

Student's Guide to The Writing Process



Purpose and Audience

Before you begin to write, make sure you have a good and clear idea of the purpose for writing and the audience for whom you are writing. This will help you decide on the best form of writing. Some possible purposes for writing are:

to persuade
to defend
to explain
to question
to respond

to describe
to express
to compare
to analyze
to report

to amuse
to entertain
to inform
to educate

Start by writing a sentence that reminds you of your purpose, your audience, and your topic. For example:

I am writing ... to describe to my teacher and classmates how I felt when our team lost the volleyball championship.

I am writing ... to persuade readers of the Ajax Mirror to donate emergency supplies to the recently arrived refugees' relief fund.

The audience you are writing for will also influence what you write and how you write it.

Choosing a Topic

There are many ways to find a topic for your writing. Try

- reading books and magazines
- browsing the Internet or scanning an encyclopedia
- watching videos or television shows
- flipping through your journal
- re-reading your class notes
- brainstorming with a group of classmates
- talking with a friend
- talking to a family member
- drawing an idea web using key words

Once you have found a possible topic, use the following questions to check that it is appropriate:

- Is it a topic you find interesting?
- Do you know (or can you find) enough information about the topic?
- Can you narrow down to topic enough so that you can write about it in the space and time available?
- Does the topic meet any special requirements set by your teacher?

Writing a Thesis Sentence

A thesis sentence tells what you want to say about the topic you have chosen. It not only *states* the topic, it says something *about* it. A good thesis sentence should give your readers some useful clues about what they are about to read. Most thesis sentences appear in the first or second paragraph.

Thesis for a Persuasive Essay	Thesis for a Report	Thesis for an Instructional Manual
<p>Injuries and flights are unavoidable in a rough game such as Canadian football.</p> <p>or</p> <p>There is no reason why anyone should be injured playing Canadian football.</p>	<p>According to statistics, football violence is not widespread as everyone believes.</p>	<p>To avoid injury in Canadian football, you need to keep your head up, your eyes moving, and your mind alert.</p>

Organizing Information

How you arrange your information or ideas depends on what you are writing (*form*), why you are writing (*purpose*), and for whom you are writing (*audience*). Here are some common patterns of organization:

Patterns of Organization	Examples
time sequence (chronological)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stories - factual accounts
place or location (spatial)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - descriptions of people, places, or things
features or characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - comparisons - descriptions of people, places, or things
order of importance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - news stories - business reports - memos - persuasive writing - recipes - assembly instructions
cause to effect or vice-versa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - science reports - explanations or instructions

Outlining

An outline is like a map to help guide you through your writing. Several ways of creating an outline for your writing are briefly discussed below. Use the text outline or tree diagram for reports and essays (*non-fiction writing*); use a time line for short stories or biographies (*narratives*).

Text Outlining

I. Main Idea

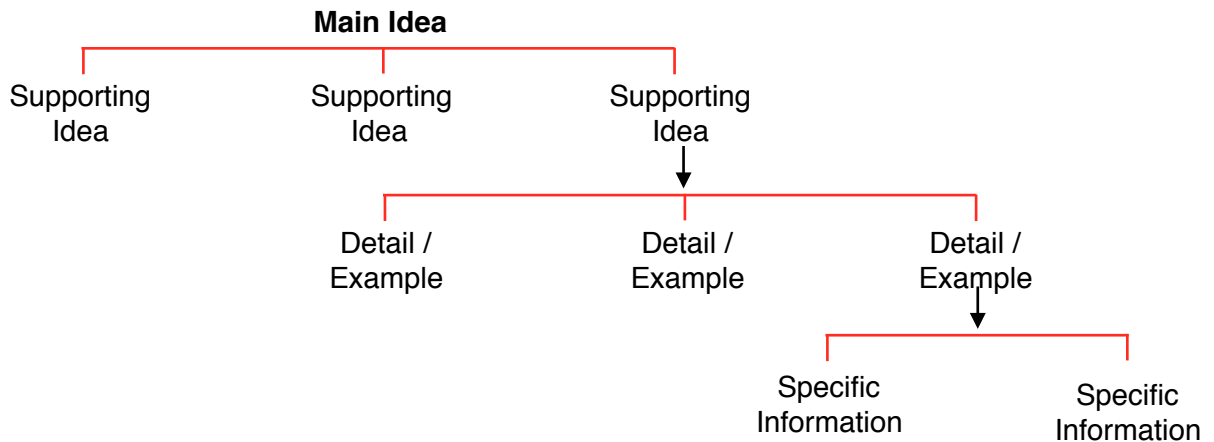
A. Supporting Idea

1. Detail or Example
 - a) specific information
 - b) specific information
2. Detail or Example
 - a) specific information
 - b) specific information

