

# The Writing Process: Getting Started

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Since writing is complex, the process is not as neat as a list of stages makes it sound. For example, you may set up a plan and follow it. Then, in the mental excitement induced by writing, an entirely new idea may come to you. If you decide the new idea is too good to throw away, you may have to modify your earlier plans. This is one reason why the final steps of editing and proofreading are best postponed as long as possible--if you've invested too much time getting every sentence exactly right, you will naturally be unwilling to change the piece of writing in any way.

Here is a list of the main stages in the writing process. Bear in mind that this is oversimplified, and will not fit all writers or all tasks. **Handouts referred to in this sheet can be found on display or in the file cabinet.** Further information on the process to be followed for specific kinds of assignments will be found in the sheets numbered 840.1 to 840.12.

1. **Analyze the Task:** You must first consider the requirements of the assignment. First, what is your purpose? You may, for example, be asked to argue, to explain, or to prove a point, but all writing needs a purpose. Second, who is your reader? In some cases, your instructor will want you to write with a specific kind of reader in mind (a potential employer, for example) and everything you write will be shaped by the needs of that reader. Third, what is the length of the assignment and the time available to you? Are you expected to draw on your own experience and knowledge, or are you pulling in material from outside sources such as published books and articles? See 820.2 - 4.
2. **Generate Material:** The next step is to read, or think around your topic. Think of yourself as filling up a reservoir that you will draw on later. The more facts and ideas you have floating around in the reservoir, the more likely it is that you'll have what you need when you're writing the essay later on. Use a journal or notebook to jot down ideas as they come to you, or to record observations which may be useful. Remember that some of the best ideas are like stray visitors that come unannounced--catch them before they vanish. If you're writing a research essay, begin taking notes, using note cards or a loose-leafed notebook so you can reshuffle the order later. At this stage, let your mind play freely round the topic, remembering that the possibilities for any essay are limitless. See 820.5.1-2.
3. **Narrow the Topic:** Now, harness what you have and put it to use. Begin to think in practical terms: how much ground can you reasonably cover in the assigned number of pages? If you began with a broad topic (say, Assisted Reproductive Technology), you

now stake out a narrower bit of territory which you can hope to cover thoroughly (say, the factors a doctor must take into account before recommending ART to a patient). Several techniques are helpful at this stage. You can formulate a working thesis, or statement of the central point your essay will make, or the central issue which it will explore. You can construct a tentative topic outline to help you visualize the shape of the eventual essay. Or you can use the "nutshelling" technique, in which you explain either to yourself or, preferably, to someone else what your essay will do. *See 820.6 - 7.2.*

4. ***Writing the First Draft:*** Get a complete first draft on paper while you still have plenty of time ahead of you, even if you know you have gaps to fill. Don't worry if things aren't perfect at this stage; simply try to get the flow of ideas down. Inevitably, the flow sometimes dries up. You can often get it going again simply by taking a break, or by reading through what you've written and letting the thought carry you on. Use some system of marginal notes, so you can remind yourself which sections need further work, or record other possible directions you might take. Since the introductory paragraph can be the hardest section to write, you may wish to begin with a roughed-in introduction or bare thesis statement; then return to the introduction later. *See 820.8 - 10.*
5. ***Revise the Draft:*** Ideally, take a break of a day or two after you finish the first draft. Then you come back to it as the reader rather than the writer of your work. In your new role, you will be able to see which sections are strong and which need work. Revision is a reconsideration of the content and overall style of the essay. Be sure that you are fulfilling the demands of the assignment, and see if you can envisage alternative ways of developing and organizing your material. Ideally, ask someone else to read your essay, and attend to their reactions. Remember that the essay is simply something you have written: someone else's judgment on your essay is not a judgment of your personal worth. If you get negative criticism, put it to use in your revised draft. *See 820.11.*
6. ***Edit the Essay:*** Now that your essay has found its final shape, attend to the finer matters of style and grammar. Proceed from the larger units to the small: first check that your paragraphs are unified and clearly tied to your thesis, then that the sentences within the paragraphs are grammatically constructed, connected with each other, and as direct and economical as the meaning will allow. If any word is superfluous, cut it out. Try reading your work aloud; if you stumble over any sentence, it may need work. *See 820.12.*
7. ***Proofread the Essay:*** Now you're down to the very fine points. Go through your essay sentence by sentence, looking for punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and the precise format of your documentation. Go through it again word by word, preferably backwards (so that your eye won't flow over the small words) and check the spelling. This last stage requires patience. *See 820.13-14.*