Methods of Discovery: A Guide to Research W

Pavel Zemliansky, Ph.D

Home » Read Online

Chapter 2: Research Writing as a Process

Posted April 10th, 2008 by pz

Introduction

"I work best under pressure." We all have probably heard this statement from someone trying to meet a late deadline. For writers this approach means sitting down to write a paper just hours before it is due, writing only one draft, and submitting it. Such writing is a race against the clock, and there is no time for revision. Writers who believe in this method often say that working fast somehow releases their creative juices and helps them to beat writer's block. Some even say they deliberately put a writing task off to the last minute choosing to race against the clock rather than to work on the assignment gradually and in steps.

Surely, most writers are busy people, and sometimes we feel that there is no time to develop a piece of writing over days or even weeks before it is due. Sometimes we procrastinate, believing that we can produce good quality work just before the deadline. But such a "fast and furious" approach to writing is much more than just a problem of time management or procrastination. While most of us can write something up quickly, will this be our best work and will the resulting paper do justice to our topic and to our audience? Racing against the clock, are we giving ourselves enough time to let the meaning of our writing to mature, or do we commit to paper the first thoughts that come to mind simply because we don't have time to develop them? When we work under stress of an imminent deadline, we naturally focus on getting the product out, that text which we will submit for a grade or publication. We simply have to have something written down. As we concentrate on getting that something on paper, we forget to give ourselves the opportunity to develop our thoughts and ideas, to let our piece evolve in our minds. In other words, we neglect the writing process.

In this chapter, I explain how to approach writing as a process The process model of writing justifies and endorses an approach to composing as a sequence of thoughtful steps, or quite the opposite to the "work under pressure" model mentioned earlier. Writers who take the process approach treat their work as a sequence of necessary stages. They compose multiple drafts; the seek feedback on those drafts from other readers; the revise the meaning of their writing heavily based on that feedback and on their own evolving thinking about the piece they are working on.

In this chapter, we will explore the main features of the process approach to composing and what makes it radically different from the product one. We will discuss what the process model can help you accomplish as a researcher and a writer. If you are used to the product approach because it has, on some level, worked for you in the past, you may be skeptical towards the process theory. In order to convince you otherwise, I have decided included in this chapter stories and interviews by students, many of whom were also making the transition from the product to the process approach for the first time as they worked on the research writing projects described in this chapter. These narratives by students are not always all-out-success

conversion from product to process stories, nor do they need to be. Some of these writers struggle with trying to be process-oriented as they try to understand and apply this new way of composing.

Product and Process Theories of Writing

In order to become critical writers and researchers capable of adapting to various writing situations, we must know not only the "how's", but also the "why's" of the theories and methods we try to use. Therefore, let us begin with an overview of the differences between process and product based writing. This will help us make informed decisions about our writing process and choose the best method for writing given our specific rhetorical situation.

Before we begin, though, I'd like to offer a disclaimer. While having a lot of time for writing, revising, and discussing your work with others if, of course, is good thing, there will be situations in every writer's career when producing one version of a text for an upcoming deadline is all we can do. Such product-based writing can be of high-quality, and experienced writers know how to produce such high-quality writing. Typically, they do that by carefully analyzing their rhetorical situation before and during the writing act. Such writers typically spend more time and effort planning and developing a piece in their mind than on paper. At the same time, process-oriented writing which allows for multiple revisions, for "stepping back" and considering the text from multiple points of view, and for discussing your work with others, is likely to result in a better-developed message. As you gain experience with writing a variety of texts for a variety of rhetorical situations, you will discover which method, or combination of methods, work for you.

Product-Based Writing

Here, I'd like to tell a story from my own writing career. Some years ago, before I became a writing teacher, I worked in a job which required me to write and publish a monthly newsletter which described and promoted the services we offered and and try to establish a connection with our customer base.

Writing the newsletter seemed like an easy enough job. After all, I knew well what our organization did and, I thought that I could easily write several pages per week describing that to my readers. So, one afternoon I sat in front of the computer and tried to compose the first issue of our new publication. I had it all in my head: the contents, the style, even the layout of the final draft. I thought I had a vision for this thing, and I really wanted to do a good job with it.

And then, writer's block hit me. I just couldn't write that first sentence. I wrote the beginning of it and wasn't happy with it. So I deleted it and started over again. The next version was no better, so I deleted it, too. After about an hour, I realized that I was in trouble: I had written three sentences out of five or six pages that I had to produce. Even worse, the whole thing was due on my boss's desk the next afternoon.

So, where and how did I get into trouble with my assignment? I thought I knew perfectly well what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. My problem was trying to get every word and every sentence "just right" the first time I wrote them. I had a picture of the finished newsletter in my head, but I just didn't know how to get to that picture. Somewhere along

the way, I became unable to translate my writing plans into words, sentences and pages. I focused too much on the product of my writing that I had envisioned but that did not yet exist. I was not thinking enough on the process of getting from a blank computer screen to the finished text.

Now I know that I followed the product model of composing that day. As its name suggests, the product approach forces the writer to concentrate on the finished text, or the product of writing, at the expense of the steps and stages necessary to arrive at that product. Finishing the piece quickly, efficiently and in one sitting is what counts. This desire to write everything perfectly the first time can demoralize and incapacitate the writer, especially an an inexperienced one.

