

## Writing Seminar

### The Writing Process: A Fresh View

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So, what's the problem?

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"Writing isn't so difficult. I just sit down and open a vein."

– Red Smith

"All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath."

– F. Scott Fitzgerald

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"Writing is easy; all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until little drops of blood form on your forehead."

– Eugene Fowler

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## Myths About Writing

- ◆ *Myth*: "People should judge me on the quality of my ideas, not on my writing."
- ◆ *Reality*: Clear, organized thinking and good writing are inseparable. They not only appear together, they happen together.

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"We write in order to think."

– Joan Bolker

"Clear thinking becomes clear writing: one can't exist without the other."

– William Zinsser

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## Myths About Writing

- ◆ **Myth:** "Writing is a means of reporting what you know and think."
- ◆ **Reality:** Your final written product is a means of reporting what you know and think.  
*Writing is a means of discovering what you know and think.*

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"Meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with."

– Peter Elbow

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"Writing became such a process of discovery that I couldn't wait to get to work in the morning: I wanted to know what I was going to say.

– Sharon O'Brien

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## Myths About Writing

- ◆ **Myth:** "Good writers work from an outline."
- ◆ **Reality:** Some writers work from an outline. *Many writers skip this step, believing that they can better organize their thoughts as part of the writing process, rather than in anticipation of it.*

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"I don't mean to scare you, but I never work from an outline."

– Bill DeJong

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## General Advice: Tip 1

- ◆ When you read good writing, analyze how it was done.
  - Look at the introductory and concluding paragraphs.
  - Study the flow from one paragraph to another.
  - Analyze the structure of each paragraph.
    - ◆ Examine the topic sentence placement
    - ◆ Study the flow from one sentence to another

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## General Advice: Tip 2

- ◆ Give yourself enough time.
  - A free and playful approach to your work will facilitate your writing process.
  - Time pressure creates panic, which makes writing even more difficult.
  - Your writing might go better if you work a little bit at a time.
    - ◆ You'll keep thinking about your work.
    - ◆ You'll be better able to detect writing problems.

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"When I face the desolate impossibility of writing 500 pages, a sick sense of failure falls on me, and I know I can never do it. Then gradually, I write one page and then another. One day's work is all I can permit myself to contemplate."

– *John Steinbeck*

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## General Advice: Tip 3

- ◆ Try to ease the burden for your readers.
  - In most cases, you should assume that your readers are bright undergraduates.
  - You need to remind experts of what they know, so that they will bring the proper frame of reference to your work.
    - ◆ Do not pass over key facts or points too quickly.
    - ◆ Do not skip over steps in your argument.
  - Keep in mind that people read quickly or skim.
    - ◆ Use short paragraphs.
    - ◆ Use road markers (e.g., "First," "Next," "Finally")

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"I try to leave out the parts that people skip."

– *Elmore Leonard*

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## General Advice: Tip 4

- ◆ Learn to compose at a word processor.
  - You can get your thoughts down on paper as you have them.
  - You can import your notes easily.
  - False starts can be made to disappear in an instant.
  - Editing and rewriting are far easier.
  - *Editorial Comment:* I **hate** MS-Word.

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## General Advice: Tip 5

- ◆ Learn to be your harshest critic and editor.
  - You need to put yourself in the position of a fresh reader who is unfamiliar with your subject.
  - If possible, let your draft sit for a time before you return to it.
  - If not, find a trusted colleague who will read your draft and react honestly. Then listen.

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"I'm not a very good writer, but I'm an excellent rewriter."

– James Michener

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## General Advice: Tip 6

- ◆ Develop an affirming attitude.
  - Accept that writing is hard work, for everybody.
  - Accept that your first draft (and maybe your second or third) will be awful.
  - Remember that writing, like any skill, requires practice.

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"The wastebasket is a writer's best friend."

– Isaac Bashevis Singer

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"The art of writing is no more spontaneous than the art of marriage. There are moments of spontaneity, seconds of inspiration or insight, minutes of delight, but most of the time it is hard work."

