revising Your Work](#)."

#### Reading Aloud

The act of reading one's essay aloud allows the student to "hear it" in the way a reader will. This act permits the writer to slow down and pay attention to all words in the essay. They get a sense of what a reader experiences, where words are clear and effective, and where they are weak. Poorly structured sentences are hard to read out loud, indicating that this would be a good place to start revising. This technique is a great precursor for receiving feedback from others. It also helps writers take responsibility for their writing.

### How to Incorporate Feedback in Revision

Feedback is a wonderful tool in the revision process. Some instructors require student-writers to give each other feedback; this is often referred to as peer review. Other instructors may give every student-writer feedback on their projects directly. This may involve a list of general concepts to work on or in-line comments handwritten on a printed document or typed using the comments feature of an electronic document. Still, student-writers may seek their own feedback by sharing their work with friends and family or visiting the campus writing/tutoring center or using an online tutoring program.

There is value in receiving different kinds of feedback. If you participate in peer review, that does not mean you would not benefit from sharing with a tutor. Likewise, if your parent, sibling, or partner often reads your work, that does not mean feedback from your classmates will not help you. Writing is subjective. That means that you will likely receive varying bits of advice from everyone who reads your work. But when you have a vast array of feedback, you can consider the trends that cannot be ignored. Additionally, you may find that some feedback resonates with you while other feedback does not. Give careful consideration to the feedback you receive, but also be brave enough to accept or reject as you see fit. Remember, though, revision relies on your ability to think critically about your own work.

#### General Revision Tips

1. Look back at a writing assignment you've completed in the past. Either reverse outline it or read it aloud. After doing so, consider what changes you might make if you were to revisit the assignment again. To improve the document: What could be added? What could be rearranged? What could be removed? What could be replaced?
2. Find a partner or group of classmates who are willing to meet weekly either face-to-face or online. During your meetings, read your writing assignments aloud, and give each other feedback on the content and language of the work. This should be a group you are committed to working with throughout the semester with the goal of helping each other grow as writers.
3. Explore tutoring services at your institution. Ask your instructor what face-to-face and online options are available to you. Make a point to submit your first writing assignment for feedback through one of the tutoring options. Once you do, you will know whether and/or how the services would be useful for you as you continue with your other writing assignments in the course.

### Editing as Part of the Process

The process of editing is an ongoing activity for all writers. From the time they come up with a possible topic, they begin editing their ideas and directions in which to go. Once they begin to write, however, the editing takes a new path. Writers edit their own work by reading with fresh eyes and deciding if words need to be moved around or changed. They look for misspellings and awkward wording, and they rework for the sake of clarity. They check their work for typos and unintentional repetition of words and phrases, and they check all the grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

#### Questions to Ask

- Is this saying what I think it does?
- Am I being as clear as possible?
- Is there a more concise or artful way that I can express this important idea?

However, it is extremely important not to focus on editing too early in the writing process. If you write one sentence or paragraph and immediately begin to edit it, you may find that you lose the flow of your ideas. Suddenly, while focusing on how to spell a word, the whole rest of the essay gets put on hold. The inner editor or critic can inhibit writers, causing them to lose flow and to experience perfectionism and writer's block. Most instructors recommend that writers ban their critics until they have completed their first drafts and revision has taken place. This saves writers the wasted effort that comes with closely editing material that doesn't make the final cut anyway.

At later points during the document's creation, an outside set of editorial eyes may be needed—those of a peer, instructor, colleague, or formal editor—to help move that piece of text toward excellence. In addition to the big-picture structural or information-based considerations, the need for a comma or better word may be the focus of editing efforts. Good editing allows the writer to submit the written creation with the confidence that it is the best it can be and stands as something to truly be proud of.

### Grammar: The Grand Dame

According to Merriam-Webster, grammar is a system of rules that defines the structure of a language. For most of the USA, that system is Standard American English (SAE). Grammar is the way people use language rules and how words are used in a certain order to form phrases and clauses that relay a meaning for readers. The term “syntax” (the art of sentence structure) goes hand-in-hand with this.

