The Academic Writing Process: Strategies for Navigating & Inventing Academic Text

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The eternal struggle.

= cognitive burden for inexperienced writers (Kellogg 2008)
Writing Processes

A. Brainstorm. Read. Write. Edit. Turn in.
B. Read. Read. Read. Read. Read. Write at the last minute. Turn in.

D. Usually starts with brainstorming → reading and note-taking → drafting → feedback → back to research which generates new ideas → more drafting → feedback → revision that leads to new ideas → more focused reading → feedback → more revising, which eventually leads to editing and proofreading. Turn in.
2 minutes to describe your writing process

1. What do you need, mentally and physically, to start writing?
2. Is it easier for you to write in the morning or the afternoon?
3. Describe your writing process: what stages do you go through?
   A. What is the hardest part?
   B. The easiest part?
“I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.”

-Flannery O’Connor

"If you cannot write well, you cannot think well; if you cannot think well, others will do your thinking for you."

--attributed to both Oscar Wilde and George Orwell
Benefits of writing regularly

- 6 year study of 32 people
- 16 regular writers (30 minutes/day, consistently)
- 16 binge writers

**FIGURE 11.1 Effects of BDS**

Base slide from Dr. Kim Nicholas, LUMES
Benefits of writing regularly

“The precondition for writing well is being able to write badly and to write when you are not in the mood.”

--Peter Elbow (1998)
Different texts at different times

- Process writing (focus on thinking & content)
- Product writing (focus on its form)

Different types of writing generate different types of text:
- raw text (for your eyes only)
- draft text (for feedback during the process)
- reader text (the end product)

All are necessary in the writing process
But how?

Leonid Pasternak, “The Passion of Creation” (1892)
Text invention strategies

1) Keep a writing journal and a schedule
   1. **Before:** What will I do today? Set up goals.
   
   2. **During:** What problems do I face? How can I solve them? Do I need to ask for help?

   3. **After:** What have I done? How will I work further?
If writing for an extending amount of time is painful...
Pomodoro technique

1. Choose a (concrete, realistic) task
2. Eliminate as many external distractions as possible
3. Work with intense focus for 25 minutes
4. Quickly note distractions on scratch paper
5. After 25 minutes, note what you have done
6. You’ve earned a 5-minute pause 😊
7. Work for another 25 minutes
8. After 4 pomodori, take a longer break
Text invention strategies

1) Keep a writing journal and a schedule
2) Start a thoughtful literature search, take reflective notes & synthesize literature
Literature search to move from topic to question(s)

“...beginner’s mistakes: start plowing through all the sources they can find on a topic, taking notes on everything they read.”

“...the best way to begin working on your specific topic is not to find all the data you can on your general topic, but to formulate questions that point you to just those data that you need to answer them.”

Topic to Question(s)

Innovation in cultural organizations or Environmental Management or Human Rights Law and Gender Identity

Subject area

Narrowed topic

Innovation processes in museums or Sustainable (waste/water/energy ...) management or Private and Family Life of Transgender People
Types of questions to ask that guide your literature search → lead to a RQ or focused aim?

**Ask about the history:**
- How does (topic) fit into a larger historical context?
- What is (topic’s) internal history?

**Ask about its structure and composition:**
- How does (topic) fit into the context of a larger structure or function as part of a larger system?
- How do (topic’s) parts fit together as a system?
Types of questions to ask that guide your literature search → lead to a RQ or focused aim?

Ask how your topic is categorized?
- How can (topic) be grouped into kinds?
- How does (topic) compare to and contrast with others like it?

Turn positive questions into negative ones.
- What has not contributed to...?
- How does (topic) not differ from...?