Here are some of the main features of product-based writing:

- It assumes that writers produce texts in "one sitting," without revising or taking pauses in their work
- It forces the writer to "think before writing." Product-oriented writers must have a clear plan for writing in our heads before composing.
- Producing only one draft forces them to settle for what came first, which may or may not be their best work.
- In product-oriented writing, there is little or no opportunity for feedback from others

When someone tells us to "think before we write," we are being asked to believe that meaning can be fully formed in our head before we commit it to paper. It is as if we were forced not only to construct the paper fully in our mind, but also to memorize it. According to the product approach, only then can we begin to write. If this is correct, then writing means only transcribing existing information, ideas, and opinions on to paper.

A writer who follows the product model gets only one opportunity to formulate and express his or her thoughts. Whatever meaning that writer has created in his or her head by thinking about the subject of his or her writing gets transferred on to paper or computer screen as the final version. The quality of such writing (as well as the quality of the ideas which gave birth to it) may be passable, but it is hardly the best this writer can do given the chance to develop and refine these ideas through multiple drafts.

Within the product model, a writer gets only one chance to "get it right." As my story about writing the newsletter illustrates, this can lead to writer's block, fear of the blank page or blank computer screen, or whatever else we can call that feeling of helplessness and despair which we face when a deadline is looming and we have not written anything. This feeling makes us rush, and rushing, in turn, produced bad writing.

Because there are no drafts and revisions in product-based writing, writers get little or no opportunity to ask others for feedback and suggestions to improve the writing. The first and only draft is what gets submitted, usually for a grade, and by that time, it is too late to work on improvements. The very first reader who sees the writing, be it a boss at work or a teacher at school, is its judge and jury. This very first reader of a piece grades it or evaluates it in some other way, returning the verdict to the writer. As you learned from the chapter of this book dedicated to rhetoric, composing is a highly social process and no writer works in a vacuum. Asking anyone to write without feedback and the chance to discuss their ideas and drafts clearly contradicts that.

Process-Based Writing

In order to learn to see writing as a process, it is first important to understand that the meaning of any text is created during the act of writing itself, not before. Here are some basic principles of process-based writing:

- Writing is a process and practice. The meaning of any text is created and evolves during composing and revision.
- In order to develop meaning fully, multiple drafts are necessary. Writing is much more than a transcription tool. It is a means of making knowledge, learning, and critical thinking.
- The writing process can be divided into stages that include but are not limited to invention, revision, and editing.
- Writing is a non-linear process, and its stages often overlap.
- Writers actively seek feedback from readers and judiciously use that feedback in their revisions.
- The process model empowers writers by encouraging them to understand and refine their writing strategies and techniques.

Most writers do not begin a new piece with a set meaning in their minds. We may have an initial idea for a piece of writing, but in order to implement that idea, we have to shape and re-shape it constantly as we write and re-write. The meaning if any text is an ever-evolving entity. Thinking does not precede writing, but happens simultaneously with writing. This shaping and re-shaping of the text's meaning takes place through drafting and revision. For example, I took every chapter in this book through several drafts before it was published. Some parts of this text were rewritten five or six times, as my own thinking about them changed and as I received feedback from reviewers.

Writing is a Non-Linear and Recursive Process

In Lewis Carroll's tale *Alice in Wonderland*, the following dialog takes place between the King and the White Rabbit. Alice is on trial, and the Rabbit believes that he has a letter that might prove her innocence. He asks the King to allow him to read the letter. After the King agrees, the Rabbit asks: "Where shall I begin, please, your Majesty?" And the King answers: "Begin at the beginning…. And go on till you come to the end: then stop."

Writing, of course, is not the same as reading, but writers who are used to the product-based approach to composing often work on their compositions in a manner similar to the one in which the Rabbit read his letter. As you recall, the product-based approach requires writers to "think before they write." According to this theory, we have to plan and lay out our whole compositions in our heads before we can begin writing them down. Consequently, a writer who has the whole piece stored in his or her mind, can quite easily write it from the beginning through the middle and to the end. After all, according to this approach nothing should change in the content of the piece during the act of writing itself. According to the product theory, writing is a sequential and orderly process of transcription.

Having studied the process model, however, we know that the content of every piece of writing gets developed during composing and not before. Thus, when we are working on a paper, we are not merely committing to paper or computer screen some pre-determined and pre-planned ideas that existed in our heads before we began composing. Instead, we are formulating and refining those ideas as compose. Such an approach allows us to take care of the content of the piece before be begin to worry about its structure.

Writers who approach composing in a linear way, tend to think about their pieces in terms of structure rather than content first. That is, before they even come up with enough to say,

they, at least subconsciously, begin to worry about introduction, body, conclusion, and other structural elements of a text that does not yet exist. It is difficult for them to do otherwise because, if writing is linear (and in their minds it is), then you have to create the pieces of the future paper sequentially. According to this method, it is impossible to write the body of a text before the introduction. Similarly, within this framework, you cannot write a conclusion before the introduction is finished, and so on.

Writing is a non-linear and recursive process. This means that most writers do not "begin at the beginning" of a piece and "end at the end." Instead, composing takes places in chunks, with authors going back and forth between clusters of ideas and writing possibilities, constantly reviewing and revising them, and moving them between the various parts of the prospective text.