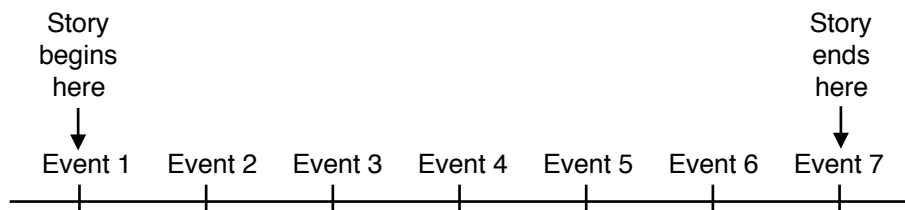
B. Supporting Idea

1. Detail or Example
- ... etc.

Tree Diagram



Time Line



Taking Notes

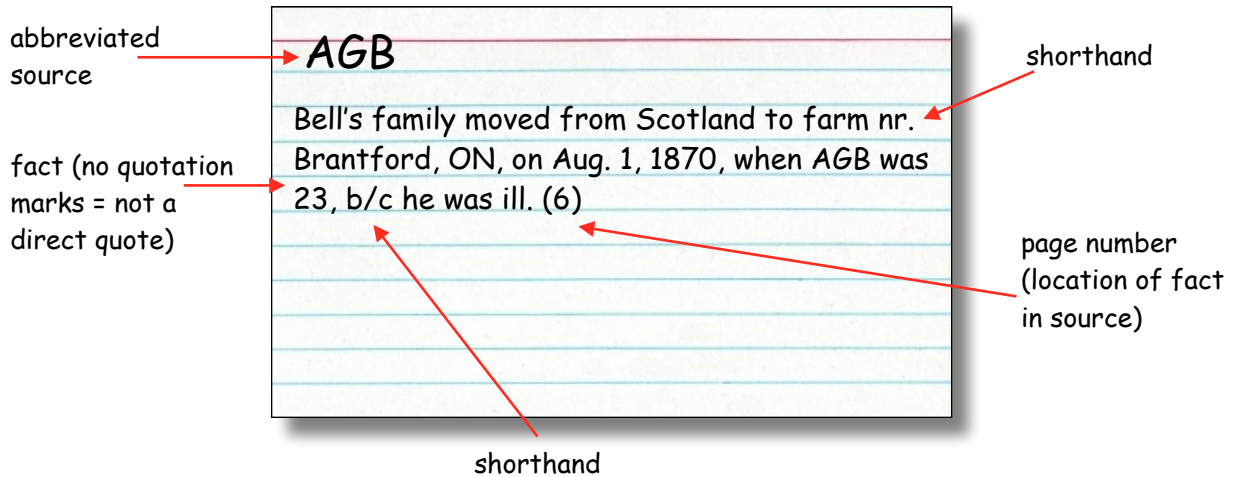
If you need to take notes to gather information from books, magazines or other sources before you write, follow these guidelines:

- **Focus on your purpose.** Remind yourself often of your purpose for writing.
- **Look for the structure.** Look for clues that show how the information is organized. Headlines and key phrases often signal that the reasons or stages will be explained in the paragraphs that follow.
- **Make connections.** Try writing your notes in outline form to show how the ideas are related. On a computer, you can group related information by using simple formatting, such as boldface italics headings, or bulleted or numbered lists.
- **Write in your own words.** Avoid repeating word-for-word what you have read. When you use a direct quote from a source, put it in quotation marks and note the source (title, page number)
- **Identify the source.** Write the name of the author, the title of the source, and the date of publication. For a book, include where it was published and the name of the publisher.
- **Use few words.** Skip small words such as the, and develop your own shorthand to save you time. Here's some ideas:

Try this...	As shorthand for ...
–	is
<	less than / small
>	more than / big / large
ø	nothing / none / no
b/c	because
nr.	near
s/b	should be
w/o	without

- **Use cue/recipe cards.** If you are taking notes from different sources, try recording each fact on a separate card. By sorting and re-arranging groups of cards, you can experiment with different ways of organizing the information gathered. This method can be followed if you're taking notes on a computer – simply cut and paste until you find an arrangement that works well.

