

Getting our students to understand that composition is a process rather than a one-and-done “act” is the first step toward improving their writing.

# Freshman Composition & the Process Approach

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## FRESHMAN WRITING: THE PROCESS APPROACH

The first semester focuses on learning how to create a logical and coherent narrative. To do this, we focus on the **how** of producing the text, more than the **what** of the text itself. The objective at the start is for students to be thinking about the PROCESS they are learning more than their essay's TOPIC.

The reason is simple: if your students' paper topics are 'fluffy' and light-hearted, they don't get bogged down with emotional reactions to workshopping and critiques. Save the serious topics for subsequent classes. Below are examples of 'light' essay topics. .

1. Identify a moment in your life that made you feel like you had superpowers. What did you do exceptionally well? How did circumstances change because of your actions?
2. How have you handled being the "new kid" in your lifetime?
3. "Dear Me" in 5 Years...
4. What household appliance would you invent if you could?
5. What would you like to go back and tell a teacher from your past?
6. If your alarm clock could talk, what would it say?
7. What jokes, pranks, hoaxes, or tricks have you fallen for? What jokes, pranks, hoaxes, or tricks have you played on someone else?
8. Outside of your family, who is someone that has made a difference in your life?
9. If you had your own talk show, who would you like to interview? Why?
10. What fantastical creature would you like to have come alive?

**Remember**, our primary objective is to change students' approach to how they literally produce a text for a class. In FYI 1, we practice various techniques addressing HOW a text is created.

For this to happen, students will critically reflect on their writing process with the help of their peers, in the form of **Workshop Groups**. These are a vital aspect of the process, for students are far more likely to ask questions and give frank feedback to and with one another.

## STEPS IN PRODUCING THE TEXT

**BRAINSTORMING / INVENTION EXERCISES:** These are important activities for students to learn, as they will very useful when the stakes are higher. For the first time around, they can be fun and silly.

**INFORMAL PROSPECTUS:** students compose a brief (500 – 700 words) text expressly directed at you, the teacher, describing their intended topic. This is your opportunity to reel-in students whose topics are too complex.

**OUTLINE:** Some students can produce these at the start. Many others (myself included) can only produce an outline **after** we've written the paper. Either approach is fine. Outlines help identify whether an essay's organization is logical.

**FIRST DRAFT:** While drafts for the first semester must have a beginning, a middle and an end, they can be as sloppy and unfocused as necessary. At FSU we called them "s\*\*\*\*\*" first drafts. I tell students **"The worst first draft is better than the best idea!"**

**SECOND / THIRD / FOURTH DRAFTS / REVISIONS:** Depending on how much time you have in your specific class, students continue the drafting process with their workshop groups. Students reflect on workshop members' suggestions in subsequent drafts / revisions. You do not need to grade / read / respond to these. Just check that students have produced them. I require all drafts be submitted with the final essay.

**PROCESS MEMO:** The process memo will be turned in along with their final draft. This is a response to specific questions regarding their experience in being meta-critical about their own process in creating a text in this manner.

**FINAL DRAFT:** Only when students and their workshop members are their text has **1)** a point, **2)** enough facts, dialogue, description, germane points (etc.) to make it an interesting experience for the reader, and **3)** a sense of unity - should they worry about spelling, usage, and mechanics. You wouldn't ice a cake before you bake it, right?

## **BRAIN-STORMING AND INVENTION ACTIVITIES (hyper-link)**

These introduce students to the idea that writing isn't simply a matter of composing until the essay is done. It may and really should involve innumerable inventive activities students engage in before they begin drafting.

**Freewriting** :Read through your assignment and choose a topic, theme, or question that comes to mind. Write for 10-15 minutes in response to this idea – do not lift your pen from the paper or your hands from the keyboard. When you are finished, read through your draft and underline or circle ideas that might lead you to a thesis for your paper. Consider asking a classmate or friend to read what you've written and ask questions about your ideas and topics.