Ask “what if?” and other speculative questions.
- How would things be different if (topic) didn’t happen/never existed?
Focused reading & note-taking

Amateur approach to essay writing: the “look up as I go” method

Instead:

Notes that rework the source and include your own reflections lead to better texts.
Notes that rework the source ➔
better memory & better papers

TEXT CONTENT and REFLECTIONS

1) What type of text is this?
2) Problem-solution text? Question-answer text? Claim driven?
3) Note the main idea and how the author convinces you or not
4) What does the text help you understand about your topic?
5) What definitions does the text use?
6) Any helpful concepts or language?
7) What connections does this text make or not make?
8) Other reactions, questions, associations?
Notes to include: content + reflections

- Problem-solution?
- Main idea and evidence?
- Description of a process or method?
- Timeline of events/experiment?
- Relation between hypothesis/aim and results?
- Keywords
- Examples (that were especially clarifying)
- Page numbers and reference info

- Questions
- Associations, reactions, ideas
- Any potential problems with method or results achieved?
- Other methods that could have been used?
- Concrete examples of abstract thoughts
Synthesis matrix for an overview of the literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic:</th>
<th>Source #1</th>
<th>Source #2</th>
<th>Source #3</th>
<th>Source #4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main Idea A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Idea B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example from: https://writingcenter.fiu.edu/resources/synthesis-matrix-2.pdf
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Women in WWII</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alteration of women’s roles because of WWII</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cornelsen</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Women accredited the WASP program for opening new doors, challenging stereotypes, and proving that women were as capable as men (p. 113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Women could compete with men as equals in the sky because of their exemplary performance (p. 116)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- WASP created opportunities for women that had never previously existed (p. 112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Women’s success at flying aircrafts “marked a pivotal step towards breaking the existing gender barrier” (p. 112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hardships and oppositions women faced</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- “From the outset male pilots resented women’s presence in a traditionally male military setting” (p. 1113-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- “The WASP were routinely assigned inferior planes that were later found to have been improperly maintained” (p. 114)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- discrimination against WASP at every level of military service, women were only paid 2/3 of what men were for doing identical tasks (p. 114)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ask:

- Are there differences in the scope of these texts’ main ideas?
- Any degree of disagreements between them?
- Do they engage with each other? How?
- Do they cover different aspects of my subject? How many different aspects? Any left out?
- How detailed/deep is each analysis?
- Any ideas in one text that you could reasonably expect to see in another, but don’t?
- Do they use similar methods to reach similar conclusions? Similar methods but different conclusions? Different methods but similar conclusions?
Text invention strategies

1) Keep a writing journal and a schedule
2) Take reflective notes & synthesize literature
3) Free write
Free write

• To warm up your writing muscles
• To turn off your inner critic or editor
• To quickly generate raw text
• To break through writer’s block

1. Choose a time frame and starting sentence/theme
2. Write without stopping! (No backspace, no eraser)
3. Continue to write without thinking about what you’re writing, even if you don’t have anything to write about

If you free write on the computer, turn off the monitor!
How to free write: sentences

It’s a problem that...\textit{(starting point)}
It’s a problem especially for....\textit{(whom does it concern?)}
The problem is caused by.... \textit{(causes)}
I aim to....\textit{(your aim)}
To study the problem, I will.... \textit{(method)}
To understand the problem, you have to understand how X works....\textit{(theory)}
Some keywords and concepts are...
I will only deal with...because...\textit{(delimitations)}
For now, I’ll work as if this section will have the following structure...\textit{(organization)}
What can you do with a “free write” text?

• Find a starting point for a new free write
  – underline good ideas and formulations
  – write the best bits on a new page and free write from there
  – repeat until you have developed a working draft

• Find keywords and make a preliminary structure
  – note keywords and write them on a separate page
  – structure the keywords in a logical order → paper structure?
  – write additional comments on each point

• Find gaps in what you know to guide further reading
  – note questions or uncertainties in your text
  – formulate as questions to ask to other literature
  – group and prioritize the questions according to kind
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Exercise: Using your “free write” text

• Underline 3-5 good ideas and formulations, (or keywords).

• Write additional comments on each point:
  - I want to talk about / explain / analyze / .......... because ........
  - The relation between .............. and .............. is ..............
  - First I’ll write about ................. because .................. and then I’ll write about .................... because ....................

