



to depict two trends at once: the red line shows the percentage of women who were in the US labor force from 1948 to 2012, and the blue bars show the percentage of US workers who were women during that same period. Both trends are shown in two-year increments. To make sense of this chart, you need to read the title, the x-axis and y-axis labels, and their definitions carefully.

W-4 Writing Processes

To create anything, we generally break the work down into a series of steps. We follow a recipe (or the directions on a box) to bake a cake; we divide a piece of music into various singing parts to arrange it for a choir. So it is when we write. We rely on various processes to get from a blank page to a finished product. This chapter offers advice on some of these processes—from generating ideas to drafting to revising and editing.

W-4a Generating Ideas

The activities that follow can help you explore a topic—what you already know about it or how you might look at it in new ways.

- **Brainstorming.** Jot down everything that comes to mind about your topic, working either alone or with others. Look over your list, and try to identify connections or patterns.
- **Freewriting.** Write as quickly as you can without stopping for five to ten minutes. Then underline interesting passages. Write more, using an underlined passage as your new topic.
- **Looping.** Write for five to ten minutes, jotting down whatever you know about your subject. Then write a one-sentence summary of the most important idea. Use this summary to start another loop. Keep looping until you have a tentative focus.
- **Clustering.** Clustering is a way of connecting ideas visually. Write your topic in the middle of a page, and write subtopics and other ideas around it. Circle each item, and draw lines to connect related ideas.
- **Questioning.** You might start by asking *What? Who? When? Where? How? and Why?* You could also ask questions as if the topic were a play: *What happens? Who are the participants? When does the action take place? How? Where? Why does this happen?*

- **Keeping a journal.** Jotting down ideas, feelings, or the events of your day in a journal is a good way to generate ideas—and a journal is a good place to explore why you think as you do.
- **Starting some research.** Depending on your topic and purpose, you might do a little preliminary research to get basic information and help you discover paths you might follow.

W-4b Developing a Tentative Thesis

A **THESIS** is a statement that indicates your main point, identifying your topic and the **CLAIM** you are making about it. Here are some steps for developing a tentative thesis statement:

1. **State your topic as a question.** You may have a topic, such as “gasoline prices.” But that doesn’t make a statement. To move from a topic to a thesis statement, start by turning your topic into a question: “What causes fluctuations in gasoline prices?”
2. **Then turn your question into a position.** A thesis statement is an assertion—it takes a stand or makes a claim. One way to establish a thesis is to answer your own question: “Gasoline prices fluctuate for several reasons.”
3. **Narrow your thesis.** A good thesis is specific, telling your audience exactly what your essay will cover: “Gasoline prices fluctuate because of production procedures, consumer demand, international politics, and oil companies’ policies.”
4. **Qualify your thesis.** Though you may sometimes want to state your thesis strongly and bluntly, often you need to acknowledge that your assertion may not be unconditionally true. In such cases, consider adding **QUALIFYING WORDS** such as “may,” “very,” “likely,” and “often” to qualify your statement: “Gasoline prices very likely fluctuate because of production procedures, consumer demand, international politics, and oil companies’ policies.”

Whatever tentative thesis you start with, keep in mind that you may want to modify it as you proceed.

W-4c Organizing and Drafting

Organizing. You may want to use an outline to organize your ideas before you begin to draft. You can create an informal outline by simply listing your ideas in the order in which you want to write about them.

Thesis statement

First main idea

Supporting evidence or detail

Supporting evidence or detail

Second main idea

Supporting evidence or detail

Supporting evidence or detail

An outline can help you organize your thoughts and see where more research is needed. As you draft and revise, though, stay flexible—and be ready to change direction as your topic develops.

Drafting. At some point, you need to write out a draft. As you draft, you may need to get more information, rethink your thesis, or explore some new ideas. But first, you just need to get started.

- **Write quickly in spurts.** Try to write a complete draft, or a complete section of a longer draft, in one sitting. If you need to stop in the middle, jot down some notes about where you’re headed so that you can pick up your train of thought when you begin again.
- **Expect surprises.** Writing is a form of thinking; you may end up somewhere you didn’t anticipate. That can be a good thing—but if not, it’s OK to double back or follow a new path.
- **Expect to write more than one draft.** Parts of your first draft may not achieve your goals. That’s OK—as you revise, you can fill in gaps and improve your writing.
- **Don’t worry about correctness.** You can check words, dates, and spelling at a later stage. For now, just write.