**Looping**: After freewriting, read through what you have written and underline a phrase or sentence that you think is particularly effective or that expresses your ideas most clearly. Write this at the top of a new sheet of paper and use it to guide a new freewrite. Repeat this process several times. The more you write and select, the more you will be able to refine your ideas.

**Listing**: List all the ideas you can think of that are connected to the topic or the subject you want to explore. List quickly and then set your list aside for a few minutes. Come back and read your list and then do the listing exercise again.

**Using Charts or Shapes**: Use phrases or words that are central to your topic and try to arrange them spatially in a graph, grid, table, or chart. For example, draw a tree and with the trunk as the main idea, with the branches being the various sub-topics.

**Topic Swap**: **Have** classmates each write down their tentative topic. Pass the sheets around so each student can write down a thoughtful question or suggestion.

## **INVENTION ACTIVITIES (hyper-link)**

**The Cliché Short Story**: Students make a list of common cliches, and then compose a very silly story using as many cliches from their list as possible. The objective is to realize that cliches are useless in formal writing and should be avoided “like the plague” (ha ha).

**The Exquisite Corpse**: students write nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs on 3x5 cards. Each type is in a different color (e.g., nouns in red, verbs in green, etc.). Workshop groups take a set of cards and produce syntactically correct but logically bonkers sentences. This is a good refresher on how to use (or not use) descriptive language.

## **WORKSHOPPING (hyper-link)**

Workshopping is done in groups of 3 or 4 students, ideally once a week as the drafting process progresses. A workshop activity should take from 15- 45 minutes, depending upon which workshop approach is being used.

Preliminary workshops begin with simple exercises. They should increase in complexity as the class progresses. You should model each workshop activity with a willing student for the entire class before asking groups to engage in them. The instructor should also “sit in” with each workshop group to get a good sense of how things are going (and to keep things on track).

Ideally near the end of the drafting process, the instructor will meet with each workshop group. Depending upon the size of your class, this can be done during Office Hours, or you might cancel a week of classes and give each group at least a one-hour slot. During this meeting each student reads his or her paper aloud. This is a vital step, as the author will be able to “hear” and fix the issue! Then the instructor and workshop group members each give feedback on the close-to-finished draft.

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES (FROM DARTMOUTH COLLEGE)**

Conducting an engaging and constructive workshop draws on skills you already have as a discussion leader. However, if you've never critiqued student papers in class, you will discover that talking about student writing differs in some important ways from talking about the other readings in your class.

First, the writer is in the room. Writing workshops must therefore be sensitively conducted. Second, the aim of the writing workshop is to enhance students' authority and responsibility as readers and writers. The instructor must therefore facilitate rather than direct the discussion. Third, the writing workshop emphasizes the complex role of the reader in a writer's process. Instructors will want to encourage readers to “out” their questions and concerns about a paper so that writers understand the myriad of responses their work has evoked. They will internalize this sense of audience and draw on it as they revise.

## Peer Responses: Elbow and Belanoff's *Sharing and Responding Workshops*

Begin by modeling the peer-response process for the entire class, using a volunteer's paper. Ask that everyone take notes as they listen, then make sure you also model how to encourage the author to initiate feedback from the auditors. Add that every time an auditor offers little more than "It's really good / I liked it / You're sure to get an A" somewhere, a fairy dies.

Make sure to take group dynamics into consideration. Give clear verbal and written instructions. Establish a clear and demonstrable outcome, and limit time allowed so that students stay on task. Circulate, ask questions, check progress, and make suggestions.

### Useful in the beginning stages

#### Sharing: No Response

- Student reads work out loud to peers
- Peers do not respond but only listen attentively
  - *Useful in the early stages because articulating their words aloud enables them to catch inconsistencies and 'hear' what's lacking.*

#### Pointing

- Identify striking words, phrases, and/or powerful moments in the text.

