

# CONTENTS

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## Part I

### Essay writing: the process

- UNIT 1 An overview of the writing process / 2
- UNIT 2 Prewriting—assessing the purpose and audience / 14
- UNIT 3 Prewriting—exploring the topic / 28
- UNIT 4 Prewriting—planning the essay / 39
- UNIT 5 Writing and rewriting the essay / 53

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## Part II

### Essay writing: the patterns of development

- UNIT 6 Narration / 68
- UNIT 7 Description / 84
- UNIT 8 Exemplification / 99
- UNIT 9 Process analysis / 112
- UNIT 10 Cause and effect analysis / 126
- UNIT 11 Comparison and contrast / 142
- UNIT 12 Division and classification / 156
- UNIT 13 Definition / 170
- UNIT 14 Argumentation / 185

---

## Part III

### Essay writing: the effective style

- UNIT 15 Using the exact word / 210
- UNIT 16 Using the appropriate word / 221
- UNIT 17 Using figurative language / 234
- UNIT 18 Avoiding wordiness / 251

# UNIT 1



## An overview of the writing process

### KEY TERMS

- editing 编辑, 编校
- prewriting 写前准备
- revising 修改, 修订
- rewriting 改写
- draft 草稿
- writer's block  
写作瓶颈, 文思枯竭
- writing process 写作过程

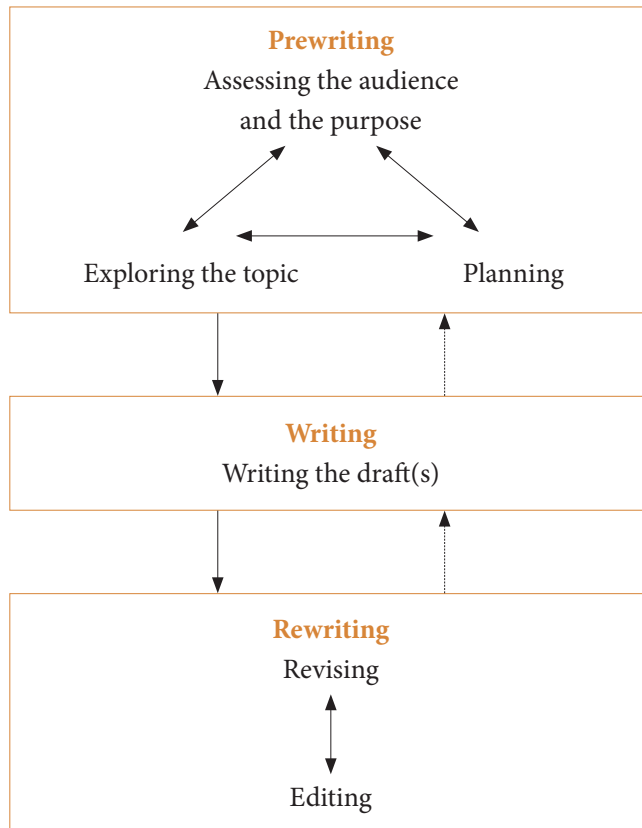
## Introduction

Many students think that a professional writer just sits down, grasps an idea, and dashes off a poem, a play, an essay, or a novel without any stops or mistakes. These students see the writing process as a series of steps consisting of the outline, the rough draft, and the final draft. Seldom, however, is this the case. Instead, the writer moves back and forth from the outline to the first draft, back to the outline, back to the draft, and so forth. The writing process involves considerable trial and error as the writer tries to present a message on the page as clearly and effectively as possible.

The process of writing is different for every writer. However, there are some logical stages that every writer should follow in the creation of an essay. We follow them at different speeds and to differing degrees. As a writer, you will need to become familiar with the various stages of the writing process. The process described in this unit outlines those basic stages.

# An overview of the writing process

The writing process generally consists of three stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. The diagram below provides an overview of the whole process.



The solid arrows indicate the major movement of the process; the dotted arrows indicate the likelihood of the writing having to go back in the process.