W-4d Getting Response

As writers, we need to be able to look at our work with a critical eye, to see if our writing is doing what we want it to do. We also need to get feedback from other readers. Here is a list of questions for reading a draft closely and considering how it should or could be revised:

- Will the **OPENING** paragraph grab readers' attention? If so, how does it do so? If not, how else might the piece begin?
- What is the **THESIS**? Is it stated directly? If not, should it be?
- Are there good **REASONS** and sufficient **EVIDENCE** to support the thesis? Is there anywhere you'd like to have more detail?
- Is there a clear pattern of organization? Does each part relate to the thesis? Are there appropriate **TRANSITIONS** to help readers follow your train of thought? Are there headings that make the structure of the text clear—and if not, should there be?
- Will the text meet the needs and expectations of its **AUDIENCE**? Where might they need more information or guidance?
- Are all **QUOTATIONS** introduced with a **SIGNAL PHRASE** and documented? Are they accurately quoted, and have any changes and omissions been indicated with brackets and ellipses?
- Is your **STANCE** on the topic clear and consistent throughout? Is the **tone** appropriate for your audience and purpose?
- Is the **CONCLUSION** satisfying? What does it leave readers thinking? How else might the text end?
- Is the title one that will attract interest? Does it announce your topic and give some sense of what you have to say?
- Are there any **VISUALS**—tables, charts, photos? If so, are they clearly labeled with captions? Is **ALTERNATIVE TEXT** provided for visuals in a digital text? If you did not create the visuals yourself, have you cited your sources?

W-4e Taking Stock and Revising

Once you've gotten response from others, it's time to take stock of what you've drafted and what readers have said about it. Revision may feel daunting, but it will improve your finished work. Also, knowing that you're going to revise could reduce writer's block when you sit down to write the first draft. Since you know you'll be making changes later, you can think of your first draft as a rehearsal, a warm-up.

Revising also gives you a chance to try out words and ideas and weigh different options for expressing the points that you've already written. Give yourself a little room to play and experiment. Here are some tips for taking stock of your draft and planning your next moves:

- **Summarize from memory.** Before you read any comments on your first draft made by your instructor or peers, and without looking at the draft, your notes, or any of your sources, sit down and write a brief **SUMMARY** of your whole draft. You probably won't remember everything, but it will be useful to know what sticks with you and what doesn't. Mention which parts you remember struggling with and what you thought about writing but didn't.
- **Imagine how others might understand your draft.** Imagine you're someone who knows nothing about your topic—your grandfather, perhaps, or a friend from work—and read your first draft the way they might. (Try reading out loud.) Did it read smoothly? Note any parts that didn't. What questions might your reader ask? Where might they stop and say "Wow!?" Next, read your draft again, imagining you are someone who has an *opposing* opinion on your topic. Where might they want to question or challenge you? Make a note of your imagined readers' questions or comments.
- **Consider the feedback you've received.** If you've received comments on your draft from your instructor and/or peers, trust that the feedback has been given in a spirit of helpfulness; read it calmly and in good faith. Evaluate all the comments with an open

mind—which ones make the most sense, are the most important? Which ones can you disregard?

- **Put it all together.** Look again at the summary you wrote from memory, your notes about the responses of your imagined readers, and the feedback you've received. Where do they coincide? Where do they differ? Considering those three angles will give you a good idea of what to work on. Keep in mind that the goals of a revision, in general, are to sharpen and polish what you've already done. Having a grasp of the whole task ahead of you will help you focus and get it done.

Set your goals for revising. Remember what you are trying to accomplish with your revision:

- First, you want to sharpen your focus. Find your **THESIS**; does it clearly articulate your main point? Have you provided the necessary contextual information in the opening paragraph? Does your ending provide a satisfactory conclusion?
- Next, you want to strengthen your argument. Check every key idea to make sure that each one is fully explained. You may need to qualify some of your **CLAIMS** or provide more **REASONS** or **EVIDENCE** to support them.
- Third, check to make sure that everything is understandable and cohesive. Is every new or unfamiliar term defined? Does your title give readers a good sense of what your text is about?

Plan and execute. Make a realistic estimate of the time (and energy) you have available for doing the work and assess what can reasonably be accomplished in that available time. Set yourself step-by-step deadlines and try not to do it all at once.

Use your main revising tools: cut, add, and reorder. Now that you have a good idea of the scope of your revision, you can classify the tasks involved into three categories: cutting existing material that may be repetitive or unnecessary; adding new material; and

reorganizing existing material. The order in which you do the tasks is a matter of preference.

- **Changing the sequence of sections or paragraphs** (or even sentences within a paragraph) can help your work flow more smoothly. Try it the old-school way: print your draft, cut the paragraphs apart with scissors, mix up the slips of paper, and arrange them in a logical order. Does everything end up in the same order as the original draft? (Hint: it often doesn't.)
- **Cutting whole paragraphs or just sentences and phrases** can sharpen your focus. Don't just delete material; save it in a separate "out-takes" document with any related notes or comments. Dropped pieces might be useful later.
- **Adding material**—details, supporting evidence, examples, etc.—can strengthen a point or clarify information. And don't forget to add good **TRANSITIONS** to tie your ideas together.

W-4f Editing and Proofreading

Your ability to produce clear, error-free writing shows something about your ability as a writer, so you should be sure to edit and proofread your work carefully. Editing is the stage at which you work on the details of your paragraphs, sentences, language, and punctuation to make your writing as clear, precise, and appropriate as possible. The following guidelines can help you check the paragraphs, sentences, and words in your drafts.

