

# The Writing Process

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial addresses the writing process. It lists the eight steps of the writing process, and indicates how to complete them, using a "real-world" example. The subject of plagiarism is also considered: what plagiarism means, in an academic context, and how to avoid it.

This tutorial examines the writing process in three parts:

1. The Writing Process
2. Using the Writing Process: Example
3. Plagiarism

## 1. The Writing Process

First-time college English students sometimes think that writing is something that "just happens." If you're "good at writing," you do it well; if you're not, you don't. This couldn't be further from the truth. Any experienced writer will tell you that writing is a *process*, one in which you'll often have to repeat and restart many times as you work on a project.

Although some experienced writers have internalized the **writing process** to the extent that they seem to work "by instinct" rather than as a result of conscious thought, it's important for novice writers to learn how the process works.

There are eight steps in the writing process:

1. Brainstorming
2. Prewriting
3. Thesis Development
4. Researching
5. Drafting
6. Revising
7. Editing
8. Proofreading



## TERM TO KNOW

### Writing Process

An approach to writing that involves multiple, recurring steps including brainstorming, prewriting, thesis development, research, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading.



## STEP BY STEP

### *Step 1: Brainstorming*

The first step to take when beginning any writing project is **brainstorming**. Brainstorming enables writers think about what they're going to write before they do so. This is the time when writers think about topics, subjects, and themes.

There are a number of ways to brainstorm, including free association (sometimes called free writing), in which a writer writes to him- or herself about a subject. During free association, no effort is made to refine or edit. No one but the writer sees what he or she has written.

Another brainstorming method is to create a "word web." To do so, jot down terms and ideas that you think might be important, then draw lines to connect them to other ideas and terms. This process enables writers to see how subjects might be related.



## HINT

The brainstorming step is often overlooked by beginning writers. They put themselves at a disadvantage when they do so, since they haven't taken enough time to think before starting to research and write. Don't underestimate the importance of brainstorming. It might seem like a waste of time, but it may save you time later in the process.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Brainstorming

Techniques that are used to encourage thinking, to clarify concepts and ideas.

### *Step 2: Prewriting*

The second step in the process is **prewriting**. During this step, writers plan their writing projects. After thinking about your subject for a while, use prewriting to narrow your focus and refine your ideas into a manageable form. This step is the time when writers formulate their plans of attack: They identify what they want to write, and how they want to write it. Remember that the plan you develop during the prewriting step will not be included your writing project. Instead, you'll use it as a guide as you create that project.



## HINT

This is also called the outlining stage.

Think of prewriting as being like the frames carpenters use when they build a house. The frames are necessary, even though they won't be part of the building. Like brainstorming, prewriting is a step you shouldn't skip. By taking the time to prewrite, you'll save time and effort later in the writing process.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Prewriting

Techniques used to plan a writing project, including outlining and other organization strategies.

### *Step 3: Thesis Development*

A **thesis** is the central sentence (or two) that explains your main argument. During the thesis development step, you must answer these questions:

- What do I want to say (or prove) about my subject?
- What is my point, and how can I state it most clearly?

When you answer these questions, you'll be better able to move forward on your project. As you do, don't worry if your thesis changes as you do research. This indicates that you're learning as you go, while forming a more complete and nuanced position.



Remember that the wording and focus of a thesis is likely to change during the research process.



#### **Thesis**

In English composition, a sentence (or two) that explains the main argument or point of a written work.

### *Step 4: Researching*

In an academic context, **research** is the process of obtaining information to understand a subject, and to support an argument involving that subject. It is a process of looking for and evaluating possible sources of information. Research is an ongoing process, one in which you must assume that some of the information you locate will lead to changes in your writing project.



#### **Research**

The identification and review of information to understand and provide support for an argument or topic.

### *Step 5: Drafting*

You'll begin to write during the **drafting** step. This is the time when you'll begin to construct your written work. Keep in mind that you'll almost certainly have to return to this step later.

Drafting is important, but it's more important not to rush through the preceding steps. Although many beginning writers start their process by drafting, they usually discover that they have begun to write *before* they know what they're writing about.



#### **Draft**

An iteration of a writing project.

### *Step 6: Revising*

The drafting step is followed by **revision**: the process of evaluating and improving drafts of your writing project. This is the time when writers reassess the ideas, structure, and conceptual elements of their projects.

It's important to keep the "big picture" in mind when revising. This is not the time to address grammar or typos. Rather, large-scale, broad changes to the project are made during this step. Continue to examine the entire project, to determine what it says and does, and how it aligns with the original plan.



Revision is re-vision: that is, to see again.



### Revising/Revision

Critical evaluation of the ideas, structure, and support information involved in a writing project, and making relevant changes to improve the work.

#### *Step 7: Editing*

During the **editing** step, the focus is on style, clarity, and redundancy. After asking (and answering) questions about the draft's overall structure, it's time to focus on paragraphs and sentences. Make sure that the language is clear and consistent, and the essay states what you want it to say.



If revision is a *broad* examination of the entire essay, editing is a *close* examination.



### Editing

The process of improving a written work by focusing on style, clarity, and redundancy, and making appropriate changes in those areas.

#### *Step 8: Proofreading*

In the **proofreading** step, writers evaluate word choice, grammar, and spelling. This is the last, careful reading of the final draft of the writing project. Although all writers should proofread their work, many beginning writers do so too early in the writing process. They worry about punctuating a sentence correctly, for example, before considering whether or not that sentence should be included in the work.