So, how might this non-linear approach to writing work in practical terms? To understand, consider one student's composing process.

Melissa Hull was a student in one of my first-year writing classes. One of the assignments in that class required her to find and study a text produced by some oppressed or under-represented ethnic or cultural
group and to show how that group had, over time, adjusted its writing and its self-representation in order to survive in a society dominated by other cultures. Melissa decided to study texts produced by Arvanites, an ethnic and linguistic minority in Greece. Melissa's approach to the project is an excellent example of the recursive and non-linearity nature of writing. I interviewed Melissa to gain an insight into her research and writing processes. The following are summaries of parts of our conversation.

> PZ: Could you describe the early stages of the project? How did you begin to make sense of the assignment?

> MH: I started to take notes and jot down ideas before even finding any texts written by Arvanites. However, I did not want to get too far

along into the project without showing it to someone first. I was

worried that maybe I was doing something wrong.

> PZ: How did you start your research and why did you choose to write about Arvanites?

> MH: I did some searches of online databases on the library websites on marginalized cultures. At first, the assignment was a little confusing, though.

> PZ: Could you describe the writing of the first draft?

> MH: I did some searches and found a lot of materials about Arvanites but none by them. It appears that their language is almost dead, so there aren't many written texts by them. I found some texts on the web that said they were by Arvanites, but they were in Greek, so I could not go with them. I decided to start writing the draft just to make a better sense of the assignment and to go by what I had. I thought things would become clearer as I went. I ended up writing five drafts.

> PZ: I seem to remember that you struggled after you write the very first rough draft? What was difficult and how did you resolve the problems?

> MH: I knew absolutely nothing about them, but they seemed interesting and wanted to find out.

> PZ: Could you describe the differences between your first and following drafts?

> *MH: After I wrote the first draft and received some feedback from my*
> *workshop group, I began to understand that I need a change of*
> *directionn my approach because I was not going to be able to find*
> *enough texts*
> *by the Arvanites. So, I looked a bit broader and wondered if I could*
> *use other elements of their culture, such as architecture and crafts,*
> *as texts. I was also beginning to realize that the point of my paper*
> *could be that there weren't enough texts by the Arvanites and that*
> *facts showed something about their culture. So, my point of view on the*
> *subject changed as I kept writing drafts and researching.*

As you can see from these excerpts, Melissa's plans and the direction in which her paper was going change as she conducted additional research, revised, and received responses from her classmates and instructor. She was creating meaning in and through the process of research and writing.

How does the non-linear and the non-sequential nature of the writing process affect you as a writer? It urges you to move away from thinking about your compositions in terms of an introduction, body, and conclusion, that is they are thinking in structural terms. Very often, when students discuss their writing plans with me, they say something like "and then, in this paragraph, I will have idea X. And then in the next paragraph, I will include story Y." Certainly, there comes a time in the writing process when a writer needs to revise for structure and coherence deciding how to organize paragraphs and sentences. But, in my experience, many student writers begin to worry about structure way too early, way before they have fully formed and developed their ideas for writing.

So, as you begin to write your next piece, I invite you to begin by thinking not about the structure of your yet unwritten text but about its content. You will create the structure later, once you know what kind of material you have for your writing. Your content will determine the structure of your paper, and you will generate that content not by going through some predetermined routine, but by working in a creative, non-linear, and non-sequential way.

Applying the Process Approach to Research Writing

The generic research paper assignment that most of us have been given in school often requires us to come up with a thesis, or position on the subject of our research before we begin researching. The crudest by widely-spread example of this approach goes something like this: a student writer is asked to "defend" a position he or she strongly believes in and to "support" that position with researched evidence. The assumption here is that the writer knows exactly what he she wants to say before the composing process begins. It is easy to see that, in this case, the purpose of research is to find the kinds of sources, proofs, and theories that confirm the writer's existing opinion. Thus, the definition of the term "research" itself is changed and searching for answers is replaced with a quick fix of facts, statistics, and quotes.

Suppose, for example, that you have been assigned to write a researched argument about the death penalty. Suppose also that you are against the death penalty and that, in your paper, you will try to "prove" that killing someone as a means of administering justice is morally wrong. By the way, I think that arguing for or against the death penalty, abortion rights, and other similar controversial subject in a research project is very difficult because most people, including you, the writer, have set views on each of these subjects that cannot be changed.

But, we will use the example of the death penalty argument anyway because it keeps popping up in traditional research papers.

Armed with the belief that death penalty is wrong, you go to the library or browse the Internet looking for "research" to support your thesis. Of course, because you already have your thesis, it is very tempting to look for and use only those sources that agree with you and to discard or overlook the others. If you are lucky, you find enough such sources and construct a paper that argues for the abolition of the death penalty. Ask yourself the following question, though: what have you found out or investigated during your research? Have you discovered new theories, opinions, or aspects of your subject? Did anything surprise you, intrigue you, or make you look further? If you answered no to these questions, you did not fulfill the purpose of true research, which is to explore, to discover, and to investigate.

