

The Writing Process (Steven Engler)

This guide offers some advice for dealing with some of the roadblocks and difficulties that crop up during the writing process.

Myths About Writing

- Writing should be easy.
- Writing should be right the first time.
- Good writers get clear in their head before they start writing.
- A good writer knows the rules or models for a good essay and just follows them.
- The process of writing should be the same for everyone.
- Writing is just for transmitting information.
- Advice about writing is always useful.

Getting Started

- Talk about your topic. Listen to what you say.
- Call it an experiment; write without worrying about how it turns out.
- Visualize. Sketch. Draw. Diagram. Chart. Map-out.
- Try freewriting. Just start writing as fast and freely as you can as a warm-up exercise. Don't worry about staying on topic or whether you are making good points. Just write!
- Write the easy parts first.
- When you take a break or put it aside, try stopping writing in the middle of a sentence or paragraph. That might make it easier to get rolling again.
- Write a very quick, very rough draft—even before research—just to get something to build on.

Writing Drafts

- Try writing fast for a first or other early draft.
- Turn off the critic inside that says points aren't phrased right or aren't right on track.
- Write with information; give specific, concrete details, not vague generalities and jargon.
- Alternatively (what works for you?), write without using your notes (check details later).
- Don't edit as you're writing; don't scratch out what you don't like; edit and add points later.
- Satisfice. Let ideas or words suffice even though they're not entirely satisfactory. Take your first idea or solution and don't worry about getting it just right until a later draft.
- If using paper, leave lots of space for adding things later.

What To Do When You're Blocked

- "What I really mean is...." Force yourself to make a clear, concise statement of your main point(s).
- Talk with someone about your ideas.
- Brainstorm. Freewrite. Visualize.
- Take a break and relax.
- Change the setting. Even sitting in a different place in the room or changing the lighting can sometimes help get things going.

Editing

- Wait an hour or a day.
- Write and edit in different settings.
- Read out loud. Or get someone to read your essay aloud to you.
- Check to see that the meaning is clear. For your first check, read the essay very quickly to see how easy it is to follow the points.
- Check to see that you gave the reader cues: preview your meaning with titles, introductions, headings, topic sentences; divisions, numbering, indentations and spacing; re-cap your meaning with conclusions and summaries.
- Interrogate your essay: Is each point supported? Does it go off on tangents? Does it deliver what the reader would expect from reading the introduction? Does the end echo the beginning and give the reader a sense of completion? As you read aloud, does the language sound smooth, natural, and like you? Does each paragraph make one point and develop it clearly? Are there any gaps in the flow of ideas? Are there unnecessary words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that can be cut?
- Go through and check for errors. You might read once for grammar, once for spelling, once for punctuation or for your personal problem areas.
- Get feedback from someone else. Tell the reader what you would like her or him to look for.