Appendix A

Writing College Papers

What’s so hard about writing a college paper? Nothing really, if you know how to go about it. Why, then, do so many students dread writing papers? For some students, getting started is the biggest problem. Finding a good topic, writing the first paragraph, or figuring out what to do when you feel as though you’ve said all you can but you only have one page written are common stumbling blocks. In this section you’ll find some new strategies for writing papers using a process approach.

WRITING IS A PROCESS
Writing is a work in progress. You may be wondering how writing is a process. If you think about all the steps you must go through to “create” a paper, though, it becomes more obvious. Can you think of any other creative efforts that involve a process? The first thing that comes to my mind is a photograph. To create a photograph, you must go through many steps. First, you must decide on a subject. Then you must decide how you want to capture that subject and compose the picture in such a way that you achieve your desired result. You then must process the film into a negative and go through even more steps to print the picture. If you don’t follow all steps in the process, your finished product—”the photograph”—will be disappointing. Writing is this same sort of process. Unfortunately, some students try to “print the picture” before they “develop the film.” They try to produce the finished product without going through the necessary steps. Many writing experts have defined the steps in the writing process. Hans Guth described five stages in the writing cycle: Explore, Focus, Organize, Draft, and Revise.¹ Others use variations of Guth’s stages, but all of them include activities to do before, during, and after writing. These stages often are referred to as prewriting, writing, and rewriting. In this section you will learn to use the following steps in the writing process: getting started, getting organized, drafting, revising, and evaluating.
Getting started includes brainstorming for ideas, limiting your topic, and focusing your thoughts and ideas. Getting organized includes listing and selecting ideas, formulating a tentative thesis, and outlining your paper. When you draft your paper, you transform the ideas from your outline into sentences and paragraphs to develop an introduction, body, and conclusion. Revising is an active process that may involve improving the development, coherence, and unity of your paper, as well as correcting errors in spelling, grammar, and sentence structure. Finally, evaluating your writing involves looking critically at your paper after it is returned, as well as during the various stages of its development.

Many students see these steps as distinctly different and linear in nature; in other words, when one step is completed, you simply move on to the next step. However, writing is somewhat different from developing a photograph. Not every piece of writing develops in exactly the same way. Instead, writing can be thought of as a cycle. During the writing process, you may complete one stage, begin the next, and then return again to the first stage. In other words, you may gather information, limit your topic, and then realize that you need to gather additional information. You may organize your ideas and, in the process, realize that you need to limit or narrow your focus again. Look at the diagram in Figure A.1. You can see that the writing cycle comes full circle; it is a series of stages or steps that often lead back to the beginning. As you learn about each of the five stages in the writing cycle, remember that you can and should move back and forth through them as you prepare your paper.

GETTING STARTED
Getting started often is the most difficult step for students who are inexperienced writers. In fact, it often is the most difficult step for experienced writers, too. Many students spend hours staring at a blank piece of paper or computer screen trying to decide what to write. Before computers became so popular, crumpled sheets of paper strewn around the room were often a sign that a student was starting to write a paper. Now, of course, many students compose their papers directly on the computer and only the bare screen, the blinking cursor, and fingerprints on the “delete” key are the telltale signs of the failure of the composing process. Learning to brainstorm for ideas and learning to focus your topic will help you get started on your assignments without becoming stalled or frustrated.
BRAINSTORM

Brainstorming can be thought of as a way of getting all the ideas that you have in your head onto paper where you can use them. A number of brainstorming techniques can help you get started on your assignments. In this section you will learn to use free writing, listing, and mapping strategies.

Free Writing

One of the easiest ways to get started on a writing project is just to start. After writing a topic at the top of a piece of paper, just start writing anything that comes to mind. Write for five or ten minutes without stopping. Don’t worry about spelling, grammar, or even sentence structure. Your goal is to get ideas on paper. If you get stuck, write about the last idea that you had. Even if you get a good idea early in your brainstorming, keep writing because you may come up with an idea that is even better. After you finish putting your ideas on paper, circle or underline the ones that you think are the best.

Listing

Although some students find that free writing works very well for them, others prefer listing their ideas to generate a paper topic. Rather than writing ideas in sentence or paragraph form, you can make lists of words or phrases that pop into your head. Start by writing the general topic at the top of a sheet of paper. This time, though, jot down your ideas in list form. If you get stuck or run out of ideas, go back and reread your list. You may think of more ideas after reading an earlier entry; you may form different associations this time. Try to generate at least forty ideas. Then circle or underline your three or four best ideas. Many students find that several of their best ideas—"the most original and creative ones"—occur in the middle or toward the end of their brainstorming list; the ideas that are generated first are often common or overused. An example of listing to brainstorm the topic “Advertising” is shown in Figure A.2. Which ideas do you think are the best? Circle three or four. Where are they located in the list?

Mapping

If you’re already using one of the mapping techniques for taking text notes or preparing study sheets, you may find that mapping works just as well for generating paper topics and ideas. If you haven’t tried mapping yet, try it now. Some students find that the visual display provided by mapping helps them get started on their writing assignments.
GET FOCUSED

After you develop some ideas, you need to limit your topic. You couldn’t write a well-developed short essay or research paper on topics such as censorship, education, or war because they are all too broad. One of the reasons to circle your best ideas after brainstorming is to help focus your writing, to help narrow your topic. It would be impossible to write about a broad topic such as “Natural Disasters” in a five-paragraph essay or even in a five-page paper.

Many students believe that the broader the topic, the easier the paper will be to write. In some ways this may be true, but often the result tends to be a rather general discussion of the topic with little depth or insight. In most cases, by narrowing the topic, you actually increase your ability to write a good paper. By dealing with a more focused, specific topic, you can communicate your information more clearly.

There are a number of ways to narrow your topic in addition to the brainstorming techniques mentioned above. One method that seems to be particularly effective is to make the topic more specific. Think of one example, one person, one time, or one event to write about. Ask yourself who, what, where, when, why, or how questions again, but this time use the specific answer to one of them as your topic. If you were assigned the topic “Vandalism,” you might brainstorm to get ideas. In the process of brainstorming, you might narrow or limit your topic to one better suited to a short writing assignment. (You also could narrow the topic prior to doing your brainstorming.) Several broad topics, including vandalism, are limited in Figure A.3. How would you narrow the broad topics “Vandalism,” “Occupations,” and “Pollution”?

Once you have chosen your topic, you may find that you need to brainstorm again for more ideas. Write your limited topic in the center or at the top of a piece of a paper and brainstorm again. Now you are brainstorming for support that you can use to develop your topic into a paper. You may find that you develop a number of new ideas on the topic that you did not think of before.

If you’re writing a research paper, you’ll need to locate sources such as books, journal articles, or government documents to gather information for your paper. Use the library resources described in Chapter 1 or the Internet resources described later in Appendix D to prepare a working bibliography for your paper. This list of possible sources on the
topic should provide you with most of the information that you’ll need to write the paper. As you read each of the books or articles, make notes on information that you think will be useful in your paper. You may want to refer to the style manual or handbook used in a writing course for more information on how to take notes and create your bibliography.

GETTING ORGANIZED

After you’ve brainstormed for a topic, focused the topic, and generated ideas to use in your paper, you need to organize your ideas before you begin to write. Except for mapping, which allows you to group your ideas as they develop, the brainstorming techniques don’t have a built-in method of organization. By listing and selecting ideas, you may find that you easily can organize the points that you want to make. You also may find that this strategy helps you decide which ideas to use in your paper and which to omit. In addition, at this stage of the development of your paper, you may realize that you need to add more information to some parts of your paper. Developing a tentative thesis statement helps you organize and structure your outline. Finally, outlining the paper provides you with a framework in which to write.

LIST AND SELECT IDEAS

The next step in the writing process is to select which ideas to use and which to throw away or save for another paper. Some of the ideas generated during your brainstorming session may not be appropriate to your limited topic. Many students try to use all of their ideas or research in their paper just because they think they should. Unfortunately, this often results in a paper that lacks unity of purpose. Look at Figure A.4, the list of ideas that students generated on the limited topic “Why Walk?” You may notice that many of the ideas are related or seem to revolve around the same basic topics. After listing and selecting from the brainstormed ideas, the class developed the three groups of ideas shown in Figure A.5.

DEVELOP A TENTATIVE THESIS

After you list and select your ideas, you need to develop a tentative thesis statement. Developing a thesis statement at this point in the writing process will help you determine how to organize your information. It also will help you determine whether you need additional information to write an effective paper. Your thesis is simply one sentence that tells your reader the main point or points you’re going to make in the paper. A good
thesis statement shows your point of view or attitude about the topic. Look at Figure A.5 to see the sample thesis statement that was developed for the essay “Why People Walk.” This thesis shows that the writer views walking as useful or beneficial. It also tells the reader the three reasons that the writer believes walking is a beneficial activity. Your thesis can help you, the writer, know where you’re going. As you develop an outline and write your first draft, you may decide to modify your thesis. That’s fine. However, having some idea of what you plan to discuss in the paper can help you organize it more clearly.

**OUTLINE YOUR PAPER**

Outlines help you structure your ideas before you begin to write. They allow you to check each main section to make sure that it includes sufficient support and is well organized. If you find that some areas of your topic are not well developed, you may decide to gather additional support through brainstorming or library research. You also may decide to switch paragraphs around, move supporting ideas from one main topic to another, or even change your thesis. All these changes are much more easily made in the outlining stage than after you’ve already written the paper.

**DRAFTING YOUR PAPER**

For many students, writing a paper begins and ends with the drafting stage; they simply write the paper once, and that’s that. No brainstorming, focusing, or organizing occurs before they write, and no revision or evaluation occurs afterward. Although some students actually can produce a good paper without going through the prewriting steps, most cannot. Their papers lack focus, organization, adequate development, or all three. By completing the prewriting steps, however, it’s easy to write a first draft. Essays, reports, and term papers generally contain an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. A typical five-paragraph theme contains an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. Similarly, a five-page paper may contain several introductory paragraphs, a number of body paragraphs, and one or more concluding paragraphs. Once you understand how to write a five-paragraph theme, you should be able to use the same basic ideas in preparing longer papers. Let’s look at the basic format for each part of the essay.
THE INTRODUCTION

Many students have a hard time starting a paper because they don’t know how to write the first paragraph. Before we even begin to discuss some strategies for composing introductory paragraphs, you should know that you don’t have to write the introduction first. As long as you have written your thesis statement and your outline, you can begin with the first body paragraph, the first main point, and then write the introduction after you complete the rest of the paper.

The introduction gives you the opportunity to do three things. First, it allows you to capture the reader’s interest. You can use a catchy phrase or quotation, a startling statistic, a brief story, or even a question to get your reader interested in your topic. Second, the introduction provides you with a convenient “slot” in which to place your thesis statement. Once you get the reader’s attention, you need to present the topic or subject of your paper and your position or attitude toward your topic. Finally, the introduction allows you to tell your reader what main points you intend to discuss to support the position that you took in your thesis statement. Introductory paragraphs, then, are used to get your reader interested in your topic, to state your thesis, and to show the method of development that you intend to use in your paper.

THE BODY PARAGRAPHS

After you have developed your thesis statement, you need to ask yourself why you believe the view that it expresses. By answering that question, you’ll generate the main points for each of your body paragraphs. Each main point will become a topic sentence (one topic sentence for each body paragraph). In developing the topic “Why Walk?” students generated three categories of ideas: physical health, physical fitness, and mental health (see Figure A.5). Each of these categories or main points must be developed into a topic sentence.

The Topic Sentence Provides the Controlling Idea

Just as the thesis statement provides the controlling idea for the paper as a whole, the topic sentence expresses the overall, controlling idea of one body paragraph. If you
recall, the class generated the following thesis statement for the paper on walking:
“Walking is beneficial because it improves one’s physical fitness, physical health, and mental health.” If you were developing topic sentences for each of the body paragraphs based on this thesis, you might use these:
1. Walking is an excellent form of aerobic exercise that improves one’s overall physical fitness.
2. In addition to building physical fitness, walking provides long-term benefits to a person’s physical health.
3. Walking also is beneficial because it improves one’s mental health.

Although there are many ways to formulate a topic sentence for each of your body paragraphs, each topic sentence must include the topic that you are discussing and the point of view (or position) that you are taking. Good topic sentences should take one position or one side; they should be positive, in favor of the subject, or negative, against the subject. If your topic sentence doesn’t take a stand about the topic, you won’t be able to back it up with supporting sentences.

Develop Your Supporting Points

After you develop your topic sentences, you need to refer to your outline for supporting points to make your case. Each of the ideas that you listed under the main headings can be developed into separate sentences. You need to include excellent reasons, examples, and facts to convince your reader that the points you are making are sound.

Use Reference Material to Support Your Topic Sentence

If you’re writing a research paper, the information that you find in reference materials generally can be used as secondary support. You still need to make your own points as you write the paper. Then use the information from your research notes to back up those points.

One method of documenting information is to put quotation marks around any information that you copy directly from a book, periodical, or other source. Another method is to paraphrase information from source materials. Many students think that as
long as they put the information into their own words, they don’t have to cite (indicate) the source. Unfortunately, in most cases, even paraphrased information must be documented, too.

You can cite a source by including the publication information for the article or book or other work in a footnote, endnote, or reference list. Since many different citation styles are used in college, you should check with your professor to find out which format he or she expects you to use and then use a style manual or handbook to verify the proper form for each reference work you are using.

THE CONCLUSION

Just as your introduction should capture the reader’s attention, your conclusion should leave the reader thinking about the issues that you presented in your paper. Your concluding paragraph should bring your paper to a logical end. Restating your thesis or main points in the concluding paragraph can help convince your reader that your position is a valid one. You may also be able to move or inspire your reader with a striking quotation, a dramatic example, or a startling statistic. If you begin your paper with a question, you might answer that question in the concluding paragraph. You can offer suggestions for how to solve the problem, or urge the reader to take action about the issue that you discussed in the paper.

REVISING YOUR PAPER

For many students, revising their paper means correcting spelling errors, recopying (or typing) the paper, and fixing a word here and there. Revision, however, is much more involved than that. Revision may involve adding further support, eliminating ideas that disrupt the unity of a paragraph or the essay as a whole, and rearranging information to improve the coherence (the organization) of the paper. Revision can be undertaken at almost any point in preparing your paper, but students often do a “formal” revision after completing the first draft.
REVISE AS YOU PLAN
How much you change or how many times you make changes in your paper before you hand it in is really up to you. If you spent a lot of time planning your paper before you wrote the first draft, you may find that you need to make only minor improvements during the revision stage. On the other hand, if you just sat down and wrote the paper “off the top of your head,” you may need to go back to the prewriting stages to properly develop your topic.

REVISE AFTER YOUR PAPER IS RETURNED
Your professor may require you to revise your paper after it is returned. Many professors believe that students learn the most about writing papers by correcting the errors that they have made. Although professors assume that you will correct spelling errors, fix grammatical mistakes, and improve sentence construction, that’s not all that will be expected in your revision. Your revision may require a reworking of your entire paper, beginning perhaps with a more specific or focused thesis. You may need to rethink or reexplore your topic for ideas on how to develop the points that you have made. Some professors may expect you to go into more detail or provide more support from outside sources. You may need to examine each paragraph individually to determine whether you provided convincing evidence or support for the point that you made in your topic sentence.

EVALUATING YOUR PAPER
Evaluating your paper is the final stage of the writing process. Unfortunately, many students neglect this important step. Once they’ve written the required number of words, they assume the job is done. Good writers, however, take time to analyze and evaluate the finished product. Try to put yourself in the place of your professor. Look critically at the paper and then grade the paper as if you were the professor. To do this effectively, you need to know what criteria your professor is planning to use to evaluate papers. If you aren’t told how your paper will be evaluated, ask.

COMPARE YOUR PAPER WITH PREVIOUS PAPERS
If this paper is your second, third, or fourth piece of written work for a certain class, you should have a pretty good idea of what your professor expects. Use your other papers to help you determine the merits of the newest one. Ask yourself the following types of questions:

1. What types of errors did I make on my previous papers?
2. Have I corrected the errors that my professor noted on the previous papers?
3. What were the strengths of my previous papers?
4. Is this paper better than my previous papers? Why?
5. Am I satisfied with this paper?
6. What grade would I give this paper?

DISCUSS YOUR PAPER WITH YOUR PROFESSOR

After your paper is returned to you, look at the comments and suggestions that the professor has made rather than just at the grade. Take the notes or check sheet that you completed with you so that you can discuss your own efforts at evaluation and ask your professor to explain why you were incorrect in one or more areas. Learning what the professor expects is a critical step in effectively writing the next paper. Discussing the paper in a rational and realistic way with your professor may help you gain some points, but, more important, you may learn how to write a better paper.