The purpose of research is not to look for proofs that would fit the author's pre-existing theories, but to learn about the subject of the investigation as much as possible and then form those theories, opinions, and arguments on the basis of this newly found knowledge and understanding. And what if there is no data that prove your theory? What if, after hours and days of searching, you realize that there is nothing out there that would allow you to make the claim that you wanted to make? Most likely, this will lead to frustration, a change of the paper's topic, and having to start all over again. Not only will this inconvenience you by making you to race against the clock to meat the deadline and to do lots more busywork than necessary, but it will also be a waste of time because you will not learn anything new. Even if you manage to create a neat and efficient paper, it will be false research, simply jumping through hoops in order to fulfill another meaningless school assignment.

So, should you begin every research project as a disinterested individual without opinions, ideas, and beliefs? Of course, not! There is nothing wrong about having opinions, ideas, and beliefs about your subject before beginning the research process. Good researchers and writers are passionate about their work and want to share their passion with the world. Moreover, pre-existing knowledge can be a powerful research-starter. But what separates a true researcher from someone who simply looks for "proofs" for a pre-fabricated thesis is that a true researcher is willing to question those pre-existing beliefs and to take his or her understanding of the research topic well beyond what he or she knew at the outset. Speaking in terms of the process theory of writing, a good researcher and writer is willing to create new meaning, a new understanding of his or her subject through research and writing and based on the ideas and beliefs that he or she had entering the research project.

Writing Activity: Examining Past Writing Experiences

Remember
a situation in which you chose or were forced to follow the product model, whether consciously or sub-consciously. Consider both school writing tasks and out-of-school ones. Working on your own or with a partner, jot down some answers to the following questions. After you finish, be sure to share your ideas with your classmates.

What was the assignment's purpose, audience, and how much time did you have to complete it?

- Briefly describe your composing process. Talk about the amount of time you spent planning the piece in your head and the amount of time you spent writing it. Try to remember whether you had the opportunity to

receive feedback from others before the assignment was due. If not, why?

- If at any point in the assignment, you hit writer's block, what did you do about it? Did you have adequate time, resources, and writing techniques to overcome it?
- Who read and evaluated your writing after it was completed? What criteria was the evaluation based on? Did you feel that you did a good job with the piece?

The Main Stages of the Writing Process

The word "process" itself implies doing things in stages and over time. Applied to writing, this means that as you proceed from the beginning of a writing project through its middle and towards the end, you go through certain definable stages, each of which needs to be completed in order for the whole project to succeed. Composing is very complex intellectual work consisting of many complex mental activities and processes. As we will see in the next section of this chapter, it is often difficult to say when and where one stage of the writing process ends and the next one begins. However, it is generally agreed that the writing process has at least three discreet stages: invention, revision, and editing. In addition to inventing, revising, and editing, writers who follow the process approach also seek and receive feedback to their drafts from others. It is also important to understand that the writing process is recursive and non-linear. What this means is that a writer may finish initial invention, produce a draft, and then go back to generating more ideas, before revising the text he or she created.

Invention

Invention is what writers do before they produce a first complete draft of their piece. As its name suggests, invention helps writers to come up with material for writing. The process theory states that no writer should be expected to simply sit down and write a complete piece without some kind of preparatory work. The purpose of invention is to explore various directions in which the piece may go and to try different ways to develop material for writing. Note the words "explore" and "try" in the previous sentence. They suggest that not all the material generated during invention final, or even the first draft. To a writer used to product-based composing, this may seem like a waste of time and energy. Why generate more ideas during invention than you can into the paper, they reason? Remember that your goal during invention is to explore various possibilities for your project. At this point, just about the most dangerous and counter-productive thing you can do as a writer is to "lock in" on one idea, thesis, type of evidence, or detail, and ignore all other possibilities. Such a limited approach is particularly dangerous when applied to research writing. A discussion of that follows in the section of this chapter which is dedicated to the application the process model to research writing. Below, I offer several invention, revision, and editing strategies and activities.

Invention Techniques

These invention strategies invite spontaneity and creativity. Feel free to adjust and modify them as you see fit. They will probably work best for you if you apply them to a specific writing project rather than try them out "for practice's sake." As you try them, don't worry about the shape or even content of your final draft. At this stage, you simply don't know what that draft is going to look like. You are creating its content as you invent. This is not a complete list of all

possible invention strategies. Your teacher and classmates may be able to share other invention ideas with you.

Free-writing

As its name suggests, free writing encourages the writer to write freely and without worrying about the content or shape of the writing. When you free-write, your goal is to generate as much material on the page as possible, no matter what you say or how you say it.

Try to write for five, ten, or even fifteen minutes without checking, censoring, or editing yourself in any way. You should not put your pen or pencil down, or stop typing on the computer, no matter what. If you run out of things to say, repeat "I have nothing to say" or something similar until the next idea pops into your head. Let your mind go, go with the flow, and don't worry about the end product. Your objective is to create as much text as possible. Don't even worry about finishing your sentences or separating your paragraphs. You are not writing a draft of your paper. Instead, you are producing raw material for that draft. Later on, you just might find a gem of an idea in that raw material which you can develop into a complete draft. Also don't worry if anyone will be able to read what your have written—most likely you will be the only reader of your text. If your teacher asks you to share your free writing with other students, you can explain what you have written to your group mates as you go along.