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## 2. Using the Writing Process: Example

Suppose you have been assigned to write a five-page essay about any topic related to police violence. You'll need to narrow down the overall subject area (i.e., police violence) by brainstorming to identify topics within that area.

Here are a few potential topics in the area of police violence:

- The rise in violent crime
- The increasing militarization of police departments
- Racism and unequal law enforcement
- For-profit prisons
- Nonlethal weapons

- Nonviolent protests

You are interested in "Nonlethal weapons," and it seems to be narrow enough to be the focus of a five-page essay, so you select it as your topic. What are some of the possible arguments for this essay? What is your thesis?

To answer the second question (regarding your thesis), you could argue that the nonlethal nature of these weapons encourage police to use them more often than they would use lethal weapons. Alternatively, you could argue that nonlethal weapons help police to keep citizens (including victims of crime) safe.

Let's say you've chosen to argue that the "nonlethal" nature of some weapons encourages police officers to use them with less regard for public safety, and that they are therefore harmful to the general population. At this point, you've decided on your argument, and may be able to think of some ways to make it. However, before you start writing, you must do some research to learn more about the topic (and your proposed argument), and to locate support for your thesis.

Let's assume that your research identifies two sources of useful information. Note that you'd need more sources to support an academic essay, but two are sufficient for this example.

The first source is a book titled *Nonlethal Weapons: A Fatal Attraction*, which argues that since police are required to be tased before being authorized to use tasers on others, they are less likely to use them unnecessarily. The second source is a newspaper report that Seattle police attribute a drop in police-related shootings to their use of tasers.

The information in your sources prompts you to ask yourself a question: If your research identifies information that refutes your thesis, or seems to refute your thesis, should you change your thesis? The answer is that you probably should. It's your argument, so you should state what you believe. However, you must support whatever you assert.

In this example, perhaps, after considering the results of your research, you decide to change your thesis. Instead of arguing that having nonlethal weapons makes officers more likely to use them, you argue that even if this is true, their increased use is a positive result because the weapons are less devastating than lethal weapons. Even if more people are tased when arrested, for example, it's better than more people being shot (or suffering other devastating consequences).

As a result of the process described in the preceding paragraphs, your new thesis may look something like the following, which is written in the form of a concluding paragraph.

Despite the humanitarian issues raised by weapons that are designed to hurt, but not kill, the addition of non-lethal weaponry to the arsenal of our civic protectors is a benefit to our safety, and the safety of police officers. We must heed the criticism of these weapons, but we must not let the possible consequences of new technology blind us to the good they accomplish.

The preceding paragraph would be located near the end of a real academic essay, which is often where the thesis is presented. The only remaining part of the writing process in this example is to reread this paragraph, and the rest of the essay, to ensure that it says what you want it to say, in the way that you want to say it. Finally, examine the language for irregularities, before proofreading to make sure that the work is free of

errors.



## BIG IDEA

Let's review the steps you took to write your essay. You brainstormed the topic and planned how you would write about it. You formulated a thesis and performed research, changed your thesis, and wrote a draft, which you revised, edited, and proofread. Congratulations, you completed all eight steps in the writing process!

# 3. Plagiarism

**Plagiarism**, one of the most uncomfortable subjects for writers to consider, is the representation of the work (the writing or the ideas) of another as your own.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Plagiarism

The intentional or unintentional presentation of the ideas or writing of another as your own

Intentional plagiarism is what most students think of when the word is used in class. This term refers to the theft of the ideas of another. Those who engage in intentional plagiarism deny themselves the opportunity to find out what they can accomplish themselves. Unintentional plagiarism can occur when a writer forgets to credit another writer properly. Other writers may plagiarize unintentionally when they fail to re-examine their research to determine where they got an idea or phrase. Instead, they include the work of others without properly attributing it to its creators, implying that it is original work. Unintentional though this may be, it's still plagiarism.

Careful attention and persistence enable writers to avoid unintentional plagiarism. A decision to do honest work, and to give credit when and to whom it is due, is the way to avoid intentional plagiarism. Respect the work of others, trust your writing potential, and make the effort to be the best writer you can be.



## SUMMARY

This tutorial examined the eight recursive steps of the writing process: brainstorming, prewriting, thesis development, researching, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading. It indicated how these steps can be applied to progress from a prompt (e.g., an academic assignment) to a completed academic work. The two types of plagiarism, intentional and unintentional, were also defined and discussed.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Brainstorming

Techniques to generate thinking in order to clarify thoughts and ideas.

**Draft**

An iteration of a writing project.

**Editing**

Improving a piece of writing by focusing on issues of style, clarity, and redundancy.

**Plagiarism**

Presenting someone else's ideas or writing as your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally

**Prewriting**

Techniques, including outlining or other organization strategies, for planning a writing project.

**Research**

Information gathering with the goal of understanding and supporting an argument or topic.

**Revising/Revision**

Critically evaluating a writing project's ideas, structure, and support and making relevant changes that improve the work.

**Thesis**

In English composition, a single sentence that explains the main argument or point of a piece of writing.

**Writing Process**

A recursive approach to writing that accepts multiple, recurring steps including brainstorming, prewriting, thesis development, research, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading.