

## How to Write a Good Essay

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### Checklist: How to write a paper?

1. Sit in a straight, comfortable chair in a well lit place with plenty of freshly sharpened pencils.
2. Check your email.
3. Read over the assignment carefully, to make certain you understand.
4. Walk down to the vending machines and buy some coffee to help you concentrate.
5. On the way back visit a friend from class. If your friend hasn't started the paper yet either, you can both walk to McDonalds and buy a hamburger to help you concentrate. If your friend shows you her paper, typed, double-spaced, and bound in one of those irritating see-through plastic folders, drop him/her.
6. When you get back to your room, sit in a straight, comfortable chair in a clean, well lit place with plenty of freshly sharpened pencils.
7. Read over the assignment again to make absolutely certain you understand it.
8. Check your email.
9. You know, you haven't written to that kid you met at camp since fourth grade. You'd better write that letter now and get it out of the way so you can concentrate.
10. Look at your teeth in the bathroom mirror.
11. Listen to one side of your favourite tape and that's it, I mean it, as soon as it's over you are going to start that paper.
12. Listen to the other side.
13. Check your email.
14. Phone a classmate and ask if he's started writing yet. Exchange derogatory remarks about your teacher, the course, the school/college, the world at large.
15. Sit in a straight, comfortable chair in a clean, well lit place with plenty of freshly sharpened pencils.
16. Make yourself a power snack.
17. Check your email.
18. Make sure you aren't missing something truly worthwhile on TV. NOTE: When you have a paper due in less than 12 hours, anything on TV is truly worthwhile.
19. Check your email.
20. Look at your tongue in the bathroom mirror.
21. Sit down and do some serious thinking about your plans for the future.
22. Check your email.
23. Sit in a straight, comfortable chair in a clean, well lit place with plenty of freshly sharpened pencils.
24. Read over the assignment one more time, just for the heck of it.
25. Scoot your chair across the room to the window and watch the sunrise.
26. Lie face down on the floor and groan.
27. Check your email.
28. Leap up and write the paper.
29. Type the paper, and while you're at it, check your email.
30. Complain to everyone that you didn't get any sleep because you had to write that damn paper!

- ☞ What is the main problem in the case of the imaginary student described above?
- ☞ Is your process of writing in any way similar to the one described?
- ☞ What conclusions can we draw from this description? What can we learn from it? Are there any useful strategies mentioned in this humorous checklist?
- ☞ What are the main tips/strategies that you rely on when writing, in order to make the process more effective and less painful?

## What happens when people write?

Maxine Hairston

*Professor of English and writing expert Maxine Hairston provides a useful overview of the writing process and then goes on to focus on the differences between two different kinds of writing – explanatory and exploratory – that we must master and value equally.*

Many people who have trouble writing believe that writing is a mysterious process that the average person cannot master. They assume that anyone who writes well does so because of a magic mixture of talent and inspiration, and that people who are not lucky enough to have those gifts can never become writers. Thus they take an “either you have it or you don’t” attitude that discourages them before they even start to write.

Like most myths, this one has a grain of truth in it, but only a grain. Admittedly the best writers are people with talent just as the best musicians or athletes or chemists are people with talent. But that qualification does not mean that only talented people can write well and more than it means that only a few gifted people can become good tennis players. Tennis coaches know differently. From experience, they know any reasonably well-coordinated and healthy person can learn to play a fairly good game and work at putting them into practice. They help people become tennis players by showing them the strategies that experts use and by giving them criticism and reinforcement as they practice those strategies. In recent years, as we have learned more about the processes of working writers, many teachers have begun to work with their writing students in the same way.

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE WRITING PROCESS

#### How Professional Writers Work

- Most writers don’t wait for inspiration. They write whether they feel like it or not. Usually they write on a schedule, putting in regular hours just as they would on a job.
- Professional writers constantly work in the same places with the same tools – pencil, typewriter, or word processor. The physical details of writing are important to them so they take trouble to create

- a good writing environment for themselves.
- Successful writers work constantly at observing what goes on around them and have a system for gathering and storing material. They collect clippings, keep notebooks, or write in journals.
- Even successful writers need deadlines to make them work, just like everyone else.
- Successful writers make plans before they start to write, but they keep their plans flexible, subject to revision.
- Successful writers usually have some audience in mind and stay aware of that audience as they write and revise.
- Most successful writers work rather slowly; four to six double-spaced pages is considered a good day’s work.
- Even successful writers often have trouble getting started; they expect it and don’t panic.
- Successful writers seldom know precisely what they are going to write before they start, and they plan on discovering at least part of their content as they work.
- Successful writers stop frequently to reread what they’ve written and consider such rereading an important part of the writing process.
- Successful writers revise as they write and expect to do two or more drafts of anything they write.
- Like ordinary mortals, successful writers often procrastinate and feel guilty about it; unlike less experienced writers, however, most of them have a good sense of how long they can procrastinate and still avoid disaster.

