W-3 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-3a 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 5–10 minutes. Then underline interesting passages. Write more, using an underlined passage as your new topic.

- *Looping.* Write for 5–10 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-3b Coming Up with 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.* A good way to narrow a thesis is to ask and answer questions about it: *Why do gasoline prices fluctuate?* The answer will help you craft a narrow, focused thesis.

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 such terms as *may, very likely,* and *often* to qualify your statement: *Gasoline prices <u>very likely</u> fluctuate because of production procedures, consumer demand, international politics, and oil companies' policies.*

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

W-3c Organizing and Drafting

Organizing. You may want to use an outline to help 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 okay 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 okay—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-3d 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 beginning 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?
- 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 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?
- Are there any VISUALS—tables, charts, photos? If so, are they clearly labeled with captions? If you did not create them yourself, have you cited your sources?
- Will the text meet the needs and expectations of its AUDIENCE? Where might they need more information or guidance?
- Is your STANCE on the topic clear and consistent throughout? Is the TONE appropriate for your audience and purpose?
- Is the ending 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?

W-3e Revising

Once you've studied your draft with a critical eye and gotten response from other readers, it's time to revise. Start with global (whole-text) issues, and gradually move to smaller, sentence-level details.

- *Give yourself time to revise.* Set deadlines that will give you plenty of time to work on your REVISION. Try to get some distance. If you can, step away from your writing for a while and think about something else.
- *Revise to sharpen your focus.* Examine your THESIS to make sure it matches your purpose and clearly articulates your main point. Does each paragraph contribute to your main point? Does your beginning introduce your topic and provide any necessary contextual information? Does your ending provide a satisfying conclusion?
- *Revise to strengthen the argument.* Make sure that all your key ideas are fully explained. If readers find some of your CLAIMS unconvincing, you may need to qualify them—or provide more REASONS or EVIDENCE. If you add evidence, make sure that it all supports your point and includes any needed documentation.
- *Revise to improve the organization.* You may find it helpful to outline your draft to see all the parts readily. If anything seems out of place, move it—or if need be, cut it completely. Check to see if you've included appropriate TRANSITIONS or headings.
- *Revise to be sure readers will understand what you're saying.* Make sure that you've defined any terms they may not know. If you don't state a thesis directly, consider whether you should. Look closely at your title to be sure it gives a sense of what your text is about.

W-3f 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 when you work on

the details of your paragraphs, sentences, language, and punctuation to make your writing as clear, precise, and correct 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—at the beginning? 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 first paragraph catch readers' attention? How else might you begin?

- Does the final paragraph provide a satisfactory ending? How else might you conclude?

For more help with paragraphs, see **W-4**.

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**? Your writing will almost always be better without such predictable expressions.

- Be careful with language that refers to other people. 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" and *its* to mean "belonging to it."

For more help with language, see **L-1** through **L-10**.

Proofreading

This is the final stage of the writing process, the point 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 very reliable. Computer programs rely on formulas and banks of words—so what they flag (or not) as mistakes may not be accurate. For example, if you were to write "Sea you soon," the word *Sea* would not be flagged as misspelled.

- Place a ruler or piece of paper under each line as you read. Use your finger or a pencil as a pointer.

- 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.

W-3g 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 write 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.