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1

How Writers Really Write – The Writing Process

Before you read any further, take a minute to do this quick exercise. Imagine for a moment that you have to stop at the grocery store and pick up four or five items. Write yourself a reminder of what you need to buy. For example:

Bread *Grapes*
Chkn *Dressing*
Ice crm

Now imagine that something has come up so you can't do the shopping yourself. Someone else has to do your shopping for you. Make whatever changes you need in order to ensure that the person understands what you want. Your list might look like this:

Multigrain bread, sliced, the store brand
Boneless chicken breasts (if they're on sale, otherwise don't bother)
Rollo ice cream (the big container)
Green grapes (about 2 lbs)
Creamy Cucumber Salad Dressing (Kraft)

Let's look at the process of this communication. Before you began, you probably made a decision – a kind of pre-writing – to write the reminder in the *form* of a list. Lists serve a particular purpose: they provide the key information without extraneous detail.

Next, you *drafted* your list. You might not have written it very neatly – after all, a list, by definition, is quick to write – and it probably had scanty detail and even a few abbreviations or misspellings. That was fine as long as you were the only one who was going to read it. But when you realized that someone else was going to read and act upon your notes, you had to make some changes. You realized that your reader would need more information on some items. As soon as you

As long as you're the only audience for your writing, a one-draft wonder is just fine. If someone else is going to read it, you'd better follow the writing process.

began adding detail – changing your text to suit an outside audience – you were involved in *revising*.

Revising a shopping list doesn't call for much. You have to explain what kind of items you usually buy (multigrain bread, not white) and give some provisos on expense (only buy the chicken breasts if they're on sale). Finally, you might fix up any careless spelling and perhaps recopy the list if it looks too messy or scratched up. That's simple *editing*.

Publishing is when we share a piece of writing with its intended audience. In this case, the publishing is simple: hand the list to your spouse and send him or her off to the store. Or, hand it to your child with a couple of ten-dollar bills and keep your fingers crossed.

The effectiveness of your process will be evident in what comes home from the grocery store: either you will get what you want, or you will end up with a pile of junk food you never expected.

No One-Draft Wonders

You may not even be aware of it, but you have just used a writing process for this simplest of tasks. You planned what you were going to write, you drafted a note, then revised and edited it for another reader and maybe even published it. You went through a five-step process:

Pre-writing → Drafting → Revising → Editing → Publishing

The process of pre-writing, composing and revising writing is a natural one. Before writing, we make decisions about what we're going to write, why we're writing it and what form the writing is going to take. Next, we compose, or draft, the piece of writing. Then, good writers revise their work to ensure that the writing is clear and powerful. Most professional authors will tell you they revise a piece of writing a dozen times or more before it is published. Once the writing says what we want it to say, we make sure all the mechanics are in place and it is ready to share with an audience, a process known as editing. Not every piece of writing we do makes it to an audience – diaries and personal notes are often private – but even an e-mail is a kind of published writing. Publishing is that stage where our piece of print meets its readers.

Although a multi-stage process is common for most real-life writing, it has not always been the practice for most writing in school. In the past, much writing in school consisted of one-word or one-sentence responses to teacher-generated questions. It wasn't until the late 1970s that researchers such as Donald Graves began to pay attention to students' writing and to apply the processes that professional writers use to writing instruction. Since then, classroom researchers such as Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins and Shelley Harwayne have written about using the writing process with students of all ages. Now we teach students to pre-write, draft and revise their writing, then to edit for surface errors and finally to publish, or share it with an audience.

Most writers go through the processes we've just described, though it's rarely as simple as the five-step outline would indicate. Sometimes a

writer will go back to his pre-writing plan several times, even during revision, and sometimes he may abandon a piece of writing altogether. The writing process varies from one writer to another and even one piece of writing to another.

The process of pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing is a good teaching tool, but is neither a formula nor a recipe for writing. The only simple truth is that good writing is *never* a one-draft wonder. Anyone who says, “I just sat down and wrote it,” spent a lot of time planning and crafting in her head before the first word hit the page.

All this explains why the mechanical five-day writing plan (pre-writing on Monday, drafting on Tuesday, revising on Wednesday, editing on Thursday, publishing on Friday) contradicts what we know of a natural and effective writing process. Quite frankly, no one writes that way. As we’ll explain later, real writing requires some flexibility in both time and process.

Pre-writing

Some journalists say that pre-writing takes up to 85 percent of their entire writing process.

Some writers maintain that the pre-writing stage is the most complex and time-consuming aspect of writing. A strong pre-writing plan makes the rest of the process easier and more efficient. Many decisions must be made before writing: what to write about, what form it will take, who might read it, and why they should.

The acronym RAFTS represents the decisions a writer must make before beginning: **Role-Audience-Format-Topic-Strong verb** (or purpose for writing). **Role** is the perspective of the writer – a storyteller, an observer, a humorist, a person with a strong opinion, or most commonly, the writer herself. **Audience** refers to who will read the writing. Is the writing for other students, for the teacher, for the adult community? The tone and voice of the writing would vary for each of these audiences. **Format** describes the form the writing will take: essay, letter, memo, and so on. **Topic** is, of course, what the writing is all about. **Strong verb** describes the purpose of the writing: to inform, to entertain, to complain, to invite. (See the page 21 for a reproducible poster of RAFTS.)