Editing paragraphs

- Does each paragraph focus on one point and have a **TOPIC SENTENCE** that announces that point? Does every sentence in the paragraph relate to that point?
- Where is the most important information in each paragraph—at the beginning? at the end? in the middle?

- Check to see how your paragraphs fit together. Does each one follow smoothly from the one before it? Do you need to add **TRANSITIONS**?
- How does the **OPENING** paragraph catch readers' attention? How else might you begin?
- Does the **CONCLUSION** provide a satisfactory ending? How else might you conclude?

For more help with paragraphs, see **W-5**.

Editing sentences

- Check to see that each sentence is complete, with a **SUBJECT** and a **VERB**, and that it begins with a capital letter and ends with a period, question mark, or exclamation point.
- Are your sentences varied? If they all start with the subject or are all the same length, try varying them by adding **TRANSITIONS** or introductory phrases—or by combining some sentences.
- Be sure that lists or series are **PARALLEL** in form—all nouns (lions, tigers, bears), all verbs (hop, skip, jump), and so on.
- Do many of your sentences begin with “It” or “There”? Sometimes these words help introduce a topic, but often they make a text vague.

For more help with sentences, see **S-1** through **S-9**.

Editing language

- Are you sure of the meaning of every word?
- Do your words all convey the appropriate **TONE**?
- Is any of your language too general? For example, do you need to replace verbs like “be” or “do” with more specific **VERBS**?
- Check all **PRONOUNS** to see that they have clear **ANTECEDENTS**.
- Have you used any **CLICHÉS**? Academic writing in the US tends to avoid clichés.

- Double check language that refers to other people to be sure you're using preferred terms. Edit out language that might be considered **SEXIST** or would otherwise stereotype any individual or group.
- Check for “it's” and “its.” Use “it's” to mean “it is” or “it has” and “its” to mean “belonging to it.”

For more help with language, see *Editing the Errors That Matter* (**E-1** through **E-6**) and **L-1** through **L-11**.

Proofreading

This is the final stage of the writing process, when you check for misspelled words, mixed-up fonts, missing pages, and so on.

- Use your computer's grammar and spelling checkers, but be aware that they're not foolproof. Computer programs rely on formulas and banks of words—so what they flag (or not) as mistakes may not be accurate.
- Place a ruler or piece of paper under each line as you read. Use your finger or a pencil as a pointer.
- Focus on each sentence, one at a time, looking for anything that needs to be changed. Try beginning with the last sentence and working backward.
- Read your text out loud to yourself—or better, to others. Ask someone else to read your text aloud to you. Listen for areas that could be clearer.

W-4g Collaborating

Even if you do much of your writing alone, you probably spend a lot of time working with others, either face-to-face or online. Here are some guidelines for collaborating successfully.

Working in a group

- For face-to-face meetings, make sure everyone is facing one another and is physically part of the group.

- Be respectful and tactful. This is especially important when collaborating online. Without tone of voice, facial expressions, and other body language, your words carry all the weight. Remember also that what you write may be forwarded to others.
- When collaborating online, decide as a group how best to exchange drafts and comments. Group members may not all have access to the same equipment and software. Name files carefully.
- Each meeting needs an agenda—and careful attention to the clock. Appoint one person as timekeeper and another person as group leader; a third member should keep a record of the discussion and send around a summary afterward.

Working on a group writing project

- Define the overall project as clearly as possible, and divide the work into parts.
- Assign each group member specific tasks with deadlines.
- Try to accommodate everyone's style of working, but make sure everyone performs.
- Work for consensus, if not necessarily total agreement.

W-5 Developing Paragraphs

Paragraphs help us organize our writing for our readers. Here one writer recalls when he first understood what a paragraph does.

I still remember the exact moment when I first understood, with a sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. . . .

—Sherman Alexie, "The Joy of Reading and Writing"

This chapter will help you build "fences" around words that work together on a common topic. It offers tips and examples for composing strong paragraphs.

W-5a Focusing on the Main Point

All the sentences in a paragraph should focus on one main idea, as they do in this paragraph from an article about the Mall of America.

There is, of course, nothing naturally abhorrent in the human impulse to dwell in marketplaces or the urge to buy, sell, and trade. Rural Americans traditionally looked forward to the excitement and sensuality of market day; Native Americans traveled long distances to barter and trade at sprawling, festive encampments. In Persian bazaars and in the ancient Greek agoras the very soul of the community was preserved and could be seen, felt, heard, and smelled as it might be nowhere else. All over the planet the humblest of people have always gone to market with hope in their hearts and in expectation of something beyond mere goods—seeking a place where humanity is temporarily in ascendance, a palette for the senses, one another. —David Guterson, "Enclosed. Encyclopedic. Endured. One Week at the Mall of America"

Topic sentences. To help you focus a paragraph on one main point, state that point in a **TOPIC SENTENCE**. Often, but not always, you might