How to Manage the Writing Process

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Writing is a very complex process because your brain must tend to many different things at once: you must form your idea, put it into words, think about how to spell those words, consider what to capitalize and how to punctuate, *and* remember how to form letters (or find them on a keyboard). In addition, while you're writing one sentence, your mind is likely racing ahead to what you'll say in the *next* sentence!

One way to make writing easier is to break the process into parts so that you can focus on each step individually. At any time, even when you're trying to decide what you'll write about, you might find it helpful to talk about your ideas with someone else.

1. Clarify your writing task. Choose a topic that is specific enough that you can deal with it thoroughly in the space and time available to you. Be sure you know whom you're writing for and why. Don't think of your **audience** merely as your teacher. It would be good if your writing would be read by others—classmates, perhaps, or readers of a newspaper. Even if your parent or teacher is the main person who'll see your work, imagine that you're writing for a specific, perhaps broader, audience—your peers, younger students, a famous author, a relative. Also have the **purpose** of your writing clearly in mind. What do you want your writing to accomplish? What response do you want from your readers?

2. Once you've determined your audience and purpose, spend some time jotting down ideas and **planning** your writing—whether you're writing a story, a poem, a report, an essay, or something else. How will you accomplish your purpose? Your ideas might be in the form of an outline or a web, or they might just be scattered randomly on a page. The important thing is to record them somewhere so you don't have to worry about forgetting them. That frees your mind for writing.

Write down anything you might possibly want to include. You want to develop your narrowed topic as completely as possible. For example, if you were trying to persuade someone to do something, you'd want to use the *best* arguments or those that address various aspects of the subject, not just the first ones that occur to you.

As you talk with others about what you'll write, try to choose people who'll ask questions and encourage you to talk about your topic. Your conferees don't need to be experts on your topic. In fact, people who aren't familiar with your topic might be better able to help you find ways to explain it clearly. As you talk about your topic, you'll use words that you'll later use in your writing. Talking provides an excellent rehearsal for writing.

3. Once you've gathered your ideas and put them in order, write your **first draft** as quickly as possible. Don't worry about wording, spelling, or other mechanics. Record your ideas on paper, on a computer disk, or even on magnetic tape. If you're working on a computer, *save your work often* and create one or more backup files on different disks. If you're writing by hand, *write on only one side of your paper*. If you later decide to reorganize your composition, you'll be able to see the whole thing at once. You can even cut and paste if you want to. Obviously that's

impossible if you've written on front and back. Skipping lines also simplifies revision. The important thing is to record your ideas.

If you did thorough planning, you might find that writing your first draft is simply a matter of writing a few sentences about each point in your plan. If you have trouble, though, remember that you don't need to write your composition in order. Often the introduction is one of the hardest parts to write. If you're stuck on the introduction, skip to whatever part you *do* feel ready to write. After you've written parts of your composition—or even all of it—the introduction might be easier for you to write.

4. Once you have your ideas down, begin **polishing**. First consider *what* you're saying. Have you made your message clear? Have you adequately supported your ideas? Have you created vivid pictures that will bring your ideas to life? Is everything directed toward your purpose? Will your beginning get your readers' attention? Will your ending leave them with the thoughts and feelings you want them to have? Read your composition aloud, checking for smooth sentences.

5. Although you may have been **conferring** with others throughout the writing process, it's especially important to get feedback when you yourself are satisfied with your composition. Read your writing aloud, asking your listener to focus on the *content*, or message. Have your listener "tell back" what he or she heard. That lets you know how your piece comes across to someone else. Ask your listener what works well in your writing, and invite suggestions for improvement. That response will be much more helpful than just saying your writing is great as it is.

If your listener is reluctant to give specific feedback, ask questions. If you're unsure of a particular section, call it to your listener's attention. Open-ended questions, rather than the yes-no variety, will give more information. For example, the answer to "What did this section mean to you?" is more helpful than the answer to "Was this part clear?" The part might have been perfectly clear to your listener, but the message received might have been quite different from the message you intended. Your attitude toward your listener's comments has a big effect on the kind of feedback you receive. If you become defensive whenever a suggestion is given, your conferee is likely to stop giving feedback. If, however, you show that you appreciate this feedback, you'll probably get more.

6. Of course, it's *your* composition; you have the final say about which changes will be made and which things will remain as they are. However, you should at least **consider suggestions**. Although your ideas may be perfectly clear to you, they might not be clear to your reader. People with whom you confer let you know how effectively your ideas come across *from your paper*. Their help is invaluable.

7. Once you're again satisfied with the content of your writing, you're ready to begin **editing**, focusing on the mechanics. You might have done some of this in your earlier polishing, but now you're editing in detail. Again it's helpful to focus on only one task at a time. Becoming familiar with your own strengths and weaknesses will help you know which editing tasks require more focused attention.

When you're editing, you need to be careful to read what's on the page, not what you *intended* to put on the page. Reading aloud slowly and pointing to one word at a time can help you with this.

a. First consider whether all of your **sentences** are complete.

b. Then see whether you have started new **paragraphs** in appropriate places. You should start a new paragraph when you move on to a new topic or major segment of your composition. If you're writing conversation, you need to start a new paragraph whenever you change speakers.

c. Third, see if you have proper **usage** (subject–verb agreement, right form of verb, correct pronoun, etc.).

d. Next check to see if your **capitalization** is correct. (If this is especially difficult for you, you might want to go through your composition once checking just for capitalization at the beginning of a sentence; then go through a second time checking for words that should be capitalized within sentences.)

e. Fifth, check **punctuation**. You might want to subdivide this step also.

f. Finally, check **spelling**. It's fine to use the feature on your word processing program that checks spelling, but don't let that be your only check. That will tell you only if your words are words; it won't tell you if they're the *right* words. Be especially careful of homophones (*their* and *there*, for example). You should also check for typographical errors, such as *they* for *the*.

As long as you're making changes, you should continue proofreading. Changing one thing, such as from singular to plural, might necessitate other changes. When you've read your composition a couple of times without making any changes, you're nearing the end of the editing process.

Consider having a skilled proofreader (a peer, sibling, or parent) read especially important papers, letters, and applications. Your teacher will let you know whether you should follow this procedure with daily assignments.

8. You're now ready to make what you hope will be your **final copy**. If you're handwriting your composition, you'll need to repeat the proofreading described in Step 7. Using a word processor simplifies correction of errors. Be sure to save your work frequently and to make one or more backup disks.

9. **Share** your ideas—via your writing—with a broader audience. Read your work aloud, send it in a letter, or submit it for publication. Enjoy your readers' responses!

Biographical Information

Fran Santoro Hamilton's thirty-five years as teacher, writer, and editor have enabled her to distill the English language to its essentials. Fran is the author of Hands-On English, *an English*

handbook that makes grammar visual, and she cosponsors The Grannie Annie Family Story Celebration. *Fran provides many free resources at* www.GrammarAndMore.com.