THE WRITING PROCESS

Good writers have a remedy for so-called “writer’s block.” It consists of sitting down with a pen and a yellow legal pad and writing something to fill out a full page. Call it priming the pump. Although a genius may write perfectly the first time, every time, normal writers follow a distinct process that students can imitate.

1. Choose a topic that interests you. If you have no choice, find a way to take an interest. Remember the financial meaning of the word *interest*: to increase in value, as a savings account pays interest. With interest, your topic will develop naturally. Avoid topics that look easy.

2. Develop your ideas (see file with this title) and brainstorm. Write down your ideas and possible examples or evidence in any manner that appeals to you. Make lists or bubbles, diagrams or equations. This step is inclusive, as you gather possible information. DO NOT BEGIN OUTLINING AT THIS STAGE! Outlining requires exclusion and distinctions that limit the process of collecting material.

3. In expository writing, you must formulate and refine your *thesis*, which is your own view of the topic, consistent with the evidence or available examples. This step is interchangeable with the previous one, because as you brainstorm you may need to modify or even change your thesis entirely. Bear in mind the typical form of a good thesis.

Use a simple or a complex sentence. Adverb clauses are better that adjective clauses. Avoid compound or compound-complex sentences to express the thesis, as these do not adequately subordinate one idea to another.

Check to see how your tentative thesis differs from the topic. It should be more specific and less obvious than the topic; it should contain an element of mystery or argument to be explained or proven by the theme. Avoid puffing words like *important, discussion, different, things, greatly* and *many*.

Examples

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: The maturation of the protagonist in Faulkner’s <em>The Unvanquished</em></th>
<th>Thesis: The influence of Drusilla Hawk is enormously important for the maturation of Bayard Sartoris in Faulkner’s <em>The Unvanquished</em>. (bad, vague)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Thesis: In Faulkner’s <em>The Unvanquished</em>, Bayard Sartoris matures as his actions both parallel and diverge from those of his foil, Drusilla Hawk. (good)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Topic: The significance of poetry in <em>The Loved One</em> by Evelyn Waugh</th>
<th>Thesis: Many references to poems greatly affect the mood, tone, and style of <em>The Loved One</em>, by Evelyn Waugh. (bad, over-general)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Thesis: In Evelyn Waugh’s satiric novel <em>The Loved One</em>, allusions to the poetry of Keats, Burns, and Poe serve to contrast the life of art and passion with the superficial, desensitized world of southern California in the 1940's. (good)</td>
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Note that a good thesis is not the same as a list of major paragraph topics. It should be more
focused than a mere assembly of related points.

4. Outline your topic. Do not feel that you must begin with a fully developed outline consisting of at least four levels. You may begin with a simple list of important ideas or points and work from there. If you have done enough preparation in steps 1-3, your problem now should not be how to outline so much as the best way to outline your material. Remember that the paragraphs in expository and argumentative writing should be substantial (have solid evidence), sequential (follow a clear order, both from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph), and cumulative (lead up to a conclusion). Generally, move from least to most important, simpler to more complicated, refutation to assertion (in the case of argument), easy to difficult.

Note that on the sample outline, the student, after formulating a clear thesis, organizes his material from most to least obvious. Nick, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, clearly expresses his admiration for Gatsby. The comparisons with other characters, however, are implied but rarely stated by the narrator, while the lessons of Gatsby’s *hamartia* (tragic flaw) require some knowledge of tragic theory to be elucidated (see sample outline file).

Write your rough draft (next step) from a rough outline. A final, complete outline should be assembled only when you are finished revising and polishing your project. Do not feel locked into a structure that inhibits the further development and improvement of your project.

Some intuitive writers have excessive anxiety over outlining. Although they may need more time, such writers should go ahead and write out a rough draft before attempting an outline. They should then outline their rough draft and proceed with revision.

5. Write a rough draft. At least a day in advance of a deadline for completion, preferably earlier, write out the entire essay or theme. THERE IS ALWAYS A ROUGH DRAFT. You may elect to turn in your rough draft as a final theme, but don’t expect your best grade. A rough draft should be complete but not final.

6. Revise. Think of the word *revision*, “to look again.” Look not only for errors but also for ways to improve. Read your work aloud. Your teacher will expect you to apply all the rules learned regarding punctuation, diction, and grammar. In addition, you should avoid repetition in both content and form. If you find that you are rephrasing the same idea several times, go back and brainstorm to develop the material more adequately. If your material is running too long, you may be failing to select the best examples; if too short, your approach may be too broad, or it may be invalid. If your ideas are valid, they can be extended by means of added examples/evidence, or by the inclusion of contrasting information or exceptions.

7. Produce and assemble the final document. Observe the teacher’s expectations for the form, order and kinds of materials to be turned in and have them ready at the beginning of class. Give your theme a final, deliberate proofreading at a point when you still have time to correct errors. If you made changes or revisions to the content during the final typing, these must be shown on the final outline. Produce the final theme yourself. Hired typists or someone doing a favor may introduce errors, such as misspelling a character’s name, that seriously mar your hard work.