The Writing Process

Prewriting

Preparing a carefully planned assignment will help students be successful. Students are better equipped to think about the particular topic they will address in their writing when they understand the assignment. Some of the steps involved are often internal thought processes, but putting ideas on paper often helps students with organization and recollection. You should use the following questions as a guide for creating and revising assignments, as well as have the students use the questions to analyze the assignment so they know what you are expecting from them:

· What is the subject?
· What is the assignment’s purpose?
· Who is the audience?
· What is the context?
· What is the scope?
· What is the style?
· What is the format?

Beyond the guidelines of the assignment, you could use the following questions to have the students think about the content and organization of the paper, as well as predict what information they will need to find and how long that will take:

· What will be an interesting topic to explore?
· How will students create the basic structure of the paper?
· What research will they need to do?

Students often need help finding a good topic. Brainstorming strategies can help guide students in thinking about topics in new ways. Some examples include

Listing
Ask the students to create a list of possible ways of approaching the assignment or ideas for their own paper. Have them let one idea lead to another, and be sure they know that no idea is stupid.

Freewriting
For five or ten minutes, have the students write anything and everything they can think of in connection with the assignment, as fast as they can. The goal is to get the brain moving so quickly that the students cannot edit themselves, giving them a lot more information to work with.

Invisible Writing
This is similar to freewriting, but ask the students to turn off their computer monitors and type for a certain amount of time. By not being able to see their typos, the students can focus on getting more information out of their heads.
Clustering/Webbing/Mapping
Have the students write the main topic for the paper in the middle of a page. Have them draw lines out to various subheadings. Next, the students should continue creating and connecting subheadings to all possible levels.

Talking
Break the students into pairs and allow one person to talk for a set amount of time while the listener can only ask pertinent questions, encourage, and give advice. Then let them switch places.

Journal/In-class Writing Prompts
Taking a few minutes to answer questions about the assignment or their papers will help students in their progress and let you know what development has been made. Examples include:

- What do you think you might write your paper about?
- What personal experience do you have with the topic we are discussing?
- Tell me about one source you have found for your paper.
- Imagine you are someone who disagrees with the assertions in your paper. What arguments would such a person make against your ideas?
- What has surprised, worried, or pleased you as you have written, researched, and/or learned about this particular topic?

Drafting

After the students have grasped the assignment and begun research, they will next actually writing their papers. Procrastination is the biggest problem students have with drafting, so the sooner you can force them to get ideas down on paper, the better off they and their writing will be. (Process writing also helps with procrastination because the students can write a shitty first draft and then refine their writing in later drafts). Beginning a paper is the part of writing that students struggle with the most, so you’ll need to encourage them to stick with it. As the students write their first drafts, they begin to make assumptions and realizations as they write, which could include the following:

- They begin to express their ideas logically in sentences and paragraphs and create a structure.
- They start to understand their topics more clearly.
- They determine if they need more data.
- They recognize if their thesis statements are too broad and cannot be researched, cannot be proved, or are not interesting.
- They realize if their lines of reasoning might or might not be working.
- Their foci and structures might shift from the introduction to the conclusion.
Students often need help planning their papers’ structures. Some strategies that could be helpful for students to see how to logically organize their papers include:

Clustering/Webbing/Mapping
See pre-writing techniques above for instructions.

Grouping
On index cards, have students write all the ideas they want to include in their papers—one idea per index card. Have the students group similar ideas together. They can then play around with the order of the groupings.

Formal Outlining
Have your students create formal outlines using complete sentences and Roman numerals. This will help students determine if their papers are arranged logically.

Informal Outlining
After the paper has been started, on a separate sheet of paper, have the students write the papers’ thesis statement and list each paragraph’s topic sentence. They can see whether the topic sentences all relate back to the thesis statement.

Revising

Once the first draft has been written, students can more clearly see what information does and does not work within their papers. Rarely have they explained everything clearly, included enough research, or kept a focused idea running through their papers during this first draft. Revising is much more than just changing words and sentences; it involves adding information, deleting unnecessary paragraphs or sentences, changing the overall structure, or moving sentences. Ideas that can help students with revision include the following:

- Does the paper say everything that the writer wants it to?
- Is the thesis statement too broad or too narrow?
- What is confusing for the audience? What is clear?
- What needs more evidence? What claims are fully supported?
- What is tangential? What is relevant?
- What is poorly developed or incomplete? What is well developed or clear?

Professors often feel overwhelmed at the idea of having to read multiple drafts of students’ papers. One way to avoid this is to hold peer-revision workshops. These sessions can be helpful for the students because writers see another’s view of their paper. Also, students are more responsible for their learning and often become more aware of what is required of them to fulfill an assignment by reading others’ work.
Editing

Once the papers clearly say everything the writers want them to, the students need to pay attention to the details. This will typically be the last step in the writing process because after writing an imperfect first draft, the students will most likely add to and cut from what they already have, so correcting grammar is premature when entire phrases, sentences, and paragraphs might be deleted. Some questions that you could ask students to help them think about editing are as follows:

- Is the writing clear?
- Is the format correct?
- Have they chosen an appropriate voice?
- Are the writers using specialized language (jargon) when simple, common language will suffice? Or using simple, common language when jargon is required?
- Are their spelling, grammar, and punctuation correct?
- What sounds awkward when they read the paper aloud?

Final Thoughts

Keep in mind that writing is recursive. For example, writers often revise several times; they might even use prewriting techniques in the middle of drafting. Each person will use the process to his or her best advantage, depending on each paper assignment, but these basic steps encompass the way people create their best writing. The following figure illustrates these principles.