

Instructions: Underline the main idea of each paragraph and summarize it in a brief noun or verb phrase in the left margin beside each paragraph.

Some Words About the Writing Process

For many of us the idea of writing is a fearful enterprise. Getting thoughts together and organizing them into statements or a pattern that someone else can understand are difficult tasks. Making writing work right seems sometimes like a tedious and exasperating prospect if not an outright impossibility. And to complicate the problem, what many of us have been taught in the past about the writing process hasn't made the job of composition any easier or less frightening.

"First, you have to write an appropriate, correct thesis sentence," we have been taught. "Then, you develop a topic outline and, from it, a sentence outline. Next, you must organize" Oh, the grief!

An examination of how experienced or professional writers go about composition reveals, however, something almost all of us as novice writers already suspect: a successful piece of writing doesn't just fall into place on the page like a set of organized blocks, each already pre-formed and grooved to lock into place against others through an orderly process of arrangement.

Successful writing, rather, is the product of a very fluid, highly flexible process. Successful writing is the product of constant massaging an idea or set of ideas, trying first this word and then that one, returning over and over again to reshape a sentence or reorganize a phrase as new ideas emerge, or as the writer examines the composition from various angles or points of view.

In short, we can say that writing is a recursive activity, an evolving process of creating and recreating, revising and revising again, of editing and editing still one more time. Throughout this process, not only the form of the writing changes, however, but so does the content.

The content of successful expository writing is insight: its explanation and its marketing. There are two kinds of insights. An insight is sometimes a startling, new concept that finds its way into an old, familiar pattern of perceptions. For example, before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, more and more U.S. citizens traveling to Russia were discovering that Soviet citizens, like Americans, want their children to grow up in a world of peace, unthreatened by the promise of mutually-assured destruction as the inevitable consequence of any nuclear exchange with the United States. Such a discovery conflicted with earlier preconceptions of many Americans who projected images of the Soviet people as essentially war-mongering and bent on world tyranny.

So an insight may be a new discovery that, in its effect, can be very disruptive and disorienting. On the other hand, an insight might well be an old concept that suddenly presents itself in a surprising, refreshingly new package--like the transformation of "Coca

Cola" into "Classic Coke." Such a new image, even without all the corporate fanfare and commotion, can be very satisfying and reassuring to an old customer.

From conception to dissipation, insights lead an organic life. They are constantly changing as are our enthusiasm for them, sometimes flushed and fevered, at other times heedless and lethargic. Upon discovery, an insight can carry about it the electric aura of the visionary, crashing into our consciousness with all the thunder of a revelation. After hanging out in our heads for a while, however, insights tend to mellow, first into convictions and, over time, into opinions. Even as opinions, however, insights become networks of "truth statements" which, without nurturing, can either harden into mindsets or dissolve into intellectual debris.

Whether as an exciting, new widget on the faded kitchen counter or as the same tired, overstuffed body in a flashy, tapered sport jacket, insights are always the focus of communication between a writer and his or her audience. But what constitutes insight for one person may be something much less provocative and interesting for a potential audience. Through the recursive phases of the writing process, like the form, the content also must change. That change is nothing short of a transformation.

The change that insight must undergo in any successful communication is the transformation of private insight into public insight. Or, perhaps we could characterize the change as a "transference" rather than a "transformation," a transference of insight from the writer to the audience. Whichever expression we select--"transform" or "transfer"--an idea of value and importance for us must somehow, in the writing process, become an idea of value and importance for an audience. That is what I meant above when I referred to "marketing" the insight. Somehow, in the writing process, we must "sell" our private insight to our audience. Our insight must enter the public domain.

How does that happen? How do we get an audience to buy our product? To answer that, we must begin the writing process. It will mean more to you ultimately to have experienced the answer than for me to have told you the answer. In this exercise, then, you will watch yourself work through the four very distinct phases of writing: creating, drafting, revising, and editing.

You will also witness the process of transformation of your insight into public insight as you become increasingly more objective about your writing (both the process and the product) and more attentive to the needs and interests of your audience. Your writing experiences in this unit will (1) make you feel more comfortable about your own unique approach to composition and (2) make you more conscious of your own process of writing.

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