Brainstorming

When brainstorming, you list as quickly as possible all thoughts and ideas which are connected, however loosely, to the topic of your writing. As with free writing, you should not worry about the shape or structure of your writing. Your only concern should be to write as long a list of possibilities as you can. As you brainstorm, try not to focus your writing radar too narrowly, on a single aspect of your topic or a single question. The broader you cast your brainstorming net, the better because a large list of possibilities will give you a wealth of choices when time comes to compose your first draft. Your teacher may suggest how many items to have on your brainstorming list. I usually ask my students to come up with at least ten to twelve items in a five to ten minute long brainstorming session, more if possible.

Mind-Mapping

Mind-mapping, which is also known as webbing or clustering, invites you to create a visual representation of your writing topic or of the problem you are trying to solve through your writing and research. The usefulness of mind-mapping as an invention techniques has been recognized by professionals in many disciplines, with at least one software company designing a special computer program exclusively for creating elaborate mind maps.

Here is how mind-mapping works. Write your topic or questions in the middle of a blank page, or type it in the middle of a computer screen, and think about any other topics or subtopics related to this main topic or question. Then branch out of the center connecting the central idea of your mind map to the other ones. The result should like a spider's web. The figure is a mind-map I made for the first draft of the chapter of this book dedicated to rhetoric.

Drawing

This invention strategy also asks the writer to create a visual representation of his or topic and

is particularly useful for personal writing projects and memoirs. In such projects, memories and recollections, however vague and uncertain, are often starting points for writing. Instead of writing about your memories, this invention strategy invites you to draw them. The advantage of this strategy is that it allows the writer not only to restore these memories in preparation for writing, but also to reflect upon them. As you know by now, one of the fundamental principles of the process approach to writing is that meaning is created as the writer develops the piece from draft to draft. Drawing elements of your future project may help you create such meaning. I am not particularly good at visual arts, so I will not subject you to looking at my drawings. Instead, I invite you to create your own.

Outlining

Outlining can be a powerful invention tool because it allows writers to generate ideas and to organize them in a systematic manner. In a way, outlining is similar to mind mapping as it allows you to break down main ideas and points into smaller ones. The difference between mind maps and outlines is, of course, the fact that the former provides a visual representation of your topic while the latter gives you a more linear, textual one. If you like to organize your thoughts systematically as you compose, a good outline can be a useful resource when you begin drafting.

However, it is extremely important to observe two conditions when using outlining as your main invention strategy. The first is to treat your outline as a flexible plan for writing and nothing more. The key word is "flexible." Your outline is not a rigid set of points which you absolutely must cover in your paper, and the structure of your outline, with all its points and sub-points, does not predetermine the structure of your paper. The second condition follows from the first. If, in the process of writing the paper, you realize that your current outline does not suit you anymore, change it or discard it. Do not follow it devotedly, trying to fit your writing into what your outline wants it to be. So, again, the outline is you flexible plan for writing, not a canon that you have to follow at all cost. It is hard for writers to create a "perfect" or complete outline before writing because the meaning of a piece takes shape during composing, not before. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know what you are going to say in your writing unless and until you begin to say it. Outlining may help you in planning your first draft, but it should not determine it.

Keeping a journal or a writer's notebook

Keeping a journal or a writer's notebook is another powerful invention strategy. Keeping a writer's journal can work regardless of the genre you are working in. Journals and writer's notebooks are popular among writers of fiction and creative non-fiction. But they also have a huge potential for researching writers because keeping a journal allows you not only to record events and details, but also to reflect on them through writing. In the chapter of this book dedicated to researching in academic disciplines, I discuss one particular type of writing journal called the double-entry journal. If you decide to keep a journal or a writer's notebook as an invention strategy, keep in mind the following principles:

- Write in your journal or notebook regularly.
- Keep everything you write—you never know when you may need or want to use it in your writing.
- Write about interesting events, observations, and thoughts.
- Reflect on what you have written. Reflection allows you to make that leap from simple observation to making sense of what you have observed.
- Frequently re-read your entries.

Reading

It is hard to overestimate the importance of reading as an invention strategy. As you can learn from the chapters on rhetoric and on reading, writing is a social process that never occurs in a vacuum. To get ideas for writing of your own, you need to be familiar with ideas of others. Reading is one of the best, if not the best way, to get such material. Reading is especially important for research writing. For a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between reading and writing and for specific activities designed to help you to use reading for writing, see Chapter 3 of this book dedicated to reading.

Examining your Current Knowledge

The best place to start looking for a research project topic is to examine your own interests, passions, and hobbies. What topics, events, people, or natural phenomena, or stories interest, concern you, or make you
passionate? What have you always wanted to find out more about or explore in more depth? Looking into the storehouse of your knowledge and life experiences will allow you to choose a topic for your research
project in which you are genuinely interested and in which you will,therefore, be willing to invest plenty of time, effort, and enthusiasm.

Simultaneously with being interesting and important to you, your research topic should, of course, interest your readers. As you have learned from the chapter on rhetoric, writers always write with a purpose and for a specific audience. Therefore, whatever topic you choose and whatever argument you will build about it through research should provoke response in your readers. And while almost any topic can be treated in
an original and interesting way, simply choosing the topic that interests you, the writer, is not, in itself, a guarantee of success of your research project. Here is some advice on how to select a promising topic for your next research project.

