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# **PART I**

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**Writing Assignments, Reading  
Guidelines, Writing Guidelines**

# Writing as a Process

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I'VE BEEN TEACHING writing in one form or another and at one school or another for a long time now, and I can safely say that there is no one tried-and-true writing process, system, or method that will work for everyone. I've come to this realization by observing my own writing efforts as well as those of my colleagues and students. I've learned that my writing process differs markedly from the way some other people get words down on paper. For example, I'm a slow writer, for whom producing every page is a struggle, but I'm usually able to keep what I write very focused. By contrast, a friend of mine can rapidly produce page after page, but what she writes is usually "all over the place." We were in a study group together some time ago, and although we created a first draft by entirely different methods, we were a good team when it came time to revise—because she could help me expand and develop, and I could help her cut. We learned from observing each other's methods.

Exposure to other people's writing processes has made me a better, less constricted writer. I'm still slow, but I don't approach my writing projects with quite the same level of anxiety as before, because I have more strategies to rely on now. This chapter offers you some strategies that you may not have tried for writing an essay or research paper. Sample some of the methods that are less familiar to you to see whether you can improve your own writing process.

## Enhancing Your Repertoire of Writing Strategies

The writing assignments in this book may be unlike any you've tackled before, and you may need to refine your repertoire of writing strategies to respond to them. You may need to try different ways of planning and drafting—that is, to experiment with your writing process.

On the following pages you'll find an overview of a writing process you can use to complete the assignment sequences in this book. But remember, it's up to you to customize your own strategies for writing successfully. I'll offer suggestions, but you need to keep in mind the kind of learner, thinker, and writer you are so that you can come up with creative strategies specifically geared to your inclinations and needs. Talking about how to write is like trying to explain how to dance or how to serve a volleyball: there are certain moves

everyone must make, but not everyone executes those moves in the same way. Most people who become truly proficient at an activity develop their own unique style.

## **Developing a Writing Process That Works for You**

What follows is a step-by-step description of a thinking and writing process that you can use or adapt to suit your own requirements and preferences. Although the process is specifically geared to completing the assignment sequences in this book, it is applicable to other writing projects as well. It is provided here as a model, a starting point that you can use to develop your own unique and proficient learning and writing style.

### ***Before you write anything***

Maybe you keep a personal journal or diary. Perhaps you're a fine, productive poet. You might even be a songwriter. Personal or creative writing usually does not require you to respond to specific assignments or readings. Academic writing, on the other hand, nearly always does, so you will benefit from some prior consideration of the assignment, the readings, your goals, and your potential audience. The following paragraphs describe some preliminary steps to take, in any academic writing project, before you ever put pen to paper.

### ***Assess the assignment***

The first step in the academic writing process is to assess the assignment, or "prompt." Always read your assignment through at least twice before you begin to write anything. Underline or highlight words that indicate how you're expected to approach the assignment, such as argue, compare, contrast, summarize, persuade, and analyze.

For example, if an assignment asks for an analysis of another writer's arguments, then an essay that merely restates those arguments won't fill the bill. An analysis requires that you not only make observations but also draw conclusions from them. For instance, if your instructor were to ask you to analyze a television talk show, you would, of course, describe the set, the format, and who appeared and what happened in the episodes you watched. You would then have a report. To move beyond a report to an analysis, you would have to draw conclusions from your observations, explaining the significance of certain details and identifying the show's strengths and weaknesses. You might, for example, note that although the advertisements for the show seem to be aimed at attracting a young audience, its guests seem geared too much toward older viewers.

Then you would go on to discuss your conclusions concerning why this is so and offer evidence to support those conclusions.

### ***Ask for help if you need it***

If at any time it is not clear what the assignment requires, don't hesitate to ask your instructor to go over it with you. Even if you feel you have a pretty solid understanding of the assignment, ask yourself, "If I *had* to come up with a question about this assignment for my instructor, what would it be?" This step may seem like a waste of time, but I've often found that what I think I've asked students to do and what my students think I've asked them to do aren't necessarily the same thing. When I have my students write questions about an assignment, even if they think they understand it completely, it helps us get a better sense of each other's goals and expectations. Finally, make notes on the assignment as you hear other people's questions and your teacher's responses. You never know what might help you later when it's just you and the blank page or computer screen.

### ***Read the reading***

With your answers to key focus or prereading journal questions in mind, highlight and annotate sections of the text that you think might be useful as supporting evidence or that you might want to argue against. (For a detailed discussion of active-reading strategies, see Chapter 1. Also, as noted in Chapter 1, don't try to answer all of the prereading questions for the assignment sequences in this book. Instead, pursue those questions that, for whatever reason, attract your attention most forcefully.)