– Donald M. Murray

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## The Writing Process

General Approach  
Suggested Steps

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## How We Are Taught to Write: *A Recipe for Panic*

- ◆ Learn everything there is to know about your subject before writing.
  - *Feel intimidated.*
- ◆ Develop a detailed outline first.
  - *Feel disorganized.*
- ◆ Go to the beginning of the outline and start writing.
  - *Feel overwhelmed.*

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## Alternative Approach

### ◆ Freewriting

- Write whatever comes to mind, no matter how awful it is.
- Do this for a short period of time, without distractions. Even 10 minutes is a start!
- Do not stop writing until the time is up.
- Suspend judgment about what is good or bad. *Just keep writing.*
- Reward yourself.

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## Alternative Approach

### ◆ Editing and revising come *later*.

"When you write, first you make a mess, then you clean it up."

– *William G. Perry, Jr.*

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"What makes writing so difficult for so many people is that putting words on paper involves executing two fundamentally opposite tasks. Most people try to do them simultaneously. . . . If you separate the creative impulse from the judging process, you are less likely to get confused and bogged down."

– *Peter Elbow*

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## My Beginning Assumption

- ◆ You are blessed with an organized and logical mind. ☺
  - You can see relationships between different concepts.
  - You can organize a list into meaningful subcategories.
  - You can put a list into a logical sequence.
- ◆ These are skills that can be practiced and learned.

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## Writing Process: Step 1

### ◆ Write down your main point.

- What is it that you want people to know after reading your paper?
- What is the main conclusion that you want readers to reach?
- This information will be used in both your *introduction* and *conclusion*.

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## Writing Process: Step 2

### ◆ Write down why this subject matter is important.

- Why do you feel so strongly that what you have to say is worth saying?
- What supports your view?
  - Key facts
  - Previous research
  - Statements by leaders in the field
- This information will be used in your *introduction*.

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## Writing Process: Step 3

- ◆ Do your background reading *at the computer*.
  - Your reading should be *directed* to the main points you want to make.
  - Even so, you need to be open to new ideas or to contradictory information.
- ◆ Enter key information from your reading, including quotations.
- ◆ Write down your thoughts as they occur to you while reading.

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## Writing Process: Step 3

*(continued)*

- ◆ With each new point of information, start a new line.
- ◆ Note the source of each thought
  - "Holy Roller, Batman!" (Robin, 1965a)
- ◆ Type out complete reference citations as you read. You'll be glad later.
- ◆ **DON'T WORRY ABOUT ORGANIZING ANY OF THIS – YET.**

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## Example: Resolving Conflicts Creatively Program

Dual base: ESR works in partnership with NYC Board of Ed. Not an outside group trying to get access.  
Concern by some: Will this time take away from basics?  
Need to *redefine* what the basics are.  
Response to violence has been crisis-driven. More hope, if long-term focus on prevention.  
Need more training work with administrators.  
Need a culturally diverse staff, to set an example.

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## Writing Process: Step 4

- ◆ Print everything out from the notes file you have created.
- ◆ Cut it up, with one central thought per strip.\*
- ◆ Sort the paper strips into meaningful piles
- ◆ Caution: Do not run with scissors.

\* You can try doing this sorting on the computer, if you're doing a relatively short paper. Personally, I find it easier to do this manually.

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## Writing Process: Step 5

- ◆ Take one of the piles.
- ◆ Can you write a topic sentence that establishes the main point of that pile?
- ◆ If not, subdivide the pile into smaller units until you can write a topic sentence for each part.
- ◆ Repeat this process for each pile.

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## Writing Process: Step 6

- ◆ At the word processor, create a *map* for your paper by ordering your topic sentences in a logical, coherent way.
- ◆ This map will help structure your *abstract* or *summary*.

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## Writing Process: Step 7

- ◆ Write your introductory paragraph (or section). The lead:
  - Limits your subject
  - Makes it clear where the narrative is headed.
  - Establishes the tone.
  - Captures your readers' attention.

