Writing as Process: Drafting

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Drafting. Although the prewriting process can be tedious and time-consuming, students often find themselves most intimidated by the drafting phase of the writing process. I know that as a student I kind of enjoyed the reading, thinking, and planning involved in prewriting. It imposed no immediate pressure: I could always alter my outline or revise my ideas once I started drafting. But I dreaded actually writing the paper. Worried that I’d get writer’s block, wouldn’t finish on time, or simply wouldn’t have enough to say about my subject, I always put off drafting until the last possible moment. When I finally did start drafting, I always had a knot in my stomach. However, once I got past the first paragraph or so, I discovered it wasn’t as bad as I’d imagined and I wished I’d started sooner.

To help you work past drafting dread and hopefully help you experience more success as you write, I’d like to discuss some strategies I’ve learned both through study and through my own writing experiences.

1. First, be aware that location matters. A few years ago a student came to me at the end of the term and said, “Remember when you told us to find a location that works for us? Mine is on the bathroom rug. I lock out my family and sit there with my laptop for hours. My mom thinks I’m crazy.” You might not want to sit on your bathroom floor, but you will want to find a relatively distraction-free zone where you can focus and ideas can flow. Although many people can’t concentrate unless they have background noise and many people need short breaks while writing, most people need to write in a space where they can concentrate for extended periods of time without major interruptions. If possible, try to find an environment where you’re comfortable but where you won’t be tempted by the distractions of friends, kids, television, the Internet, sleep, or even household chores. If possible, don’t choose a space you associate with sleeping, like a bedroom, or boredom, like a tiny library cubicle.

2. Second, recognize that medium matters. You might ask yourself whether your thoughts flow best when you’re writing, typing, or even speaking and recording your ideas. Because I grew up writing everything by hand, throughout most of my college career I wrote a handwritten draft before I actually typed it. Because I didn’t learn to type until I was in college, I couldn’t get my ideas to come through my fingers when I was looking at a computer screen. Something about having a writing utensil in my hand helped me think. Now that I’ve been typing papers for about twelve years, I usually draft on the computer, but I occasionally still have to write my first paragraph by hand, and after I’ve copied that first paragraph onto the computer, I can type the rest of my paper. I imagine a lot of non-traditional students might find themselves in the same situation. I strongly recommend discovering which method works best for you.

3. Third, know that your starting point matters. Try writing the easiest section of your paper first. Teachers often recommend writing the body of the paper first and then coming back to write the introduction and the conclusion last. Why? Because writing introductions can be a source of
writer’s block and make you feel unsuccessful and frustrated from the beginning. The pressure to be creative and the difficulty of introducing ideas you haven’t even written about yet can be overwhelming. However, fleshing out the main points you extensively planned and thought about during the prewriting process usually presents less difficulty. Generally, developing a paragraph or idea you’re comfortable with first will help you get past the intimidation of starting the essay.

4. Fourth, remember that **momentum matters**. You will probably want to **move on if you get stuck**. If you find yourself laboring over a specific sentence, transition, word, or paragraph for so long that it’s interrupting your flow of ideas and making you frustrated, you may just need to move on to a different portion of the essay and come back to that section later. For instance, when I can’t think of an example to illustrate a point, I might write **“INSERT EXAMPLE”** in bold and then move on. If I am unsatisfied with the wording of a particular idea, I might underline it as a reminder to revise it later. Just don’t forget to leave yourself time revise these issues later.

5. Finally, understand that **timing matters**. You will need to determine when you write best. **Do you need to start early** or do you **write best close to a deadline**? Some people experience writer’s block and shut down under the weight of a deadline if they wait until the last minute to draft their essays while others need the pressure of a deadline for their ideas to flow. Both types of writers experience perks and drawbacks. Those who need to write in advance might find themselves overwhelmed in a fast-moving course, but generally enjoy the benefit of finishing projects early. In contrast, those writers who draft best close to deadlines risk not finishing the draft on time; however, they enjoy the benefit of working well in high-pressure situations. If you, like me, are a person who works best under pressure, do be aware that you still need to schedule enough time to finish your drafts. While I might wait until the day before a due-date to draft a three page paper, I would have to start drafting an eight to ten page paper at least two or three days in advance, and even then I’d need to be sure I could devote two or three full days to drafting. Whichever type of drafter you are, be aware of the disadvantages and benefits of your approach so you can work around obstacles and avoid frustrations.

Though you might not find all of these suggestions and strategies helpful, please think about your drafting process and find a method that works for you. If you’ve experienced success with your current method, you probably won’t need to change it. However, if you find yourself frustrated or unsuccessful when you draft, you might experiment with some of these ideas to see whether it makes a difference.

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