Writers and speakers of any given language are aware that the rules related to grammar and usage of that language are largely appropriated not by formal instruction and memorization but informally and even subconsciously as one grows up listening, speaking and reading. So it's important to note that, as those who use language every day, students already have internalized

essential grammar rules. Most college writers struggle with only one or two main grammar blind-spots, like how to correctly use a comma or semicolon. Once they master these, they can confidently edit their own work.

### Language Usage

Writing is all about decision-making. Writers need to ask, “How should I craft this sentence, this paragraph? Given the effect of two possible punctuation marks, which one should I use? What is the effect of this word instead of that one, so similar in meaning but carrying a more negative connotation?” In this way, writing is about making endless choices.

### Precision of Words

Sometimes, in early drafting, writers fall back on words that are vague or boring. For example, consider sentences starting with “This” or “It.” Unless the previous sentence made it totally clear what the “This” or the “It” is, the reader will be confused. For example,

Instead of the following: “This is an exciting point in the movie.”

How about this?

“The surprise ending of movie is exciting.”

The same thing goes for starting a sentence with the personal pronoun “It.” See the two sentences below.

Instead of this: “It caused the audience to break into applause.”

Define the “It” like this. “The final scene caused the audience to break into applause.”

To note, this kind of sentence structure is essentially using words as “filler” to take up space within a sentence and creates a sort of vagueness for the reader who will wonder what the subject of the sentence might be. Sometimes such sentence construction is fine, but writers use it too often.

In addition, many students believe that using one of the following words adds an element of description or accentuation to their phrases; however, these specific words are overused by writers and should be given special consideration:

- Really
- Very
- Just

**Trick #1:** If writers conduct a global search for each of the three words above, they can use them as “red flags” to alert themselves to the perfect place to try to find a better way of saying what they want to say. How does one improve vocabulary? Use a thesaurus and read more.

What’s a word for “very scary”? Frightening.

What’s another way of saying “really hungry”? Famished.

On another note: The phrase “a lot” has generally outrun its usage by the time one reaches college. Generalizations are better avoided, as they are vague and imprecise. Academics prefer statistics and specific, verifiable statements.

### Repetition of Words and Phrases

The unintentional repetition of words and phrases is one of the most common oversights writers make. They all have their go-to words—ones that come naturally to them when they speak and write. The general advice is for writers to use a thesaurus to find a synonym for the overused word. However, what if there isn’t a synonym for the word? Look at the paragraph below:

This past summer, I had the opportunity to intern at Sea Life Park. Sea Life Park is known for being an exciting destination for locals and tourists to experience the wonders of sea life from throughout the Pacific. At the park, green sea turtles, or Honu, thrive and even continue to have babies. In addition, dolphins and the Hawaiian monk seals provide visitors with the ability to view these majestic creatures but also learn about their significance within the Pacific Ocean ecosystem and their importance within island culture.

This writer’s paragraph isn’t bad. However, “Sea Life Park” is repeated twice in the first two sentences. In addition, in sentence three, he begins with “At the park” followed by another “sea.” He defended his construction and word choice by stating, “But there isn’t another word for ‘Sea Life Park’.” Indeed, the “find a synonym” strategy would not work in this case just like there isn’t a synonym for “parking lot” or “ice cream sundae.” So another trick has to be used.

**Trick #2:** If a synonym doesn't exist, remove the repetitive words and combine the sentences.

This past summer, I had the opportunity to intern at Sea Life Park, known for being an exciting destination for locals and tourists to experience the wonders of sea life from throughout the Pacific.

Replacing the repeated phrase with a comma before “known” does the trick. But wait. The phrase “sea life” appears again a little later in this same sentence. Now what?

**Trick #3:** Use your creativity to craft an original way of saying the same thing. Instead of “Sea Life Park,” call it “the world-renowned marine playground committed to protection, preservation, and education” and the writer has not only fixed the repetition issue but also introduced wonderfully original prose.