## Prewriting

Prewriting is at least a three-part process. You have to analyze your writing task by thinking about your intended audience and your purpose for the writing, the material you will use, and the plan of organizing the essay. The double-headed arrows in the diagram above mean that there is no set order in which you approach the components—you may start at different points on different occasions. You may also move freely back and forth among all the components in the prewriting stage.

Prewriting is essentially a preparatory and planning stage. You select a subject and begin to discover what you want to say about it and how to present your thoughts best to your intended

audience. The prewriting stage provides the foundation for discoveries made in the writing process; it is at this stage that the main ideas begin to take shape. Prewriting usually takes 80 percent of the whole writing time.

## Writing

Writing is the stage in which you produce a rough draft of the essay. Usually in this stage, you need to concentrate on actually writing down your ideas; you should not concern yourself with such matters as struggling for the exact words or restructuring sentences or paragraphs. The free flow of ideas is essential during this stage, and too much attention to those matters may interrupt the flow of ideas. Writing usually takes five percent of the whole writing time.

Sometimes, no matter how hard you try not to stop, you end up with a stop. If you find that you simply cannot continue, use freewriting to get back on track. Spend 10 minutes writing about the “stuck point.” Ask questions; try to identify the problem; and write whatever comes to your mind about the topic, or back up one paragraph or two and read what you have written and then freewrite with this rereading still fresh in your mind.

## Rewriting

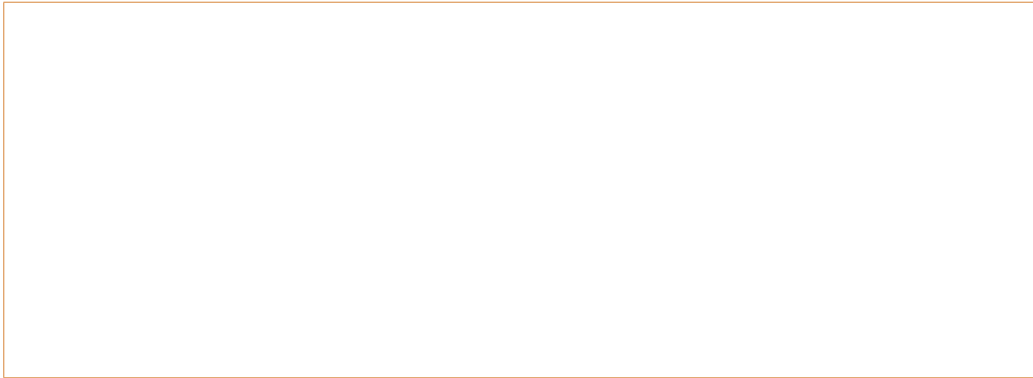
Rewriting is part of the writing process in which you revise and edit the draft produced in the writing stage. Revising often involves additional planning and writing, while editing involves reviewing the writing for appropriate and precise word choice, for various sentence structures, for correct punctuation and spelling, and for a proper manuscript form. An average writer devotes 15 percent of the whole writing time to revising and editing.

Rewriting is an important part of writing that is at times neglected by many beginners. This stage requires you to make decisions that determine the final shape and effectiveness of your writing; thus, rewriting is fundamental. On the one hand, it enables you to correct mechanical mistakes. On the other hand, it is just as creative as the other two stages. It may require that you change only a few things in the draft, or it may require an entirely new draft, or perhaps a third draft, until you are satisfied with your essay. Whatever changes you make at this stage, they must come in light of decisions already made in the other stages of the process. You are not restricted, however, by the previous decisions. Changes made at this stage reflect your ability to see the previous stages of the writing process from a new perspective.

There are many strategies you may use to revise. You may set the draft aside for at least a few hours so that you can return to the essay with a fresh vision. A good practice, once you return to the draft, is to read without marking anything and then to reread. When rereading, you can make notes about such things as what should stay, what should go, what should be rewritten completely, what should be reworded, what should be added, and what should be reordered or restructured.