• Spend a few minutes preparing to tell a classmate about these ideas.
Text invention strategies

1) Keep a writing journal and a schedule
2) Take reflective notes & synthesize literature
3) Free write
4) Draw mind maps
Health care finance convergence

- to see the whole picture
- to see the relationship between the parts
- to find gaps in information

Effect of convergence

External causes

Internal causes

Historical development

Mind map
Can be adapted for many purposes:
- map out the structure of a text you’re reading
- map out themes across several texts
- map out your reflections on one or more texts
- map out the content of a text you have to write
Text invention strategies

1) Keep a writing journal and a schedule
2) Take reflective notes & synthesize literature
3) Free write
4) Draw mind maps
5) Use metatext as a starting point
Use metatext

Metatext: text about text

**Can start as process text for the writer:** helps you understand the kind of content you need to write.

**Can become product text for readers:** helps them follow your text and understand it in the way you want it to be understood.

**Examples:**
- Focus statement
- Signpost text = directions
- Theory template
Focus Statement Template

I am studying [TOPIC] _______________ because I want to find out who/what/when/where/whether/why/how [QUESTION] ____________________ in order to better understand ____________________ (something the field doesn’t fully understand yet) and to make suggestions for how to change/fix/improve_________________. [SIGNIFICANCE]

[METHODS] To do this, I will conduct (a case study/an observational study/historical research/field-experiment)_________________. I will (collect/construct/gather qualitative/quantitative data/empirical material through interviews/observation/content analysis/questionnaires)___________________.

[METHODS & THEORY] I will analyze the data from____________________ (this theoretical perspective) or with_____________________ (this framework/these concepts). This perspective is helpful because ____________________.

[RESULTS SPECULATION] The results of this research will build on __________ and have implications for____________. Further research might focus on________________.
In this chapter, I will begin by discussing the background to my topic. With that background in place, I will turn to an evaluation of the relevant literature on this topic. The next step will be a re-interpretation of my problem in light of this literature. I will conclude by considering the implication of my topic for the broader field.

Example from *Explorations of Style*
In this chapter, I will begin by discussing the background to [my topic]. With that background in place, I will turn to an evaluation of the relevant literature on [my topic]. The next step will be a re-interpretation of [my topic] in light of this literature. I will conclude by considering the implications of [my topic] for [my field].
The first step in discussing [something] must be a consideration of [some sort of background issue]. To get a better feel for [this issue], we will need to look at [a particular aspect of the literature from two fields]. The synthesis of results from [literature in field X] and [literature in field Y] will provide a new way to understand the [current topic]. It is only when we see [this topic] in this new way that we can grasp its implications for the broader project of understanding [some issue facing the field as a whole].
In this book we draw on the work of Foucault to make our argument that psychopathology has become instrumental in schools and that schools play an instrumental role in expanding the new psychopathologies of children and young people. Foucault’s emphasis on truth, power and the constitution of the subject (Foucault 1983, 1997a, 2000) is especially useful to our analysis as it allows us to think through the ways in which psychopathology at school is produced and has productive effects. To this end Foucault’s (1982) conceptualisation of power as productive is generative for grasping how schools can indeed be instrumental in a field that, on first glance, appears to be the province of medical and health sciences (especially psychiatry, clinical psychology and psychopharmacology). It is here also that Foucault’s attention to dominant and subjugated knowledges is of value for informing how to understand how dominant knowledges of school disorders such as ADHD, direct attention from those practices that enable psychopathology to sit comfortably in contemporary schooling and educational environments.
In this (paper/chapter/article/thesis/book) I draw on (theorist’s work) to argue that (1-2 sentences summarizing your argument). (Name of theorist’s) emphasis on (specific concepts that will be used) is especially useful to this analysis as it allows us to think through (major purpose through which the theory is put). To this end (name of theorist’s) conceptualization of (name of major aspect of theory) is generative for grasping how (major application of theory in relation to your argument). It is here also that (theorist’s) attention to (another aspect of theory) is of value for informing (another piece of argument for which the theory is essential).

Text invention strategies

1) Keep a writing journal and a schedule
2) Take reflective notes & synthesize literature
3) Free write
4) Draw mind maps
5) Use metatext as a starting point
6) Tell a friend!
Tell a friend

...and get feedback

1. What stuck out to me the most was...
2. I’d like to know more about...
3. I didn’t quite understand...
“Don't write so that you can be understood, write so that you can't be misunderstood.”

-- William Howard Taft
Reflect on your writing process description from earlier

• What will you change, delete, or add?

• Name one concrete thing that you can do next time you sit down to write!