As you think about possible topics for your paper, remember that writing is a conversation between you and your readers. Whatever subject you choose to explore and write about has to be something that is interesting and important to them as well as to you. Remember kairos, or the ability to "be in the right place at the right time, which we discussed in Chapter 1.

When selecting topics for research, consider the following factors:

- Your existing knowledge about the topic
- What else you need or want to find out about the topic
- What questions about or aspects of the topic are important not only for you but for others around you.
- Resources (libraries, internet access, primary research sources, and so on) available to you in order to conduct a high quality investigation of your topic.

Read about and "around" various topics that interest you. As I argue later on in this chapter, reading is a
powerful invention tool capable of teasing out subjects, questions, and ideas which would not have come to mind otherwise. Reading also allows you to find out what questions, problems, and ideas are circulating
among your potential readers, thus enabling you to better and quicker enter the conversation with those readers through research and writing.

Writing Activity: Generating Topics

If you have an idea of the topic or issue you want to study, try asking the following questions

- Why do I care about this topic?
- What do I already know or believe about this topic?
- How did I receive my knowledge or beliefs (personal experiences, stories of others, reading, and so on)?
- What do I want to find out about this topic?
- Who else cares about or is affected by this topic? In what ways and why?
- What do I know about the kinds of things that my potential readers might want to learn about it?
- Where do my interests about the topic intersect with my readers' potential interests, and where they do not?

Which topic or topics has the most potential to interest not only you, the writer, but also your readers?

Designing Research Questions

Assuming that you were able to select the topic for your next research project, it is not time to design some research questions. Forming specific and relevant research questions will allow you to achieve three important goals:

- Direct your research from the very beginning of the project
- Keep your research focused and on track
- Help you find relevant and interesting sources

Revision Methods

Revision is Essential for Quality Writing and Research

At the heart of the process approach to writing is revision. When writers revise, they assess the strengths and weaknesses of what they have written so far and change the content of the text in an effort to make it more rhetorically effective and interesting for the readers as well as more satisfying for the writer. Again, I repeat, the changes have to be in the content of the writing. Merely making mechanical changes, such as eliminating grammatical errors is not revision. When writers revise, they re-see their message and their approach to the very subject of the piece. A writer committed to revision has no shortcuts around it. Through revision, the text is changed developed, expanded or made more concise, and so on.

Revising a text requires a certain a mindset. Authors who are committed to the idea of revision need to get rid of the popular perception that good writers create their works when struck by genius and in one sitting. They need to understand and get accustomed to the idea that writing is not a "one-shot" activity. It is not a timed contest where you only get one try. Win now or bust. Write one perfect draft or lose the competition. Do your best now, under pressure, or receive a bad grade. But any kind of writing is a creative process, and, like all processes, it implies stages. It allows the writer the opportunity to improve over time, to make changes, to read and re-read what has already been written, think about it, discuss it with others, and improve it.

When writing within the process model, you usually produce only one draft. Once you found

your sources, wrote down their summaries on note cards, and gave some thought to ways of arranging your material, you get one chance to write a paper. Writers who approach research as a process constantly evaluate and re-evaluate what they have written and, based on those evaluations, decide how to proceed with their research and writing.

To illustrate how revision might work in a process-based research project, let us return to the example about the death penalty paper. Again, I realize that this example is not perfect, but it is worth using it because of its familiarity to most college students and for convenience's sake. A process-oriented writer is guided by the idea that once the first round of searches and the first draft are completed, the investigation is far from over. Such a writer has only begun to make his or her meaning and there is still much to be done.

As you experiment with the revision strategies below, remember that making changes to the content of your text is the essence of revision. As a writer, you should not get too attached to your current draft. Instead, you should be able to distance yourself from it, evaluate it as critically as possible, and re-imagine it in a new light. These revision techniques are designed to help you do just that.

Ask Focusing Questions

Focus in writing is the issue, or sub-topic that is at the center of a given text. For example, within a general subject, such as "surfing," many different foci are possible. One writer may choose to write about the history of surfing, while another might decide to create an instructional manual teaching the basic techniques of the sport. Yet another may want to write a personal narrative about memorable surfing experiences, and so on. A first draft of a text is not always focused because, in a first draft, most writers explore the possibilities their subject has to offer and test the various directions in which they can take their writing. Therefore, one of the tasks you may face after you write the first rough draft of your work is to revise it for focus.

Searching and (Re)Searching

This method is about not settling for the first set of research sources you found and look for other and better ones between the first and second draft. Because writing is a recursive process, when you begin a research writing project, you never really know what you will find. So, once you have created a first exploratory draft of the project, you will ideally have new questions about your topic. To answer those questions, try to search for new sources, even if that will mean replacing the sources you found previously. To test this technique, try the following writing activity.

Writing Activity: Gaining New Knowledge Through Revision

After completing the first draft of your research project that is probably based on your pre-existing knowledge about the subject and the first round of your searches, consider the following questions. Apply these questions to any research project you are currently working on. You can complete this activity on your own and with your own draft, or use these questions in a workshop group as a guide for discussion and responding.