Here's a sample cue/note card showing one fact taken from *Alexander Graham Bell: An Inventive Life* by Elizabeth Macleod.



Writing an Effective Beginning

Essay or Research Report

The first paragraph of an essay or research report tells your readers what you are writing about and what you want to say about it. It should also catch your audience's interest. Here are some suggestions for creating interest in your writing:

- Present a scene to illustrate the topic.

Imagine waking up one morning to feel the floor shaking and see all your books falling off the shelves.

- Present an interesting fact that leads into your thesis.
- Relate the topic to the lives of your audience.

We usually think that earthquakes happen elsewhere, to other people, in faraway places, but according to experts, one could happen here.

- Tell a joke or funny story that is related to your topic – unless your topic is serious or tragic.
- Promise to reveal something later in the essay.

Later, I'll discuss what measures you can follow to prepare for a possible earthquake in the area.

Narrative or Story

For a narrative, you might consider creating interest in one of the following ways:

- Begin at an interesting moment in the middle of the story and fill in the details later. Look at the following example:

When Grandmama died at eighty-three our whole household held its breath. She had promised us a sing of her leaving, final proof that her present life had ended well. My parents knew that without any clear sing, our own family fortunes could be altered, threatened. My stepmother looked endlessly into the small cluttered room the ancient lady had occupied. Nothing was touched, nothing changed. My father, thinking that a sing should appear in Grandmama's garden, looked at the frost-killed shoots and cringed: *no, that could not be it...*

- from "The Jade Peony", by Wayson Choy

- Begin with some dialogue that establishes characters, introduces conflict, and/or provided background information. Here's an example:

"Cin, Cin, Cindy!" the three girls call out.
"Cindy! Will you help me put up the decorations for the dance?" Agnes says.
"Could you find my scissors, Cindy?" Marybeth chimes in.
"We need more cups!" Dara cries. "Cindy =, where are the cups?"
Cindy hurries over. "Here I come, Agnes," she says in a low voice.
"Okay, Marybeth. I'll find them, Dara."...

- from "The Transformations of Cindy R.", by Anne Mazzer

- Begin with a startling image or description. Like this example:

The flying saucer landed on Fred Foster's back lawn at three o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. Fred's oldest daughter, Mona, answered the door. There was a little green man standing there; he had a bald head, bulbous eyes, huge ears, and a pair of antennae protruding from his forehead. He was wearing a goldfish bowl on his head. She recognized him at once as a Martian. ...

- from "The Day the Martian Landed", by Pierre Berton

If you find it difficult to write the beginning of a piece, try writing it **after** you have written everything else. Many writers find that writing the beginning last is easier because they know exactly what they have said and can see how it all fits together.

Drafting Tips

It's time to write a first draft. While this may seem overwhelming, here are some suggestions to help you getting what some writers see as the "biggest hurdle" well on the way:

- Don't worry too much about the quality of the writing yet. Although it's important, it should not be the main focus at this stage. At the beginning, just concentrate on getting ideas down on paper or the computer screen.
- Start whenever you feel ready and comfortable for the task. If you find it difficult to write the first paragraph, begin with another section and come back and "fill in the blanks" later.
- If you get stuck and don't know what to write next, try re-copying what you have written. You might also try explaining to somebody (teacher, friend, mom, dad, older sibling, etc.), or move to another section the writing.
- Just before you begin writing, read something similar to the sort of writing you are planning. For example, if you are writing a newspaper article, read the front section of a newspaper before you begin.
- Try to follow your outline as much as possible, but make changes if necessary.

Revising Tips

Your first draft is done. Now it's time to revise. Revising means looking at the big picture, then adding, deleting, and re-arranging as necessary. It may be a good idea to set aside your draft for a day or two before beginning the revision. This will let you see your work with "a new set of eyes."