**Trick #4:** Writers should read everything out loud so the ear can catch what the eye might miss.

Voice, for writers, is something uniquely their own. It's the way they put words together and involves their distinctive way of looking at the world. It makes one writer's work stand out from that of others in its originality and authenticity. Key, though, is understanding that the development of one's writing voice takes time and is ever changing. That's what makes it so exciting.

Here are samples of sentences from two famous writers. Though both these writers lived in America at approximately the same time, their “voices” are very different. What are the elements that make these sentences so different?

It was very late and everyone had left the cafe except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the daytime the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference. (Ernest Hemingway, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.”)

Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care, a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town, dating from that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor—he who fathered the edict that no woman should appear on the streets without an apron—remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity. (William Faulkner, “A Rose for Emily.”)

Style: Style is much broader than voice. Some writers have a writing style that's complex and packed with personification, metaphor, and imagery. Other writers have a more straightforward style with more simplicity or directness.

### Engaging the Reader

When it comes down to it, writers within the academic setting do best when they acknowledge that what they are trying to produce is reader-based prose—written content that informs the reader of the essential message the writer is wanting to convey and also does so in a manner that is engaging and well-received.

On this note, it is important that the reader is able to follow the path of words, images, and meaning that the writer is wanting to create. Readers can become distracted and disinterested by awkward word choices, unintentional repetition, and incorrect spelling, grammar, word usage, and punctuation.

### Spelling

All writers have words that give them hassles, even if they have learned how to spell those words. Does the word “essence” end with a “ce” or “se”? Does the word “privilege” spend any time on the “ledge”?

By the time one reaches college, one knows if spelling words correctly comes easily or not. And everyone knows that spell-checkers won't pick up every mistake. Writers need to make time for careful editing and proofreading throughout the writing process with an extra special proofreading session before turning in any assignment. In addition, though, here is a trick that can actually help one become a better speller, even into adulthood.

**Trick #5:** Create a running list of all the words that you tend to misspell. If you find another word, add it to the list. Every time you sit down to write, scroll through your list. You'll find that the spelling will become less of an issue.

### Punctuation and Mechanics

Punctuation refers to the “symbols” writers use to help readers understand and process the information they wish to convey through the sentences they write. Somewhat like the notes and rests within a piece of music help musicians move quickly or slowly through a composition, punctuation marks are used for effect.

Mechanics are established rules within a language system, and sometimes include the individual decisions writers make regarding the use of capitalization, underlining, italicizing, numbers versus numerals, the placement of specific punctuation marks, and how

this differs throughout English-speaking countries (e.g., “towards” in the UK is often “toward” in the US, and periods and commas always go inside quotation marks in the U.S. but not in Canada).

For examples, see Table 1:

<b>All compound sentences need either a semicolon or a comma conjunction combination.</b> Make sure that a comma is included if there are two independent clauses. Omit the comma if the second clause is subordinate.	Example: Unless the surf is bad, we are going to surf in the morning. Example: The surf is great; we’re going surfing.
<b>Commas and periods go inside quotation marks.</b> In the U.S., current style guides place commas and periods inside quotation marks.	Example: She said, “I’m not going with you.” Example: While she said, “I’m sick,” she still came with us.
<b>Absolutes: Avoid them in most all cases.</b>	Example: Like all other eighteen-year-old girls, I love drama.
<b>Use the subjunctive form of the verb with the words “if” and “wish” (i.e., use “were” not “was”).</b>	Example: I wish I were taller. If I were taller, I could play professional volleyball.
<b>Using “so” and “that” right next to each other is often not needed unless you want to make your sentence sound more like an announcement of sorts.</b>	Example: I took a culinary class so that I could show my gratitude toward those who had influenced me.
<b>Using “so” to mean “really” or “very” without using “that” is an error.</b>	Example: I am so grateful to have been a part of a family that has nurtured and emphasized the importance of our heritage. This sentence should read as: I am grateful to have been part of a family <b>who</b> has nurtured and emphasized the importance of our heritage.”
<b>A person “who” versus a person “that.”</b>	Example: I was furious when this happened because the person who was our advisor made the wrong decision.
<b>Only use single quotes when within double quotes.</b> (In UK English, the two would be reversed.)	Example: She declared, “At that moment, that ‘Ah-ha’ moment, I decided to completely move in.”
<b>No “etc.” (which is the abbreviation for et cetera) in formal academic writing in most disciplines.</b>	Example: I would lose the ball, fumble passes, and miss shots, etc. It’s enough to phrase this sentence as: I would falter in many ways including losing the ball, fumbling passes, and missing shots.
<b>Avoid exclamation points in academic writing unless you want it to sound like you are yelling.</b>	Example: I got ready and made it to the bus on time. The period works just fine here.
<b>Be especially mindful of singular and plural subjects with subject-verb agreement.</b>	Example: The source of the problems were my father’s lack of work. This sentence should read as follows: Example: The source [singular] of the problems was [singular] my father’s lack of work.
<b>Colons cannot directly follow verbs.</b>	Example: Incorrect: They all harmoniously incorporate elements such as: romance, humor, and, of course, drama. Better: They all harmoniously incorporate elements such as romance, humor, and, of course, drama. (The “such as” does the trick.)
<b>Do not address the reader directly (i.e., no “you”) unless you mean to.</b>	Example: Incorrect: If you need to buy books, you should go to the college bookstore. Better: Students who need to buy books can go to the college bookstore.
<b>Avoid italics for emphasis and keep them just for foreign words</b>	Incorrect: And one should <i>never</i> follow my footsteps. (The word “never” does not need italicizing.)

**The correlative conjunction “not only” needs both words “but” and “also.” But the “also” could be replaced by a comma at the end of the sentence and an “as well.”**

Example: I saw how this was not only a significant aspect of my family but also of my culture. Note that no commas are needed within this sentence. Many times people like to add them with this “not only/but (also)” pair unnecessarily.

**When explaining the “reason” for something happening, you almost always do not need the word “why.”**

Example: It just so happens that teenagers and adults see the world differently, hence the reason [why] adults sometimes cannot comprehend teenage struggles the way teens do. Omit the “why” as it’s not needed.

### General Editing Tips

1. Search your draft using the “find” tool for words like “it,” “this,” “really,” “very,” “just” or “you.” See if you can find ways to eliminate these words to make your language sharper, more precise.
2. Read the sentences of your document in backward order, starting with the last sentence, and then the one above it, all the way up to the first sentence in the document. This is a great way to find fragments or to hear where the language is repetitive or unclear.
3. Make an appointment with a tutor or your instructor. Ask for help doing a close editing of two paragraphs with an eye to learning how to identify typical errors in your work, and then apply your learning to the rest of your document.
4. Business documents must be concise. While editing, pretend that you have to pay a fee for every word on the page. If each word costs you \$1, would you keep every word you have, or would you find some that are not necessary and could be cut? What if the fee were \$5 per word? Would you find more to cut? Challenge yourself to trim away all unnecessary words to make the document as concise as possible.

### Further Resources

Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (OWL) provides free writing resources and instructional material. Visit [The Purdue OWL](#) (Purdue U Writing Lab, 2019).

For further information on the steps of the writing process and tips for each of those steps, read “[The Writing Process](#)” by Ali Hal ([Daily Writing Tips](#) website, 2019).

For an editing checklist by Mignon Fogarty (also known as “Grammar Girl”), visit “[Grammar Girl’s Editing Checklist](#)” ([Quick and Dirty Tips](#) website, 2019).

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. 2nd edition, 1973, Oxford UP, 1998.

Goldberg, Natalie. *Wild Mind : Living the Writer’s Life*. Bantam Books, 1990.

**All links live as of June 2021.**

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