

Chapter 4: Stages of Writing

Chapter Overview

The act of writing involves many tasks. This chapter proposes a schedule of six stages that can be done sequentially or, in some cases, simultaneously. Above all, managing one's time is key to reducing stress and becoming a more deliberate writer. The stages of academic writing are

- understanding the assignment (its conventions, audience, scope, and specific requirements),
- generating ideas (free writing to arrive at a thesis statement),
- finding evidence (research to inform and clarify one's own ideas),
- creating a structure (outlining main points and planning how to support them),
- drafting (imperfect writing that can be improved upon later), and
- revising and editing (looking at drafts from another reader's point of view).

Key Concepts

thesis statement	A written embodiment of the thesis/claim in the introduction that's pursued through the whole text; it may inform the reader of the main supports or methods the writer uses to argue the thesis. Depending on the writing situation, thesis statements can be anything from a sentence or two to a short paragraph in length.
claim	The writer's assertion about a topic that appears in the thesis statement and supported through the text with evidence demonstrating the claim; sometimes called a thesis.
support	Evidence the writer uses to prove a claim.
evidence	The material derived from primary and secondary sources necessary for creating new ideas, solving problems, or proving new claims through academic writing.
outline	A tool for planning writing, laying out the author's main points in the order they intend to discuss them.
topic sentence	The sentence that announces the subject of a paragraph, serving as a signpost for both the reader and the writer, and relating back to the thesis statement of the whole text.
introduction	In academic writing, introductions introduce

	the topic and the writer’s claim/thesis, situate that claim within the larger topic and scholarly context, demonstrate the need for the study, and summarize the study’s approach and content.
body paragraphs	The middle paragraphs between introduction and conclusion where a writer unpacks, analyzes, and presents evidence in support of their argument or thesis.
conclusion	The last section of an essay, where the writer leaves their reader with a final sense of what they want the reader to take away from the text. Academic conclusions function in different ways, but usually look beyond the paper to the wider significance of the topic and argument.

Discussion Topics

1. What is your typical strategy when you receive an assignment? Do you get started right away or leave it until closer to the deadline? Have you ever felt stressed or overwhelmed when several assignments were due around the same time?
2. Academic writing is an expression of our own ideas, but it need not be a solitary process. Who could we go to for information, support, and collaboration at each of the stages described in this chapter?

Assignments or Activities

1. *Instructor:* Write two headings on the whiteboard: “Not Great” and “Great!”. Working together as a class, list various essay-writing strategies under each heading (for example, asking the instructor to clarify the assignment; pulling an all-nighter before the deadline; working with a classmate on the editing; writing an essay in a stream of consciousness and then handing it in without re-reading it; co-opting the ideas and evidence of something read online rather than taking time to develop their own ideas).
2. Bring in an assignment from another class that you are currently taking. In pairs, tell your partner—in your own words—*what* the assignment is asking you to do, *why* you are being asked to perform this task, and *how* you will begin your work on it. What have you noticed by describing the assignment in this way that you didn’t notice before?

3. Practice timed free-writing. Set a timer for 10 minutes and commit to writing without stopping, even if all you write is “I can’t think of anything to write; I wonder what I’ll have for lunch.” Use a prompt to get started, such as “What purpose does writing serve in your life?” or the topic of an upcoming assignment. When the 10 minutes is up, re-read what you have written and highlight any words, phrases, or sentences that contain the kernel of a good idea, or that gesture toward what it is you are trying to say on the topic. Use these scraps to write a fresh paragraph.

Further Resources

The Learning Network. “300 Questions and Images to Inspire Argument Writing.” [*The New York Times*](#), 1 Feb. 2021.

A list of three hundred prompts, each of which links to a *New York Times* article and a series of questions to guide student responses to the topic.

Pinkser, Joe. “The Best Time-Management Advice Is Depressing but Liberating.” [*The Atlantic*](#), 11 Aug. 2021.

An interview with author Oliver Burkeman about his 2021 book *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, in which Burkeman argues that good time management means doing a few things that really count rather than doing everything, being sure to make progress on the important things first.

The Pomodoro® Technique. [Cirillo Consulting GMBH](#).

This is the website for the Pomodoro Technique, a popular time management system that involves working for uninterrupted 25-minute periods, interspersed with shorter and longer breaks.