#### Center of Gravity

- Points out the primary theme / the 'essence' of the text (what peers identify as the center of gravity is often a surprise to the author).

#### Say Back

- Peers describe they think the writer is getting at.
- Helps writer see whether main idea is coming across or helps writer establish what he or she is really trying to say.
- Useful in early & late stages. Particularly useful in early stages when writers' ideas may still be vague.

#### The Almost Said

- Writer asks peers questions about what they hear implied but not stated.
- Asks if there is something the auditor would like the writer to address or expand upon.
  - This helps author find or develop missing details, and to assess if subtle details are working as intended.

## **Useful in middle to late stages.**

### Eliminating Unnecessary Words Workshop

**Purpose:** Students will practice eliminating wordiness from their own prose.

**Description:** In this workshop, the instructor gives a brief mini lesson on diction, concise prose, and tips for avoiding wordiness. Then the teacher provides a wordy paragraph for the entire class to work on, removing unnecessary verbiage.

After the practice is over, students will work individually to eliminate unnecessary words/phrases/sentences in their own paper or a peer's paper.

### Contradict

- Readers challenge author's assertions (a discussion of content, not composition).
- Discussion can generate problems with topic/view, reveal counterarguments that need to be made, or provide ideas that writer hadn't considered

### Voice

- Peers help assess tone and language of the work – feelings and attitudes expressed, trustworthiness, vividness, uniqueness, and individuality. This allows peers to describe what they're hearing without deploying technical language.

### Movies of the Mind

- Peers describe what they are thinking while they listen to or read the composition.
- Writer might stop responders in the middle or ask for "I" statements about readers' feelings.

## **Useful in later stages, when writer is confident about composition and is looking for effect on the auditor.**

### Metaphorical Description

- Peers build metaphors for the author's text.
- These can be written or drawn responses, e.g., sometimes a 'doodle' can reveal a lot of an auditor's response.

### Skeleton

- Peers identify composition's outline: main & sub points, evidence, assumptions, etc.

### What I Really Mean Is (WIRMI)

- Author composes a one sentence description of what the paper's topic and/or argument is. Author asks workshop group meme

## Guidelines for Peer Review: Consider the Topic

- Has the writer put forth an interesting intellectual problem or question?
- Does the problem seem impossibly broad? Too narrow? If so, how might the writer narrow or broaden the topic so that it is manageable?
- Do you as a reader care about this question? Or do you feel, "So what?" And why?

### Introduction

- Has the writer raised an interesting issue or question or posed a problem? Is it clearly stated?
- Is the language in the thesis vivid and clear? For example, has the writer structured the sentence so that the important information is in the main clause? Has the writer used subordinate clauses to house less important information? Has the writer used parallelism to show the relationship between parts of the thesis?
- Does the introduction engage you? Why or why not?

### Structure

- Does the structure make sense? If so, what do you think works particularly well? If not, why not? Where, precisely, does the argument lose you?
- Are all the main points relevant to the thesis? If not, what should be removed?
- Does the argument seem logical? Why or why not?
- Does the writer have sufficient support for each point?
- Does the writer acknowledge other points of view about the topic?

### Paragraphs

- Does each paragraph limit itself to a single argument point, clearly developed?
- Does the topic sentence further the argument? Give the topic sentences the same "so what?" test that you gave the thesis sentence.
- Does each topic sentence clearly connect to the paragraph before?
- Does the topic sentence control the paragraph? Why or why not?

### Evidence

- Does the writer have enough evidence to support the paper's idea?
- Does this evidence clearly support the assertion the writer is making?

### Sentences

- Are the sentences clearly written? Are they grammatically, correct?



## Generalization is death to good writing. Limiting is the cure.

One of the key qualities of writing that we might call “interesting” is that it teaches us something we did not already know. Once a subject - be it a person, place, or problem - is explored through **thoughtful writing**, readers are drawn in because they find themselves interested.