Here are some guidelines to follow during your revision stage:

- Check that everything you wrote relates to the purpose.
- Make sure you have included enough background information for your audience.
- Re-arrange paragraphs and sentences to create a logical flow.
- Cut or add information to get your message across in the most effective manner possible.
- Add connecting words to make the relationship among your ideas clear.
- Make small stylistic changes (such as changing words or phrases, adding and deleting sentences, correcting mistakes, etc.) as you notice them. But don't spend too much time doing this. These changes should be the focus in the editing stage.
- If possible, get feedback on your work from other readers. Consider their comments and suggestions, and decide what changes (if any) you need to make.

Editing Tips

The revising and editing stages of the writing process may overlap, but they are different for one another. Generally, revising deals with *focus*, *content*, and *organization*. Editing looks in more detail at *words*, *sentences*, and the overall *flow* of the writing.

A successful editing stage must follow these guidelines:

- Look for ways to say what you want using as few words as possible.
- Fine-tune the choice of words to fit your purpose and the audience.
- Check that you have used a consistent voice (first person, third person), tense (present or past), and style (formal, informal, reading level, flow, etc.)
- Correct any errors in grammar, mechanics, or spelling. However, don't spend too much time looking for these errors; there will be time for that at the proofreading stage of the writing process.

Proofreading¹ Tips

Proofreading is the final stage in the writing process. It involves preparing your work to be published. Like the revising and editing states, editing and proofreading tend to overlap. Nevertheless, make sure to set time at the end of the process to only focus on proofreading.

When proofreading, do the following:

- Read slowly, focusing on each word. If you used a computer to prepare your work, proofread a hard copy instead of reading directly from your computer screen.)
- Check for errors in capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Take special care to double-check items that have been troublesome for you in the past.
- Check that all place names and proper names are spelled correctly.
- Make sure you have used quotation marks correctly.
- Check lists, charts, and tables to make sure the content is accurate and set up properly.
- Check that each paragraph is indented, and that each sentence begins with a capital letter.
- Acknowledge all your sources correctly and completely.
- Re-copy or re-print your work in a suitable format (check with your teacher!).
- Ask a classmate to proofread your work one more time to make sure you have not missed anything.

Use the symbols that follow to mark changes to your writing or the writing of others if you are proofreading a classmate's work.

¹ This stage is also known as the **Editing** stage.

Common Proofreading Symbols		
Mark	Meaning	Example
	new paragraph	So that day ended badly. [¶] The next day....
	insert, add this	About two million ^{people}  make their home in the Sahara.
	capital letter	Planet <u>earth</u> may be in danger.
	lower case	The people came in, ate our food, messed up the house, and Left .
	delete, take out	Rattlesnakes are very very dangerous.
	add a period	It is the Sahara - the world's largest desert  .
	add comma	Bring your tent, a sleeping bag, and a flashlight.  .
	add apostrophe	"It's Hank!" he cried.  .
	move word(s)	We're watching  much  too TV, and it isn't good for us.
	stet, let it stay	I recommend it to anyone who likes good westerns.  .
	close space	Chickens can't fly, but duc  ks can.
	insert space	The Battleground [#]  is a great show.
	transpose (switch)	It's on every Thrusday night at 9 P.M.  .

Organizing Your Time

Learn to manage your time and you will be well on your way to becoming a better writer and to getting better marks. Here are some ways that will help you to keep track of your assignments and use your time more effectively.

- Use a journal or agenda to keep track of due dates. Look at your agenda every day.
- Use the amount of time you are given to complete an assignment as an indication of what your teacher expects. If an assignment is due the next day, chances are that will not be expected to do a lot of research or to produce a long piece of writing. You will, however, still have to produce and present ideas that are well thought through, well written, and carefully proofread. On the other hand, if you have a number of days or weeks to complete an assignment, budget more time for research and preparation, be prepared to develop your idea(s) in more detail and spend appropriate time revising your writing.
- Break down big assignment into smaller tasks, and estimate the amount of time you will need for each stage.
- Set aside a particular time and place for homework assignments and stick to the schedule.
- Although is important to challenge yourself, it is equally important to have reasonable goals so that you can achieve what you set out to do.