Let’s take a simple example. Suppose your students want to have pizza served in the cafeteria once a week. How does the RAFTS plan look?

Role: A group of students/customers with an opinion

Audience: The Principal and School Council

Format: A letter or petition

Topic: Addition to cafeteria menu

Strong verb: *Demanding* addition of pizza!

RAFTS can also provide useful guidelines for teachers when assigning writing topics or prompts. Effective writing prompts not only provide the writers with a topic and format, but also guide them in knowing the purpose of their writing and whom the prospective reader might be. (See the RAFTS menu on page 22.)

Beyond Brainstorming

Brainstorming isn't the only way to get started. Here are seven other ways to start:

1. Talk the piece through.
2. Sketch the ideas in pictures or graphics.
3. Make an outline.
4. Take notes and organize them.
5. Use graphic organizers.
6. Respond to another piece of writing: get mad and get writing.
7. Pick key words out of the question or prompt.

For student writers, generating ideas can be the most difficult part of writing. It's a good thing for teachers to remember that the more students write, the easier it will be for them to think of something to write about. We find it's like writing out our annual holiday cards – we have trouble thinking of something to say to the person we correspond with only once a year, but never run out of things to tell the people we see every day!

Donald Graves, a pioneer in writing process instruction, stresses the importance of teaching our students to "see the world as a writer." As teachers, we should provide frequent demonstrations of our own ideas and everyday experiences that could be turned into writing pieces. We need to teach students to notice the things around them and keep track of their ideas in a writer's notebook. We should give them surveys and interest inventories to complete and store in their writing folders. We can show them how to get ideas from books they read. And, of course, we must always expose our students to a variety of writing genres to open up worlds of possibilities for authentic, purposeful writing.

Drafting

Drafting is the stage in which a writer puts his plan into action. The writer pours out his ideas on paper or on the computer in some semblance of sentences and paragraphs. The focus is getting ideas down; mechanics and spelling are not of primary concern at this stage. Advise students to spell and punctuate *as well as they can* and remind them that they can go back later to fix up errors. (Never send a message that spelling doesn't matter.) Emphasize that writing fluency matters here.

If your students are not accustomed to using temporary spelling, it may be necessary to model the process of stretching out words to hear all the sounds and using what they know about how letters go together. Similarly, while neat handwriting is not the first priority, students must be able to write legibly enough to read their own work later on.

In the same way, encourage students to paragraph as well as they can. Paul tells his students: "Paragraphing helps you organize your thoughts. It's probably the best invention in language in the last 400 years!" While the paragraphing of any piece will certainly change in revision, it's the best tool we have to give shape to thoughts as they flow into a piece of writing.

While your students are drafting or scribbling or crossing out (don't allow them to crumple up paper in despair – that's only in Hollywood movies) remind them to

- leave a space between each line (for revision later on)
- write on only one side of the paper
- write in pen (so drafting seems special and they don't waste time erasing)
- focus on getting ideas down on paper
- do the best they can – they'll fix the writing later

In any writing, the process of drafting is often mixed with that of revision. As they write, students will find themselves deleting, changing and crossing out. Occasionally they may get a new idea as they write. Even Paul, a classic linear-thinker, frequently digresses or develops new ideas as he works on a book.

The drafting stage is a convenient one for these random corrections and indirections, but too much crossing-out and pasting-over will bog down the writing. Paul's first rule for aspiring novelists is, "Finish it, then go back to fix it." He adds, "I never go back to the first sentence until I write the last one." There is some author hyperbole in this, but the truth remains: revising is best left for later on.

Revising

In writing, as in life, you don't have to be sick to get better.

As we demonstrated with the exercise at the beginning of this chapter, if someone else is going to read your writing, you will want to make sure that your ideas are stated as clearly as possible. The process of getting to clarity is revision.

Revision involves *adding, deleting, moving* or *changing* information to convey the message of the writing more effectively. Revision may take place at the word, sentence, paragraph or whole-text level. Sometimes revision may even mean starting over.

Teachers consistently complain that their students are unwilling to revise their work. No surprise – so are most professional writers, and they get paid for what they do. For student writers, the problem often stems from a lack of audience. If only the teacher is going to read a piece, why should they keep revising it over and over? So, the single most effective way to ensure that your students will improve their writing is to make sure they have a purpose and audience for their work. Whether your students are writing a note to the principal for permission to hold a school dance or writing a letter to their favorite author about her new book, they will want to write as persuasively and effectively as possible. Good revision will help them get their message across and achieve the results they want.

Keep reminding your students that reworking a piece of writing doesn't necessarily mean there is anything *wrong* with it. When they have to revisit an assignment in math or spelling, it's usually because the answers are incorrect or incomplete. Not so in writing. We need to convince our students that "you don't need to be sick to get better." Published writers are always striving to make good writing even better – more interesting, more effective, more powerful. So should your students.

Finally, look for ways to make revising less painful. Motivation wanes when students have to recopy an entire piece of writing for every revision. Obviously, drafting on the computer can help. But even hand-written copies can be revised by cutting out portions of text, adding in new sections, and changing what's there.