

## **THREE STEPS IN THE WRITING PROCESS**

Writing a fully developed theme is not easy, but you can master the technique if you think of writing as a process with three stages—prewriting, writing, and postwriting (sometimes known as invention, shaping, and editing). Remember, though, that “the stages always overlap,” and that the writing process is too recursive, too full of starts and stops and loops backward, to break into clearly distinguished stages” (John C. Bean and John D. Ramage, *Form and Surprise in Composition: Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum*, New York: Macmillan, 1986, 10-11).

### **I. Prewriting**

This stage is probably the most important. Study the possible topics and try to select one with which you feel comfortable. If you have trouble deciding on a topic or coming up with ideas, use any of a variety of prewriting techniques, such as brainstorming, clustering, cubing, freewriting, or looping. (See the lab handouts on prewriting techniques.) Think about what you want to say and how you want to say it; this includes thinking about your audience and your purpose for writing. Then formulate a thesis statement and an outline. The following information will help you.

#### **Can you answer yes to all of these questions concerning your thesis?**

1. Is your thesis a significant statement of what you want to say in your paper?
2. Is it specific? Have you narrowed the topic into a workable subject?
3. Is it a complete sentence?
4. Is it clear and free of any likely misunderstanding?
5. Is it free of emotional language, complicated jargon, and difficult-to-define terms?
6. Is it free of deadwood and “writing about writing” (example: “In this paper, I am going to write about . . . )?
7. Does it set the direction that the body of your paper will follow? Does it give your reader an idea of the paper’s organization?
8. Does it deal with something you really believe you can write about? (This is more important than you may suspect because, if you feel trapped by your topic, you will have trouble developing it.)

Now construct an outline of the ideas you are going to develop. (See the lab handouts on organization.) The checklist and samples below should help you.

#### **Can you answer yes to all of these questions concerning your outline?**

1. Does each Roman numeral of your outline describe one of your central ideas?

2. Can you enlarge each one of your major headings into at least one fully developed paragraph?
3. Are your headings essentially free of overlapping ideas? (Although your headings must be logically related to each other, make sure that each one develops its own focus instead of merely restating what you have said elsewhere.)
4. If your teacher has required proper outline form, does your outline meet his/her standards?

### **Example A**

**Thesis statement:** Playing baseball gives a young person opportunities to develop socially, physically, and emotionally.

#### **Outline:**

- I. Introduction with thesis
- II. Opportunities to meet people
- III. Physical benefits
- IV. Source of relaxation
- V. Conclusion

### **Example B**

**Thesis statement:** Writing a theme should involve prewriting, writing, and postwriting.

#### **Outline:**

- I. Introduction with thesis
- II. Choosing and narrowing the topic, generating ideas, composing an outline and a thesis Statement
- III. Writing the introduction, body, and conclusion
- IV. Revising and proofreading
- V. Conclusion

## **II. Writing**

The actual theme will be composed of three parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. The introduction to a theme should introduce the subject and set the direction. It must capture the reader's attention, for if the introductory paragraph does not interest him, he will not read the remainder of the paper. (To see some different, interesting ways to begin a paper, ask a lab worker to show you the book *Writing Creatively*.) Usually a one-paragraph introduction is sufficient (and preferable) for a composition of the length you will be writing for most courses. This paragraph can progress either from the general to the specific or from the specific to the

general; however, the easiest direction for most students is the former. This type of introduction is called the funnel paragraph, and in it the writer starts with a general statement and gradually becomes more and more specific as he *funnels* the reader's thoughts into the main ideas of the body. Study the following sample to see how each sentence gradually becomes more specific until the thesis statement is reached:

Some old furniture has sentimental or financial value but is so buried under layers of paint, varnish, and dirt that it is aesthetically a white elephant. I had such a chair but finally decided to tackle the task of making it an attractive addition to my living room. Although I had never done any refinishing before, I soon discovered that one needs a great deal of patience to complete the stripping and apply the new finish.

**Can you answer yes to the following questions about your introduction?**

1. Is your introduction a fully developed paragraph?
2. Is it interesting? Does it capture the reader's attention?
3. Does it get into the subject smoothly and clearly?
4. Does it narrow the subject and define or explain any terms or expressions which might confuse the reader?
5. Does it conclude with a thesis statement which fits the rest of the introduction and points ahead to the remainder of your paper?
6. Is it free of mechanical errors?
7. Is it free of vague statements and wordiness?
8. Have you avoided the traps of apologizing about your subject, promising your reader too much, or "writing about writing"?

The body of your paper should contain at least one fully developed paragraph about each of your central ideas. These paragraphs should relate logically to each other but should treat each idea separately. Arrange the central ideas in a logical order, such as least important to most important.