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## Writing Process: Step 8

- ◆ Write your concluding paragraph.
- ◆ Everything you write after this will build toward this paragraph.

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## Writing Process: Step 9

- ◆ Write one paragraph corresponding to each of the topic sentences in your map.
- ◆ Begin each paragraph either with a topic sentence or a sentence that helps make the transition to that paragraph.
- ◆ The paragraph's relation to what came before, or its function as part of the whole, may need to be expressed.

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## Writing Process: Step 9

*(continued)*

- ◆ Sometimes you will need to divide a paragraph to enhance your meaning or to make the paper more readable.
  - Enormous blocks of print can be harder to read.
  - Long paragraphs can also make it harder for readers to "chunk" and retain what they are reading.
  - A paragraph may consist of only one sentence.

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## Writing Process: Keep moving!

- ◆ In writing your first draft, suspend all judgment. Just get something down, writing as hard and fast as possible.
- ◆ If you come to a difficult spot, where the logic of your argument breaks down, or where the sentences grow tangled upon themselves, just do the best you can and move on.
- ◆ If you lock up, just move on to some other part of the paper and come back later to the difficult passage. Skip around!

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## Writing Process: Step 10

- ◆ Print out the first draft and read it. Look at the *overall structure*.
  - Would you be convinced by what you wrote?
  - Are there key facts missing?
  - Have you assumed knowledge that your audience does not have (or may have forgotten)?

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## Writing Process: Step 10 (continued)

- ◆ Does each paragraph give readers the information they need when they need it?
- ◆ Does each paragraph build point by point to convince the reader of the conclusion?
- ◆ Does each paragraph lead naturally to the next?
- ◆ What parts need to be expanded or cut?

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## Writing Process: Step 11

- ◆ Once you are satisfied by the overall structure, look carefully at each paragraph.
  - Does it have *unity*? That is, does it have one central idea?
  - Does it have *coherence*? That is, does each point in the paragraph lead to the next?
  - Does it have *emphasis*? That is, are the most important points in the most important places in the paragraph?

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## Writing Process: Step 12

- ◆ Next look at each sentence.
  - Avoid using jargon or clichés.
  - Use the active voice, which is direct, bold, and concise.
  - Use a variety of sentence structures
    - Long v. short
    - Ask questions
    - Use introductory and subordinate clauses
    - Use compound sentences
  - Use as few words as possible, to increase precision and clarity.

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"This film has been modified from its original version. It has been formatted to fit your TV."



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"This film has been modified from its original version. It has been formatted to fit your TV."

"This film has been reformatted to fit your TV."

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## Writing Process: Step 14

- ◆ Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite.
  - You may have to redesign the entire piece of writing. That's okay.
  - Successful writing requires a series of ever-closer approximations.
- ◆ To do the final edit, *print out the manuscript and do the line editing by hand. Really, I insist.*

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## Remember...

- ◆ Your audience cannot read your mind, only your writing.
- ◆ Your goal is to spare your reader the error of misunderstanding and the pain of translation.

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"This is the great circle of craft in which the writer is involved. He is searching for words and for meaning. He works back and forth, seeking a subject, and audience, raw materials, a design; he writes, rethinks, researches, redesigns, rewrites, searching for his meaning and for a way to communicate his meaning to other people. The professional writer rewrites and rewrites, and rewrites.

– Donald M. Murray

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## When Do You Need a Tutor?

- ◆ Writing is a complex skill, and it requires practice.
- ◆ All of us need feedback from a critical reader.
  - Can you be that person for yourself?
  - Do you have a friend (naive reader) who can read your drafts?
- ◆ If not, then get a tutor if:
  - You continue to struggle with basic organization (flow, transitions)
  - You have problems with sentence structure (repetitive structure, awkward phrasing)

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## Give this a try...

"... Your seminar was great at lessening my anxiety, and your suggestions, which I actually used the entire year, made my writing better than it had ever been and much to my surprise – fun!"

-- HSPH Student, July 1995

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## Additional Resources

- ◆ O'Connor, Patricia T. *Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English.*
- ◆ Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction.*

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