

Writing as a Process

Many students are committed to the “Begin at the Beginning” method of essay writing. Typically, these students research their topics, perhaps jot down basic outlines, and then write their essays, editing as they go. Because this method does not make use of **detailed outlines** and eliminates **revision** as a separate activity, it requires you to craft acceptably clear and engaging sentences before you can move on. This method, therefore, **interrupts trains of thought** and so encourages **writer’s block**. To avoid this problem, adopt a **three-stage process**.

Stage One: Pre-Writing

Phase 1 – Determining a Topic

For many written assignments, professors will provide their students with a list of acceptable topics. It is important to understand, however, that these topics are rarely refined enough when presented as prompts to translate well into a typical undergraduate-level term paper or short essay. Your first priority in the writing process is, therefore, to **narrow your topic** to something that is workable.

Ex. Write a 1000-word essay on the role of the American Lend-Lease Act of 1941 in the Second World War.

Given the scope and importance of this program, some questions that might help students narrow down this broad topic would be:

- **Was Roosevelt ultimately responsible for the Act?**
- **Did the Act preserve Great Britain from invasion from Germany?**
- **Did the Act allow the Soviet Union to reindustrialize?**
- **Was the Act necessary in vitalizing the American armaments industries?**

Any of these questions would be a good starting point with which to approach the second phase.

Phase 2 – Researching

In this phase, students can conduct research based on the limits imposed by their more refined topics. It is important to **ask librarians** for assistance in setting up catalogue searches at this point. Once you have a reasonable number of search results, place a **limit on the number of articles or texts** you will read to find good information. For example, for a research paper requiring a minimum of five scholarly articles, read ten (but only ten). If after reading you have found only four worth using, read five more.

Phase 3 – The Thesis Statement

See the handout entitled **Essays – Thesis Statements** for more information.

Phase 4 – The Outline

In this phase, you develop a skeleton outline that becomes a set of **point-form instructions** for how to write your paper. For each point, include a few words or short phrase that will remind you what you need to devise

sentences for. For more information on the different components of the paragraphs in your essay, see the handout entitled **Essays – General Structure**.

Stage Two: Writing

This stage consists of **just one phase**, and in that phase you are required only to follow your outline and turn all of the point-form notes into **full sentences and paragraphs**. Do not worry about whether or not the sentences are well written. Your **one goal** at this point is simply to write out your ideas without interrupting that process with other concerns.

Stage Three: Revision

Phase 6 – Clarity/Content

Some questions to guide you through this first phase of revision are:

- **Have I included all of the necessary information?**
- **Is that information correct?**
- **Have I included reputable, convincing sources?**
- **Are all of my statements understandable?**

Add information where lacking, eliminate unnecessary or irrelevant information and clarify any ambiguous statements.

Phase 7 – Structure/Organization

Ensure that each section of a technical report contains all of the necessary components and evaluate the ordering of the body paragraphs in your argumentative essay. Assess whether the more **persuasive or compelling evidence** is ideally placed to have the greatest impact on your audience and then reorder content where necessary.

Phase 8 – Style

In this phase, assess the style of your writing and consider:

- Active vs. Passive Voice (see handout entitled **Active and Passive Voice**)
- Rhetorical Questions
- Personal Pronouns (see handout entitled **Pronouns**)
- Transitions (see handout entitled **Transition Signals**)

Decide what changes to make to your draft in this phase based on the stylistic demands of your discipline. If writing in the Arts & Humanities or Social Sciences, revise all sentences to active voice and make occasional use of personal pronouns such as “I”. If writing in the Sciences, use passive voice and avoid personal pronouns. This is also a good time to add transitions between ideas to enhance the ‘flow’ of your writing.

Phase 9 – Grammar & Punctuation

In the last phase of the writing process, read over your draft again and correct any errors in grammar and punctuation. If you have trouble identifying these errors, make use of a number of different Writing Support Centre handouts, including **Articles, The Comma, Subject-Verb Agreement, Sentence Fragments**, etc.