But writers have only so much time to write and space to work with, and so *to spend more time and space including details means **deciding what and what not to include.***

### Limiting Time, Place and Action:

*In narrative and personal experience papers, a writer’s first instinct is to try to tell or summarize the whole story.*

- This is probably the most memorable episode of my.....
- Life, it definitely has its ups and downs....
- Last summer....my vacation turned out to be more than I....
- This is an experience I hope never to experience again in my.....

These opening lines depict writers **generalizing rather than particularizing** their experience, putting it into a pre-packaged story category. Second, **they evaluate their experience too early**, prejudging it and telling readers in advance how to react to it. Third, many writers **don’t know in a first draft what their final-draft story will be.**

**In short**, first-drafts often suffer from

- over generalizations
- pre-judgment
- directional uncertainty

*What are some ways to re-see these pieces, focusing more on the story that wants to come out of the stone?*

**Revise a particular episode or concept, and start this writing by limiting time, place, and action.**

*Instead of writing about a memorable vacation to Ireland, describe in painstaking and (we hope) interesting detail waking up in a strange hotel, looking at the foreign morning light that possess a hue never before known to you, smelling foreign breakfast smells, the cold of the tile against your feet as you pad down the hall to a communal bathroom, the sounds of unfamiliar street noise, the uniforms of the school children as they crossed the street in front of your bus...the look of the hills as the driver narrated his oft-repeated spiel on the history of the castle you’re about to visit, but never do because the tire on the bus burst and....*

**Adding:** Perhaps the most obvious way to revise a paper is to **add new information** and **more explanation.** Most professional writers see adding and revising as synonymous.

- **Adding Dialogue:** this complements the suggestion to limit time, place, and action by *putting actors on the set*. While pure fiction shouldn't be your goal, approximate re-creations is fair game for all experiential or autobiographical writing.
  - And not only dialogue, but *interior monologue* can turn a paper from a summation to a dramatic telling.

**Adding Interviews:** Adding other voices also improves writing - only now the additional 'voice' is giving factual information.

**Switching Perspective:** telling the same story or reporting the same events as the previous draft from a different perspective. If a writer has been narrating in past tense, she switches to the present. If she's speaking in her own voice, she may switch to the point-of-view of another character in the narrative.

**Switching Point of View:** have the writer see herself as someone else might. This can be done *simply by switching pronouns* or, *by role-playing a third person*. For instance, in recounting a memorable basketball game in which the student was a participant, she might switch by adopting the voice of the play-by-play announcer.

- **Objective third person:** "It isn't really pleasant to look at a garbage strewn beach; the stench can be overwhelming, and the corpses of rotting fish can certainly leave one less than anxious for a relaxing dip in the water."
- **Subjective first:** "The shore was disgusting. I thought I'd puke from the smell! I couldn't believe all the dead fish littering the beach...it was more like a garbage dump than the seashore!"

**Transforming:** This strategy has the writer re-casting his or her piece into a form altogether different from what it has been. Could it be recast as an exchange of letters or a diary, as a speculative essay, as a series of telephone conversations? As a dream, or even a hallucination?

**Imagining the audience:** Rather than writing a report with no audience in mind, *a generic form of paper which exists nowhere in the world outside of school*, a writer should anticipate *a specific audience for a piece of writing*, which will automatically impose restrictions on the rhetorical stance taken by the writer.

**AUTHOR'S WORKSHOP: FILL IN THE BLANKS FOR FOCUS:**

Sometimes it helps just to fill in the blanks, to force yourself to answer simple, basic questions about your subject. As part of your planning, after you've done some freewriting or listing, try completing the following sentences and see if that process helps you clarify what you'd like to say about your subject.

1. What I'm trying to say is that:
  
2. The main problem with this subject is:
  
3. What really interests me about this idea is:
  
4. The major question I'd like to answer is:
  
5. \_\_\_\_\_ got me interested in this subject in the first place.
  
