

# The 5 Steps of Writing

## 1. Prewriting

Have you ever sat staring at a blank piece of paper or a blank document on your computer screen? You might have skipped the vital first stage of the writing process: prewriting. This covers everything you do before starting your rough draft. As a minimum, prewriting means coming up with an idea!

### Ideas and Inspiration

Ideas are all around you. If you want to write but you don't have any ideas, try:

- Using a **writing prompt** to get you started.
- Writing about incidents from your daily life, or childhood.
- Keeping a **notebook of ideas** – jotting down those thoughts that occur throughout the day.
- Creating a vivid character, and then writing about him/her.

See also [How to Generate Hundreds of Writing Ideas](#).

***Tip:** Once you have an idea, you need to expand on it. Don't make the mistake of jumping straight into your writing – you'll end up with a badly structured piece.*

### Building on Your Idea

These are a couple of popular methods you can use to add flesh to the bones of your idea:

- **Free writing:** Open a new document or start a new page, and write everything that comes into your head about your chosen topic. Don't stop to edit, even if you make mistakes.
- **Brainstorming:** Write the idea or topic in the center of your page. Jot down ideas that arise from it – sub-topics or directions you could take with the article.

Once you've done one or both of these, you need to select what's going into your first draft.

### Planning and Structure

Some pieces of writing will require more planning than others. Typically, longer pieces and academic papers need a lot of thought at this stage.

First, decide which ideas you'll use. During your free writing and brainstorming, you'll have come up with lots of thoughts. Some belong in this piece of writing: others can be kept for another time.

Then, decide how to order those ideas. Try to have a logical progression. Sometimes, your topic will make this easy: in this article, for instance, it made sense to take each step of the writing process in order. For a short story, try the **eight-point story arc**.

## 2. Writing

Sit down with your plan beside you, and start your first draft (also known as the *rough draft* or *rough copy*). At this stage, don't think about word-count, grammar, spelling and

punctuation. Don't worry if you've gone off-topic, or if some sections of your plan don't fit too well. **Just keep writing!**

If you're a new writer, you might be surprised that professional authors go through multiple drafts before they're happy with their work. This is a normal part of the writing process – **no-one gets it right first time.**

Some things that many writers find helpful when working on the first draft include:

- **Setting aside at least thirty minutes to concentrate:** it's hard to establish a writing flow if you're just snatching a few minutes here and there.
- **Going somewhere without interruptions:** a library or coffee shop can work well, if you don't have anywhere quiet to write at home.
- **Switching off distracting programs:** if you write your first draft onto a computer, you might find that turning off your Internet connection does wonders for your concentration levels! When I'm writing fiction, I like to use the free program Dark Room (you can find more about it on our collection of **writing software**).

You might write several drafts, especially if you're working on fiction. Your subsequent drafts will probably merge elements of the writing stage and the revising stage.

*Tip: Writing requires concentration and energy. If you're a new writer, don't try to write for hours without stopping. Instead, give yourself a time limit (like thirty minutes) to really focus – without checking your email!*

### **3. Revising**

Revising your work is about making "big picture" changes. You might remove whole sections, rewrite entire paragraphs, and add in information which you've realized the reader will need. Everyone needs to revise – **even talented writers.**

The revision stage is sometimes summed up with the A.R.R.R. (Adding, Rearranging, Removing, Replacing) approach:

#### **Adding**

What else does the reader need to know? If you haven't met the required word-count, what areas could you expand on? This is a good point to go back to your prewriting notes – look for ideas which you didn't use.

#### **Rearranging**

Even when you've planned your piece, sections may need rearranging. Perhaps as you wrote your essay, you found that the argument would flow better if you reordered your paragraphs. Maybe you've written a short story that drags in the middle but packs in too much at the end.

#### **Removing**

Sometimes, one of your ideas doesn't work out. Perhaps you've gone over the word count, and you need to take out a few paragraphs. Maybe that funny story doesn't really fit with the rest of your article.

#### **Replacing**

Would more vivid details help bring your piece to life? Do you need to look for stronger examples and quotations to support your argument? If a particular paragraph isn't working, try rewriting it.

*Tip: If you're not sure what's working and what isn't, show your writing to someone else. This might be a writers' circle, or just a friend who's good with words. Ask them for feedback. It's best if you can show your work to several people, so that you can get more than one opinion.*

#### **4. Editing**

**The editing stage is distinct from revision, and needs to be done after revising.**

Editing involves the close-up view of individual sentences and words. It needs to be done after you've made revisions on a big scale: or else you could agonize over a perfect sentence, only to end up cutting that whole paragraph from your piece.

When editing, go through your piece line by line, and make sure that each sentence, phrase and word is as strong as possible. Some things to check for are:

- **Have you used the same word too many times** in one sentence or paragraph? Use a thesaurus to find alternatives.
- **Are any of your sentences hard to understand?** Rewrite them to make your thoughts clear.
- **Which words could you cut to make a sentence stronger?** Words like "just" "quite", "very", "really" and "generally" **can often be removed.**
- **Are your sentences grammatically correct?** Keep a careful look out for problems like **subject-verb agreement** and staying consistent in your use of the **past, present or future tense.**
- **Is everything spelt correctly?** Don't trust your spell-checker – it won't pick up every mistake. Proofread as many times as necessary.
- **Have you used punctuation marks correctly?** **Commas** often cause difficulties. You might want to check out the Daily Writing Tips articles on **punctuation.**

*Tip: Print out your work and edit on paper. Many writers find it easier to spot mistakes this way.*

#### **5. Publishing**

The final step of the writing process is publishing. This means different things depending on the piece you're working on.

**Bloggers** need to upload, format and post their piece of completed work.

**Students** need to produce a final copy of their work, in the correct format. This often means adding a bibliography, ensuring that citations are correct, and adding details such as your student reference number.

**Journalists** need to submit their piece (usually called "copy") to an editor. Again, there will be a certain format for this.

**Fiction writers** may be sending their story to a magazine or competition. Check guidelines carefully, and make sure you follow them. If you've written a novel, look for an agent who represents your genre. (There are books like **Writer's Market**, published each year, which can help you with this.)

*Tip: Your piece of writing might never be published. That's okay – many bestselling authors wrote lots of stories or articles before they got their first piece published. Nothing that you write is wasted, because it all contributes to your growth as a writer.*

## **Conclusion**

The five stages of the writing process are a framework for writing well and easily. You might want to bookmark this post so that you can come back to it each time you start on a new article, blog post, essay or story: use it as a checklist to help you.

If you have any tips about the writing process, or if you want to share your experiences, tell us in the comments!