### ***Define your purpose***

Defining your reasons for writing and for whom you are writing is related to the step of assessing your assignment, insofar as it will cause you to focus your assessment further. For example, suppose you are asked to analyze Robert Johnson's argument in his essay "Teaching the Forbidden: Literature and the Religious Student." Right off the bat, you know that your overall purpose is to perform that analysis. But let's say you are put off by the way Johnson represents his students in his essay. You would want to communicate that concern as part of your analysis, and this would become part of your purpose in writing your essay. At this point you probably wouldn't know exactly how you would accomplish this, but it would be part of your purpose, nonetheless. Defining your purpose in writing is an important habit that will help you go beyond simply reacting to your assignments and craft unique, carefully considered responses to them.

## ***Identify your audience***

You also need to begin thinking about your audience at this stage. Certainly, you know that writing for your best friend is radically different from writing for a college course. Not only does your purpose for writing differ, but the expectations of your readers differ as well. Your friend will be a generous, interested, and sympathetic reader, disposed to be persuaded by whatever you have to say. Academic readers, who do not know you, are much more demanding. In general, academic audiences have a standard set of expectations: that you use solid logical argumentation and backing, that your prose be precise and well structured, and that you rely as little as possible on emotional appeals. The assignment sequences in this book ask you to produce papers that conform to these conventions. However, expectations may vary even among academic readers. Your biology or history or business professors will have different expectations than your English professors concerning what a successful writing project should include and how it should look. Even two English professors at the same college can differ in what they find valuable or what they want you to emphasize in your writing. Thus each writing situation requires that you shift “rhetorical gears” and that you consider for whom you are writing. Don’t let this keep you from getting started, however. If you’re not sure how to write for a particular audience, you can always revise your paper later to suit that audience once you’ve figured out what its expectations are likely to be.

The next time you read the newspaper, take a longer-than-usual look at the letters to the editor and consider how well each writer has imagined and addressed his or her audience. What kind of person do you assume each letter writer to be, and what kind of people do you think each was writing for? In other words, what is each writer’s rhetorical stance? Did these writers imagine a particular audience and try to communicate their concerns to that audience, specifically? How persuasive were they?

Each time you write, you want to accomplish something—to get a good grade, secure a job interview, or obtain more votes for the candidate you favor. If you want to be as successful as possible, then you should take the time to define exactly whom you are trying to convince and what you are trying to convince them of—this will help you adopt an effective rhetorical stance. Once you’ve done this, then you can consider how best to approach your project for the specific audience and purpose you’ve defined:

- What will your audience know about your topic? What background information will you need to provide?
- Will your audience understand your approach to your topic, or do you need to explain it?

- Where is your audience likely to stand on the issue you're addressing? Will they agree with you or disagree?
- Will you have to convince them that your approach or position is worth caring about?

All of the assignments in this book ask you to keep your experience as a student (in whatever setting and at whatever point in your life) at the center of your responses. If you're a student who has been out of school for several years, you'll have to decide how likely it is that your audience will know how your experience of student life differs from that of someone right out of high school. If you're a first generation college student at a school where most of the students have college-educated parents, you'll need to decide whether your background enables you to see some things your classmates can't. If it does, you'll need to explain something of that background to your audience so you can teach them what you've observed. Your answers to the questions in the preceding list will affect what you include in your draft and how you shape it. They'll also help you decide how to help your audience to appreciate and understand where your responses come from.

### ***The invention and planning stage***

Now that you've analyzed your assignment, done some reading on your topic, defined your purpose for writing, and identified your audience, you're ready to start planning the content of your essay. You are still very much in the thinking stages of your writing process, and you should strive to remain as unfettered as possible. At this stage you need to discover new possibilities and explore various avenues. Later you'll pick and choose among the options you develop now, so don't limit your choices at this point; let your mind roam free.

### ***Revisit the readings and the prereading questions***

You will often find that at this stage of your writing process, it is useful to reflect on any reading you've done on your topic. Because this book specifically asks you to read and respond to a number of essays for each assignment sequence, you'll definitely have done some reading on your topic by this point. In fact, you'll probably have done some reading of outside sources by this stage no matter what your assignment is, and whether or not you've yet done any formal library research. At this point you might want to revisit your answers to the prereading focus questions in the assignment sequences (or, for other assignments, any prereading questions you