- During your first round of searches, what new information, ideas and opinions about your

subject have you discovered?

- Which of your research results were expected and which ones puzzled you, surprised you, and intrigued you and why?
- How does your current understanding of your subject differ from the one you had before you began your research?
- Look back at your original research questions. In the light of your new knowledge, can they be revised, clarified, or modified in any way?
- What additional research do you need in order to answer these revised questions?
- Do not commit to a fixed thesis or a fixed point of view at this point. You are still looking, still exploring.

This activity is an example of what Bruce Ballenger (2001) called "writing in the middle" (176). You are likely between the first and the second draft of a research project. You have completed an initial search, and now it is time to evaluate what you know and what else you need to find out. In terms of the process theory, you are well on your way of creating interesting and rhetorically meaning for yourself and for your readers. By researching, writing about your data, and constantly evaluating both your research data and your writing, you are creating that new and original system of beliefs about your subject which Doug Brent talks about and which I mentioned earlier.

Writing Activity: Asking Focusing Questions

In the following activity, work with a rough draft you have recently completed. You can complete this activity on your own and working with your own draft. You can also complete this task in a small workshop group and apply the questions below to your classmates' rough drafts. As you work through the tasks below, remember that your goal is to find focus of your writing, to narrow your subject down to a manageable research question or set of questions that you can then investigate in your piece. Work through the following tasks thoroughly. Take adequate notes and record your answers and ideas. If you are reading someone else's writing, be sure to discuss your findings with the author.

- Read the draft carefully, several times if necessary.
- As you read, underline or highlight words, sentences, ideas, or paragraphs that, for whatever reason, seem important or interesting.
- What ideas, stories or arguments is the draft trying to convey or advance? Does it have a "center of gravity," a central or important point or idea? Perhaps it has several such centers, in which case you will want to take note of them all, as each can later become the paper's focus.
- Which of the ideas, stories, or arguments in the draft are worth developing further and which ones can be discarded? Remember that these ideas and arguments must be interesting and important not only to the writer but also the potential readers of the paper.
- Try to plan for the next draft keeping in mind the focus (or foci) that you found going through the preceding questions.
- As a result of this activity, your piece may take a completely different direction from the one you originally envisioned. Therefore, radical changes in your draft will likely be necessary. You will probably need to rewrite and rearrange whole sections and paragraphs of the paper, add new details, examples, and arguments while discarding some of the old ones.

Writing Activity: "Fat" Draft and Writing Between the Lines

I learned these two revision techniques from my mentor and friend Wendy Bishop. Since then, I have used them many times both in my own writing and in my teaching.

In the "fat" draft activity, you are asked to double the length of your current draft. It does not matter where in the draft you add the material as long as the next version of your text is twice as long as the previous one. It does not even matter all that much whether the sentences and paragraphs you are adding are good enough to stay in final version of your paper. Remember that you are making meaning as you revise, and it is important to generate as many options and ideas as possible in the process of revision.

In "Writing Between the Lines," you are also required to double the length of your current draft, except here you add a new like underneath every existing one. Computers make this kind of text manipulation easy. The content of every new line you add will, in some way, be related to the line that precedes it. The lines do not need to dovetail into one another smoothly, and the transitions between them do not have to be seamless. Although the organizational decisions you will make about your paper later on may be influenced by what you write now, your primary concern should not be the structure of your paper or transitions between paragraphs and sentences. Instead, you should focus on generating as much material as possible by adding explanations, details, new research, descriptions, and so on.

Writing Activity: Searching in the Middle

This activity will work best if completed between the first and the second drafts of a research project. As in previous exploratory tasks of this chapter, you can apply the questions below to any research project you are currently working on. And, as with previous activities, you can either apply these questions to your own draft or to the drafts of others in a small workshop group. As you work on the questions below, use the notes that you took about your first draft during the previous exploration activity.

- Review your first draft. Get an idea of what it is saying, but try not to look sat it as a sum of introduction, body, and conclusion. Instead, evaluate the ideas and concepts presented in it and try to decide how well they answer your research questions.
- Try to make some plans for revision. Use the revision strategies and techniques discussed earlier in this chapter as well as feedback from other readers.
- Now review the research results which you obtained during the first round of searching. What do they do and not do to answer your questions? Revisit your research questions and try to revise them. Next, go back to the library and the Internet and conduct another round of searching, guided by your current, post-first draft vision of your topic and of your project.

Writing Activity: Cut and Paste

Here is another activity invented by Peter Elbow. When I assign this activity to my students, some of them consider it a little unusual at first, but eventually most of them see its usefulness. The purpose of the cut and paste activity is to radically re-see and re-imagine your draft by rearranging and rewriting its paragraphs. This activity works on the assumption that in order to radically re-imagine and revise their work, writers need to detach themselves as much as possible from the draft in its current form. In order to see your paper in a new light, you need to try to forget what it looks like now.

Elbow's cut and paste technique is likely to help you revise on two levels. It will probably help you focus your writing better by showing which parts of your draft belong there and which ones need to be discarded or rewritten. But it may also help you to revise for development and detail by highlighting those parts of your paper which need additional explanations, descriptions, scenes, stories, and so on.