### Explanatory and Exploratory Writing

Several variables affect the method and speed with which writers work—how much time they have, how important their task is, how skilled they are, and so on. The most important variable, however, is the kind of writing they are doing. I am going to focus on two major kinds here: *explanatory* and *exploratory*. To put it briefly, although much too simply, explanatory writing tends to be about information; exploratory writing tends to be about ideas.

Explanatory writing can take many forms: a movie review, an explanation of new software, an analysis of historical causes, a report on a recent political development, a biographical sketch. These are just a few possibilities. The distinguishing feature of all these examples and other kinds of explanatory

writing is that the writer knows most of what he or she is going to say before starting to write or knows where to find the material needed to get started. /.../ Your job as a writer is to dig out the material, organize it, and shape it into a clearly written, carefully supported essay. Usually you would know who your readers are for an explanatory essay and, from the beginning, shape it for that audience.

Writers usually make plans when they are doing explanatory writing, plans that can range from a page of notes to a full outline. Such plans help them to keep track of their material, put it in some kind of order, and find a pattern for presenting it. For explanatory writing, many writers find that the traditional methods work well; assertion/support, cause and effect, process, compare/contrast, and so on. Much of the writing that students do in college is explanatory, as is much business writing. Many magazine articles and nonfiction books are primarily explanatory writing. It is a crucially important kind of writing, one that we depend on for information and education, one that keeps the machinery of business and government going.

Explanatory writing is not necessarily easy to do nor is it usually formulaic. It takes skill and care to write an accurate, interesting story /.../ or an entertaining and informative report /.../. But the process of explanatory writing is manageable. You identify the task, decide what the purpose and who the audience are, map out a plan for finding and organising information, then divide the writing itself into doable chunks and start working. Progress may be painful, and you may have to draft and revise several times to clarify points or get the tone just right, but with persistence, you can do it.

*Explanatory writing* can also take many forms: a reflective personal essay, a profile of a homeless family, an argument in support of funding for multimillion dollar science projects, or a speculative essay about the future of the women's movement. These are only a few possibilities. What distinguishes these examples and explanatory writing in general is that the writer has only a partially formed idea of what he or she is going to write before starting. A typical piece of explanatory writing might be a speculative essay on why movies about the Mafia appeal so much to the American public. You might hit on the idea of writing such a piece after you have seen several mob movies – *Goodfellas*, *Miller's Crodssing*, and *Godfather III* – but not really know what you would say or who your audience would be. The material for such a paper doesn't exit; you would have to begin by reading, talking to people, and by drawing on the ideas and insights you've gleaned from different sources to reach your own point of view. And you would certainly expect some of your most important ideas – your own conclusions – to come to you as you wrote.

Because you don't know ahead of time exactly what you're going

to say in exploratory writing, it's hard to make a detailed plan or outline; however, you can and should take copious notes as you prepare to write. You might be able to put down a tentative thesis sentence /.../. Such a sentence could be an anchor to get you started writing, but as a main idea, it could change or even disappear as the paper developed.

Many papers you write in college will be exploratory papers, for example, an interpretive paper in a literature course, an essay on the future of an ethnic community for a cultural anthropology course /.../. Many magazine articles and books are also exploratory, for example, an article on the roots of violence in American cities or an autobiographical account of being tagged a "slow learner" early in one's school career. Both in and out of college, exploratory writing is as important as explanatory writing because it is the springboard and testing ground for new ideas.

Exploratory writing isn't necessarily harder to do than explanatory writing, but it is harder to plan because it resists any systematic approach. That makes it appeal to some writers, particularly those who have a reflective or speculative turn in mind. They like the freedom of being able just to write to see what is going to develop. But although exploratory writers start out with more freedom, eventually they too have to discipline themselves to organize their writing into clear, readable form. They also have to realize that exploratory writing usually takes longer and requires more drafts.

