

WRITING PROCESS (PODCAST 21 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about the writing process.

Linus Pauling, winner of two Nobel Prizes, once said that in order to find one good idea, you need to have lots of ideas. What great advice! Pauling knew that finding something worth pursuing did not materialize out of thin air; in fact, he knew that in order to find an idea worth pursuing, one needed lots of less desirable ideas first. As you work toward finding an appropriate topic for your assignments, you would be wise to generate lots of potential topics before settling on one. And of course what this kind of exploration speaks to is the idea of writing as a process.

Many textbooks depict writing as a series of steps—first you do this and then you do this and then While this step-by-step linear approach may work for some (and if works for you, so be it!), in my experience writing is not at all a series of steps, though I definitely think there are different phases one is involved in when working on a piece of writing.

Have you ever thought about what your writing process looks like? When you go about writing, what exactly do you do? Too often people sit down to work on a writing project—a paper for class, a memo to a boss, a letter to a teacher—only to discover the words do not come easily. People assume that because they know the language, the words should simply march directly from the brain to the paper in a coherent and effortless manner. Not so. Writing, like most acts of skill, requires time and patience. Part of what takes time is finding a good topic, and to this end, I encourage you to use the writing process as a model to explore your ideas, discover what you want to say, and shape language in a way that expresses your thoughts as clearly and effectively as possible.

What exactly is the writing process? Well, there are many variations of what the writing process looks like, but Donald M. Murray, one of my writing mentors, puts it best for me. Murray defines the writing process as “using language to discover meaning in experience and communicate it” (1982, p. 73). Murray looks at the writing process in three phases: (1) prevision, (2) vision, and (3) revision.

The prevision stage is all the work that takes place prior to the composition of a first draft. Fundamentally, the writer uses writing to find a subject, narrow the focus, and then generate ideas relative to that focus. There are a number of useful strategies for this kind of exploratory writing such as listing, freewriting, mapping, and outlining to name a few. The point here is that you just don’t just sit down and start trying to write a draft; rather, you explore your thoughts via prevision techniques until you find a topic idea that seems promising. Then you explore that topic idea using prevision techniques again-and on and on until you have a clear idea in mind and you move to drafting, what Murray calls the vision stage.



In this second phase of the writing process, the writer takes the raw material from the prevision stage and composes a first draft. This draft is the writer’s first attempt at organizing thoughts and putting them down on the page. The purpose of the first draft, something Donald Murray calls the “discovery draft,” (p. 73) is to figure out what you have to say about your topic. To this end, you begin writing to sort out your ideas on the page to understand what you actually have to say about a topic. The writing in this first draft takes the form of paragraphs, but it is a mistake to try to write the paper the first time through, for you aren’t even sure of exactly what you have to say yet. The first draft is your initial attempt at transforming the raw material from prevision writing into the form of an essay. The first draft is for your eyes only. The writing may be peppered with all manner of mistakes and digressions and even new ideas and details, all of which are fine, for the purpose of this draft is to try out your ideas, begin to give them order, and figure out what you want to say about your topic, not to write the finished essay.

It’s also possible as you move toward drafting that you bounce back if you will to “prevision” and explore your thoughts on an idea that surfaced when you were drafting; in this way, you may move back and forth between the two phases as necessary.

Once you have the first draft written, the shaping of the content begins. This phase of the writing process is the revision phase, and it is here that you will spend the most time. Revision allows the writer to read over the draft and “re-see” (hence “re-vision”) what’s on the page. Revision allows the writer to look at the draft for content and meaning, and to begin the process of shaping the content to communicate meaning to an audience.

Part of the process is organizing the content you have developed into a coherent whole, and to this end, the techniques of paragraph organization will prove invaluable. Peter Elbow, the author of many books about writing, describes revision as “just a matter of adding, deleting, changing, and rearranging” content. Of course, this “adding, deleting, changing, and rearranging” is not always easy and will require a series of drafts, but through this part of the process, the meaning will become clearer and clearer on the page, and the writer will reach the point where only fine tuning, or editing, remains. Most writers dread the revision part of the process because it is the most time consuming, but in the words of Donald Murray “You can’t order good writing like a Big Mac.”

Any process is going to take time, and writing is no different. If you resign yourself to the fact that you can’t just sit down and produce a finished draft more or less the first time through, that you are going to have to work through a process in order to get better final results, then the better off you are going to be. The more you treat writing as a process—the more you embrace that process and understand your own writing process—the better off you are going to be.

Thanks for listening everyone. Happy writing.

