

The Writing Process¹

Midwestern Writer's Studio Handout

One of the most important writing lessons I've learned over the years is simple, but profound: effective writing is not a one-time effort; it is a process. In other words, just about any writing task is made easier, more rewarding, and much less intimidating when we break it down into manageable steps that we can work through one at a time.

What does that look like? While the process will vary somewhat, depending on the writer and the task, the following steps are a great place to start:

- ✓ **Plan:** Think about what you want to say before you start writing. Jot down a few notes or bullet points, or talk your ideas through with a friend.
- ✓ **Draft:** Once you have a clear idea of what you want to say, sit down and draft a rough copy. Don't worry about phrasing things perfectly; this is not the final draft. The idea is just to get something down on paper or into the computer, understanding that it does not need to be polished or perfect the first time.
- ✓ **Let your draft "cool":** Take a break. Instead of trying to rework your writing immediately, step away from your draft for a while and do something else.
- ✓ **Reread and revise:** Coming back to your draft later – after some time has passed – allows you to read it over with a fresh perspective. Read it out loud (to yourself or to a friend). What parts of the draft are working? What might need to be reworked or clarified? Revise and edit as needed.

This concept goes beyond student writing. Even the most experienced authors don't publish the very first draft they write. They plan, draft, reread, revise, and get feedback from others before reworking and revising again. Take a look, for example, at the following Tweet from best-selling author Louise Penny, written in the midst of drafting her fifteenth novel:

...Back to writing this morning. As every morning. Now at 76,000 words. Trying not to worry that the structure and pacing are off...I think. So hard to tell right now. Which is why I need to remember that the first draft is to get down broad

¹ Author: Jennifer Hearson. Adapted from "Course Introduction," C-GE 101 English Composition I.

strokes of plot, themes, characters. Pacing and structure will be resolved in second, third, fourth drafts. Need that tattooed on my hand!
(@louisepennyauthor, July 14, 2019)

Author Patricia O'Conner puts it this way:

Classy prose does not leap, complete and fully formed, from anyone's typewriter or computer or quill pen. While it may read as naturally and eloquently as if it were flawless from the start and couldn't have been written any other way, don't believe it.

All writing begins life as a first draft, and first drafts are never (well, almost never) any good. They're not supposed to be. Expecting to write perfect prose on the first try is like expecting a frog to skip the tadpole stage.

Write a first draft as though you were thinking aloud, not carving a monument...Relax and take your time, but don't bog down, chewing your nails over individual words or sentences or paragraphs. When you get stalled (and you will), put down a string of X's and keep going. What you're writing now will be rewritten. If it's messy and full of holes, so what? It's only the first draft, and no one but you has to see it.²

All in all, a clear understanding of this writing as process idea is crucial. Not only does it put us in good company (with professional and experienced writers), but will keep us from falling into two traps: 1) slapping together the first thoughts that come to mind without planning or organizing our ideas, or 2) feeling that we only have one shot at getting it right and freezing up because we're afraid to fail. Understanding writing as a process is both challenging and freeing.

² Patricia O'Conner, *Words Fail Me: What Everyone Who Writes Should Know About Writing* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999), 38.