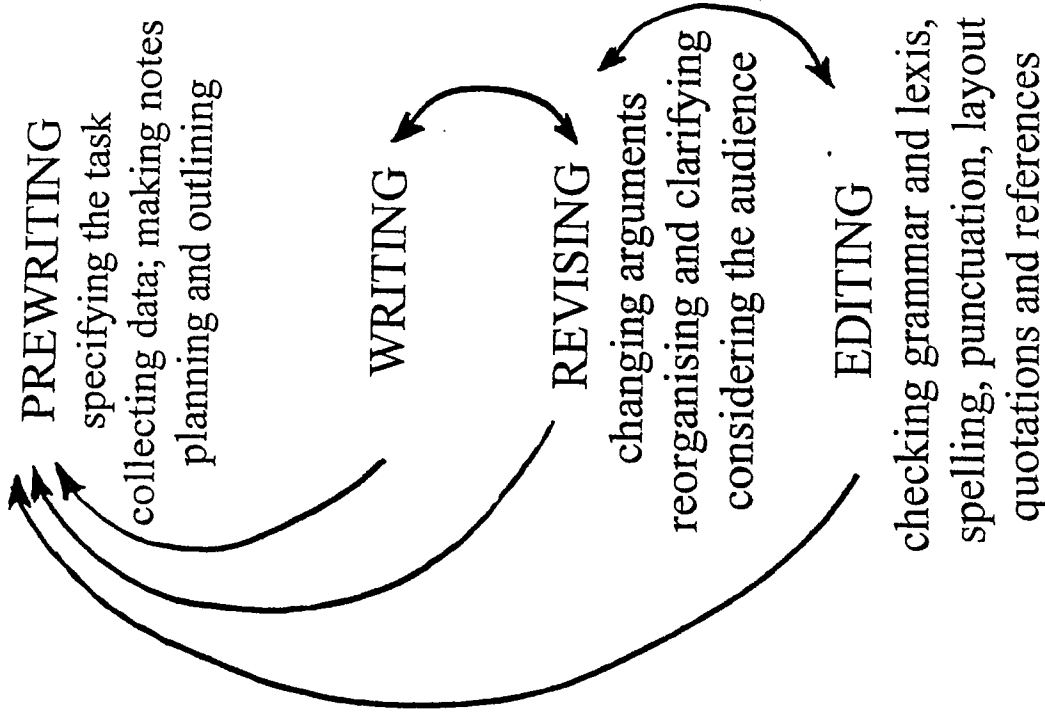
When you are doing exploratory writing, anticipate that the process will be messy. You have to tolerate uncertainty longer because ideas keep coming as you write and it's not always clear what you're going to do with them and how – or if – you can fit them into your paper. Exploratory writing is also hard to organize – sometimes you'll have to outline *after* you've written your first draft in order to get the paper under control. Finally, you also have to have confidence in your own instincts; now that you are focusing on ideas and reflections more than on facts, you have to believe that you have something worth writing about and that other people are interested in reading it.

Of course, not all writing can be easily classified as either explanatory or exploratory; sometimes you'll be working with information and ideas in the same paper and move from presenting facts to reflecting about their implications. /.../

In general, readers respond best to writing that thoughtfully connects facts to reflections, explanations to explorations. So, don't hesitate to mix the two kinds of writing if it makes your paper stronger and more interesting. /.../

**Excerpted from** Hairston, Maxine. 2000. What happens when people write? In Escholz, Paul, Rosa, Alfred and Virginia Clark (eds) *Language Awareness: Readings for College Writers*. Boston: Bedford/ St Martin's, pp 131-138.

## The Writing Process



## Structuring an essay

As stated earlier (page 142), every essay title contains an actual or implied question. The whole of your essay must focus on the title and address that question.

In your introduction, explain what the essay is going to do.

- Explain how you interpret the question.
- Identify issues that are you going to explore.
- Give a brief outline of how you will deal with each issue, and in which order.

*Length: about one-tenth of the essay.*

### Paragraph 1

- This paragraph covers the first thing your introduction said you would address.
- The first sentence introduces the main idea of the paragraph.
- Other sentences develop the topic of the paragraph. Include relevant examples, details, evidence, quotations, references.
- Lead up to the next paragraph.

### Paragraph 2 and other paragraphs

- The first sentence, or opening sentences, link the paragraph to the previous paragraphs, then introduce the main idea of the paragraph.
- Other sentences develop the paragraph's topic.

The conclusion contains no *new* material.

- Summarise your argument and the main themes.
- State your general conclusions.
- Make it clear why those conclusions are important or significant.
- In your last sentence, sum up your argument very briefly, linking it to the title.

*Length: about one-tenth of the essay.*

### References and bibliography

List all the books, articles and other materials you have referred to within the essay. (See page 125.) If a bibliography is required, list **relevant texts**, including those you read but did not refer to in the essay.

The structure given here is the most basic. It underlines not **just essays** but many other types of writing.

**The Essay**  
by Reginald Lockett

1. What is the purpose of an essay?
2. What does the American *linear* method mean?
3. A paragraph usually has a topic \_\_\_\_\_, three specific supports and a \_\_\_\_\_ topic sentence.
4. What is *thesis*?
5. What does the blueprint do?
6. What does the motivator do?
7. What is the function of a topic sentence in each central paragraph of an essay?
8. What type of support can be used in a central paragraph?
9. What should be in the conclusion?
10. Should any of these rules for essay writing in English class be changed for essays in other subjects?
11. When should you compose the title?

