The Writing Process

Most of the time, the only part that we see of a writer’s process is the finished product. Odds are you have never seen a rough draft of Harry Potter. If you have, you probably know J. K. Rowling personally.

Unfortunately, this means that we rarely think about the writing process in terms of the work that goes on before a writer considers a piece of writing “finished.” To illustrate this, let’s imagine a first-year college student named Jimmy.

When Jimmy sits down to write, since he has only ever experienced the final drafts of other people’s writing, he expects a final draft to begin the moment we first sit down to write. This expectation is both unrealistic and counterproductive: No one’s first draft is as good as their final draft, and if Jimmy expects his to be, he will quickly become discouraged and begin to believe that he “can’t write.”

This is as true of journal articles as it is of novels. It’s true of speeches, personal statements, scientific abstracts and composition essays. So take a look at some of the different ways to approach writing through three different imaginary people and get some writing advice from the greats like Ernest Hemingway and Oscar Wilde.

Alexa: The Draft Dodger
Alexa hates drafting. Once she starts to put words on the page in paragraph format, it’s really easy for her to lose track of any sense of structure or organization. She wants to do everything in her power to reduce the number of drafts that she has to write. So Alexa’s process looks like this:
As you can see, there’s a lot that goes into Alexa’s final paper. She has a unique style that works for her that might not work for other people. The notecard system is not for everyone, but it can really help people who learn through sight and touch. Similarly, Alexa is good at visual organization, so working with an incredibly detailed outline helps her see how her thoughts and sources connect in one big argument.

Our next imaginary friend is very different from Alexa. Let’s meet Robert.

**Robert: The Mapmaker**

Robert doesn’t like dealing with big formal outlines. He also doesn’t necessarily like starting with research, and he doesn’t like having to keep track of notecards. So Robert has discovered a process called mind-mapping, which lets him quickly organize his thoughts. Let’s take a look at how all of this influences his writing process:

Robert is much more of a visual organizer than a physical organizer. Where Alexa likes to be able to physically move around her notecards, Robert wants the visual organization of color coding. He likes to go into his research knowing what he is hoping to find, but he also is looking for surprises that can push him in one direction or another: surprises that will reorganize his mind map. He avoids writing the introduction first because he knows that his organization will likely change as he writes, and he’ll write a better introduction once he knows what he is introducing.

Alexa and Robert both like to be organized, though, even if they organize in different ways. Let’s meet a writer who doesn’t like to organize.
Nicole: The Free(write) Spirit

Organizing is boring to Nicole. Her desk is a mess, but she knows exactly where everything is. In fact, she would never make a flowchart of her writing process. She likes to just get to writing, even though she knows that she won’t use most of what she writes. The process of putting words on a page helps her think through her ideas in a way that produces more ideas for her. Here’s what her writing process typically looks like:

Nicole gets started by putting out a piece of paper and writing down whatever comes to mind about her topic for 5 minutes or so.

She free-writes for about 10 minutes, trying to touch on everything she wants to talk about in the paper and summarize her argument.

She writes something like “MORE WORDS HERE” and moves on to the next part.

She reads through it two or three more times to catch mistakes and refine her argument.

She takes the ideas that she’s come up with and grabs a couple keywords to guide her search for sources.

She goes back through this writing and uses it to create a tentative introduction.

She keeps writing about it until she gets stuck.

Does she have enough to begin writing?

She makes paper copies of every source that she might use, and she annotates them as she reads.

She comes back to her paper and reads through it, filling in the blanks that she left for herself and looking for opportunities to revise, edit, or reorganize.

Nicolle turns in her paper.

Key Points and Advice

The key thing to remember is that there is no “right” writing process: there is only what works for you and what does not work for you. Experiment with the writing processes this handout outlines, but also find others. Play with it until you find out what gets the best writing out of you, and even then be willing to change it up if you need to.

Here are some pieces of advice from famous writers about the writing process to show you how other people feel about and approach writing.

“I hate writing, I love having written.” – Dorothy Parker

“I’ve always said there are – to oversimplify it – two kinds of writers. There are architects and gardeners. The architects do blueprints before they drive the first nail, they design the entire house, where the pipes are running, and how many rooms there are going to be, how high the roof will be. But the gardeners just dig a hole and plant the seed and see what comes up. I think all writers are partly architects and partly gardeners, but they tend

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to one side or another, and I am definitely more of a gardener. In my Hollywood years when everything does work on outlines, I had to put on my architect's clothes and pretend to be an architect. But my natural inclinations, the way I work, is to give my characters the head and to follow them. ” – George R. R. Martin

“The first draft is just you telling yourself the story.” – Terry Pratchett

“I always worked until I had something done and I always stopped when I knew what was going to happen next. That way I could be sure of going on the next day.” – Ernest Hemingway

“There are three secrets to writing a novel. Unfortunately nobody knows what they are.” – W. Somerset Maugham

“I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back again.” – Oscar Wilde

Contact

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(972) 883-6736  WritingCenter@UTDallas.edu
www.UTDallas.edu/StudentSuccess/Writing