Conclusions are usually difficult, but they are necessary to give the reader a feeling of completion. In your conclusion, you should tie up all loose ends. Although some type of summary or evaluation of the previously discussed ideas is a good method of concluding, avoid merely repeating what has already been said in the introduction or body. When the reader has finished your conclusion, he should know that you have ended your paper; if, however, he turns the page to see if there is any more writing, you will have failed to produce the appropriate *winding-down* effect. (For further help with writing a paper, see the lab handout entitled "Baker's Keyhole.")

### III. Postwriting

The third and last step in the writing process is often done in too much of a hurry. The postwriting step includes the task of rereading the paper to see what revisions might need to be made. This means more than just proofreading for minor mechanical errors, such as spelling and punctuation errors. Be critical of your writing; be objective. Reading your paper aloud is a good idea.

Try to imagine yourself as someone reading your words for the very first time. Imagine your intended audience, which may be your instructor, your classmates, a prospective employer, or some other audience. Would your intended audience be able to understand what you wrote, just as you write it, not as you thought you wrote it? Or have you used words your audience wouldn't understand, or left out necessary information? Have you done the opposite: Have you written in a patronizing way, talking down to your audience? If you answer *yes* to any of these questions, then you need to work on the writing stage some more.

Also in the postwriting step, ask yourself whether you have fulfilled the requirements for the assignment. Did you follow the directions? Did you write the type of paper required? Did you answer fully all the questions asked of you? In other words, is the content of your paper acceptable and is that content organized in a logical manner? If the answer to any of these questions is *no*, then you need to go back to the writing stage.

When you feel that your paper fulfills the requirements in a way appropriate to your intended audience, then you may concern yourself with the mechanics of writing. Check your spelling, looking up the spelling of any words of which you are unsure. Check your punctuation to make sure that you have followed standard English conventions. Make any necessary changes in sentence structure or diction. Again, you may find that you will have to return to the writing stage. Then you should be ready for your final draft.

As you write or type your final draft, pay attention to the “niceties” of writing/typing. Follow your instructor's paper format requirements for margins, cover sheet, type or ink, paper quality, double-spacing or single spacing, neatness, etc. If you do not follow given requirements of format, your instructor may never get to the point of reading your paper for its content. In fact, your instructor may reject your paper all together. So, take the time to do a good job during the postwriting stage.

After writing or typing your final draft according to format requirements, proofread again. This time check for typographical errors such as misspelled words, omitted words, or omitted punctuation. Neatly make any necessary corrections. Then you should be ready to hand in your essay.

### Sample Paper

Study the sample paper. It is a well constructed five paragraph theme featuring a funnel introduction and clear, effective topic sentences. Despite its good points, however, there are two

basic differences between it and most of the themes you will be writing in Freshman Composition I and II:

1. It uses the second person (*you*, either stated or understood instead of the third person point of view that is nearly always preferred or required).
2. It has short, less developed paragraphs—introductory, body, and concluding—than most writing teachers prefer or require.

### **Writing a Theme**

Students often complain when they are told to write a theme. Many times they procrastinate and then hurriedly write a paper which lacks logical organization, adequate content, and/or correct mechanics. Procrastination and its subsequent problems can be avoided if a student masters the basic steps in the writing process. If he plans carefully, develops fully, and polishes diligently, he should be able to produce a theme which communicates effectively.

The first step in writing a theme is to decide what you want to say. Pick a topic you know something about and then narrow the topic down to a thesis statement which concisely states what the paper will be about. This sentence is your preliminary thesis. Now decide how to develop this idea. Jot down prospective paragraph topics. If this seems difficult—or turns out to be impossible—alter the thesis. Keep working until your thesis and main points are logically related. Then put your thesis and main ideas into outline form.

The actual writing of a theme is time-consuming, but if your outline is well-planned, composition should not be difficult. Write an introduction which makes the reader want to read your paper. Make sure that your thesis statement falls in such a place that he knows—without your saying so—that this is what your theme will be about. Now develop each body paragraph. Use topic sentences which both support your thesis and allow your ideas to flow smoothly. When you reach the conclusion, try to tie up all loose ideas. You may summarize, but don't merely repeat what you have just said.

After the theme is written, make sure it is written the way you want it to be. See that all sentences are easy to understand and that you have developed your thesis without straying from the subject or being illogical. Your style should be smooth and exhibit a variety of sentence patterns. In revising, try to subordinate your less important ideas and to replace all vague words with specific ones. Oftentimes the addition of simple modifiers can drastically improve a paper. When your theme seems to read smoothly, begin to proofread it. Check carefully for careless mistakes or mechanical errors that can destroy the sense of a sentence. A good method for proofreading is to begin with the last sentence and then progress through your paper backwards.

The theme should now be ready to turn in. At this point you should always proofread it one more time. Then, if you have followed this method, you should have a polished product which you are proud of. Some of the steps may seem difficult, but the results of the process are worth the effort.