- With a pair of scissors, cut your draft into paragraphs. In my experience and that of my students, printing and cutting the paper works better than manipulating the paragraphs on the computer screen because it seems to allow the writer to remove him or herself better from the current form of the text.
- Lay the paragraphs out on a table in front of you. Make two piles: in one pile, put the paragraphs which seem to fit in with the focus of your paper the way you currently see that focus. Put all the other paragraphs in the other pile.
- Begin working with the second pile by reading through the paragraphs. Try to decide which of them can be rewritten and improved and which ones can be discarded. Don't be afraid to get rid of the material that does not fit into your design for the paper.
- Now, consider the first pile and decide whether any of the paragraphs in it should be re-written.
- Combine both piles. Try to create a new version (or several versions) of your text by arranging and re-arranging the paragraphs in several different ways. Remember that you will be revising most, if not all of them.
- Notice what is missing in this new version. Do you need to add new arguments, details, descriptions, scenes, and so on?

Completing this activity will not produce a finished next draft for you, but it will help you to make some firm and realistic plans for it. Of course, because you have substantially re-seen and re-imagined your first draft, you will have to do write some new material to add to the existing paragraphs and complete the next draft.

Seeking Feedback From Others and Using It for Revision

Because writing is a social process, it is impossible to compose without getting feedback on your work in progress. The comments and questions you receive from your readers in the process of writing a paper will help you revise and improve your writing. They will also help you to fine tune your writing to your readers' needs and expectations. This is why writers must to

actively seek others' feedback on their writing and to use that feedback critically in their revisions.

Basic Principles of Peer Response

A large part of a successful peer response process is the mindset of the participants. Your goal as a writer seeking feedback should be to engage others, your readers, in a conversation about your ideas and your text. Tell your readers about the kinds of problems you are experiencing with the writing and about the questions you have.

As a reader of the writing by others, your goal should be not to criticize, dismantle, and destroy their draft. Your goal is not to fix their grammar mistakes or proofread their paper for them. Instead, your strategic goal as a reader and responder is to help them to take their texts where they, not you, want it to go by giving constructive, thoughtful, and detailed feedback. One of the most accessible guides to peer response for writers has been written by Richard Straub in the essay "Responding--Really Responding—to Other Students' Writing." Straub states:

> First, don't set out to seek and destroy all errors and problems in the writing. You are not an editor. You are not a teacher. You are not a cruise missile. And don't rewrite any parts of the paper. You are not the writer; you are a reader. One of many. The paper is not yours; it's the writer's (137).

He recommends the following principles of peer response:

- Play back what you read in the paper to the writer. Ask the writer if the meaning you are getting is the meaning he or she intended.
- Do not take on too much. Select one or two global (or content) problems in the piece and work in them.
- Do not worry about grammar and spelling unless it is an editing workshop.
- Comment in writing. Take notes on the margins and write summative notes at the end of the paper.
- Be polite, but not too polite. If you see a problem in the writing, let the writer know.
- Balance praise and criticism.

Good peer responding strategies and techniques are learned through practice. Neither your teacher nor I will expect you to become an excellent and experienced responder to writing over night. Use the principles above to begin your learning.

Editing and Proofreading

Any written text can be changed and improved almost indefinitely. However, there comes a time in every writing project when the writer has to polish up the final product by editing and proof-reading it. What editing strategies you will choose to employ will depend on the kind of style you want your writing to have. If you want terse and compact language, you will edit for conciseness. If you want an elaborate style, you will want to make sure that every sentence and every phrase is clear and says what you want it to say. In either case, editing is a

rhetorical task, and the choice of writing style depends on your rhetorical purpose, the audience for which you are writing, and the context in which you are writing. Becoming a good editor of your own and others' texts takes a lot of practice.

Reading the paper backwards.

Start reading the paper from the last sentence on the last page. Doing this forces you to pay attention to the mechanics of every sentence and word. By the time when you proofread your paper, you have probably finished revising it, and your main concern now is to make it as error-free as possible.

Reading to the wall

Sit or stand facing a wall in the classroom or at home. Shut out the outside world. Now, read the paper out loud to yourself, slowly and deliberately. Pay attention to separate words, phrases, and sentences.

Conclusion

I hope that this chapter has given you a foundational understanding of process approach to writing and shown you how to apply the process theory to your writing and research. This chapter will be of any use to you only if you apply the knowledge and writing techniques explained here to your own research projects, whether from this book or from elsewhere. It is not meant to be read as an abstract, work meant to indoctrinate you in some inapplicable theory. Instead, I invite you to use and test everything you have read about in this chapter for your own writing.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the process approach to composing that sets it apart from its product counterpart is the way in which the process model empowers writers. Instead of directing writers towards some set of rigid and inflexible rules about writing, the process theory encourages us become aware of the approaches, strategies, and techniques work best for us. As with any theory, following the process model of writing means adhering to certain guidelines and principles. However, within those principles the process theory allows writers considerable flexibility and independence.

Sources

Ballenger, Bruce. 2003. *The Curious Researcher*. 4th ed Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Caroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. Signet Classics, 2000.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers.* New York: Oxford University Press USA, 1998.

Hull, Melissa. Personal Interview. 2004.

‹ Chapter 1: Research Writing and Argument   up   Chapter 3: Research and Critical Reading ›

Login or register to post comments