6. If I had to put my idea into one sentence, I'd say:
  
7. When they get through reading my paper, I'd like people to be thinking about:
  
8. What really irritates me about this issue / problem is:

## **THE PROCESS MEMO** **From The University of Minnesota**

Writers gain control over their writing when they have frequent opportunities to reflect on what they were trying to write, what, in their writing process went well and what didn't, how they broke through obstacles, and how the strategies they used in one writing project might transfer to future writing projects. Providing them with an opportunity reflect on their experience in producing a text using the Process Approach may help them clarify what worked for them – as well as what might be useful going forward.

*For the Final Draft, ask students to write this memo and place it at the end of the essay.*

1. How did engaging in the drafting process change your essay as it evolved?
2. Which section of this draft do you feel most confident about? Why? What was your process for writing that/those section(s)?
3. If you were to revise this again, what might you alter?
4. Where (inside or outside your coursework) might you see an assignment like this one again?
5. If you are given a similar assignment in the future, what writing tips would you give yourself?

## **AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO GRADED WORK**

**Have students answer questions 1 – 3 BEFORE you give them their graded work.**

1. Summarize the theme of your paper. What sub-topics did you use to explore it?
2. What grade do you expect to receive? Why?
3. Be honest: how much time did you put into composing this paper (total)?
4. Did I write comments you expected to see? If yes, what were they?
5. Did any of my suggestions regarding how the text could have been more coherent, tighter, focused, detailed occur to you while you were composing your essay? If so, why didn't you follow that idea through?
6. Does the essay contain over-generalizations that weaken your paper? If so, what are they and how would you rephrase them so that they strengthen, rather than diminish, your point?
7. Did I identify areas that could have been expanded upon? How might you do that now?
8. Did I identify areas that could have been edited? Would you just cut them out, or perhaps shorten them? Why?
9. Upon re-reading the essay, what do you think of its chronology? Would changing the narrative order improve it any? How?
10. Identify any grammatical issues that were addressed. Did they result from genuine mistakes, or from lazy editing? If the answer is the former, why not address the situation by referring to your Bedford and doing the suggested assignment(s)? (Remember, this is your opportunity for extra credit.)

## THESAURISTIS WORKSHOP

I created this exercise after noting how often students used the computer's thesaurus, and not to good effect. The italicized words have been replaced with the first suggestion from the computer's thesaurus function. Give Workshop Groups about 15 – 20 minutes to try and guess the original word

Even this *prediction* did not *anticipate* Robyn for the *collision* of the foundry. They crossed another yard, where *hulls* of *extinct* machinery *fawned*, bleeding rust into their blankets of snow, and entered a *grand* building with a high *arcaded* roof hidden in *obscurity*. This space rang with the most *graceless* noise Robyn had ever experienced. The floor was covered with a black substance that looked like *creosote* but grated under the soles of her boots like *beach*. The air *smelled awful* with a sulfurous, *sticky stuff* smell, and a fine *drop* of black *lint* fell on their heads from the roof. Here and there the open doors of furnaces glowed a *ticklish* red, and in the far corner of the building what looked like a *rill* of *fused* lava *issued* down a curved strait from *thatch* to floor.

**This is the original text. How did you do?**

Even this *thought* did not *prepare* Robyn for the *shock* of the foundry. They crossed another yard, where *loads* of *old* machinery *crouched*, bleeding rust into their blankets of snow, and entered a *huge* building with a high *arched* roof hidden in *blackness*. This space rang with the most *hideous* noise Robyn had ever experienced. The floor was covered with a black substance that looked like *pitch* but grated under the soles of her boots like *sand*. The air *stank/reeked* with a sulfurous *resinous* smell, and a fine *speck* of black *ash* fell on their heads from the roof. Here and there the open doors of furnaces glowed a *dangerous* red, and in the far corner of the building what looked like a *stream* of *molten* lava *flowed* down a curved strait from *roof* to *floor*.