### Activity 1

Different writers may have different approaches to writing. What is your writing process? Devise a diagram to illustrate your particular writing process.



## The recursiveness of the writing process

As is shown by the previous diagram, writing is a recursive series of activities that turn backward while moving forward. The writer may begin with an introduction, rush to develop the major points for the body of the essay, and then return to the introduction. He/she experiments with words, trying them out until he/she feels they are right. At any stage of the process, the writer may generate ideas which must be incorporated into the essay, ideas which had not occurred to him/her before he/she began writing. Sometimes those ideas require only a minor change of a few words, phrases, or sentences; at other times, they demand that the essay be reorganized all over. Whatever the demand is, it must be met if the essay is to be fully developed.

A piece of writing frequently takes on a life of its own; one idea fosters another, then another, and then still another, until the writer exhausts the topic. How does the writer establish this flow of ideas? At times, the ideas and the words just will not come. This, known as the “writer’s block,” is a common phenomenon. When you encounter such a block, how can you overcome it and continue the writing? First, you may examine the various stages of that process. Second, you may examine how you write. By doing so you can identify your “stuck points” and know how to remedy them. Third, it may help to consider such aspects of writing as the purpose, the thesis, the audience, the organization, and the language. They may throw light on your flow of ideas. In this way, you may begin to recognize and refine your own process.

After you have practiced writing as a process, moving through each of the stages, you will see your final product improved.

## Activity 2

The following is a questionnaire on the writing process. Answer each question honestly to determine what your writing process is like. Then compare your writing habits with others'.

### Questionnaire on the Writing Process

#### 1. Prewriting

- (1) How did you gather information?
  - a. Talking to others
  - b. Browsing WeChat Moments
  - c. Going to the library
  - d. Observing
  - e. Surfing the Internet
  - f. Others (describe)
- (2) How did you discover your main idea?
  - a. Talking to others
  - b. Browsing WeChat Moments
  - c. Surfing the Internet
  - d. Reading books
  - e. Writing
  - f. Others (describe)
- (3) How did you plan?
  - a. With a formal outline
  - b. With an informal outline
  - c. With a diagram
  - d. With a list
  - e. While writing
  - f. Others (describe)

#### 2. Writing

- (1) How many drafts did you produce?
- (2) Did you continue to modify your central idea as you wrote?
- (3) Did you continue to plan as you wrote?
- (4) Did you use an outline, a list, a chart, or notes as you wrote? If so, did you follow it closely?
- (5) Did you make any of the following changes in your draft?
  - a. Adding material
  - b. Changing material
  - c. Deleting material
  - d. Rearranging material
- (6) Did you pay attention to sentence patterns and wording as you wrote?
- (7) Did your attention to sentence patterns and wording significantly interfere with your writing?
- (8) Did you think in Chinese, and then translate your ideas into English in writing?
- (9) Did you often refer to dictionaries, especially Chinese-English ones, while writing?

#### 3. Rewriting

- (1) Did you make any major changes in your essay?  
The types of major changes: \_\_\_\_\_
- (2) Did you make any minor changes in your essay?  
The types of minor changes: \_\_\_\_\_

- (3) Did you find any major problems that you had ignored before?  
The major problems: \_\_\_\_\_
- (4) Did you check over the following specific parts of your essay?
- |                      |                    |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| a. Introduction      | b. Conclusion      |
| c. Transitions       | d. Body paragraphs |
| e. Others (describe) |                    |
- (5) Did you read your writing out loud?
- (6) Which of the following do you take into consideration when you revise your essay?
- If the essay is in response to the task
  - If there is a main idea that controls the essay
  - If there are enough details about the main idea
  - If the essay is organized in a logical way
  - If the essay is free of grammar errors
  - If the essay is written in appropriate language
- (7) Did you make any changes in sentences
- as you were writing the first draft?
  - after you wrote the first draft?
  - both in and after writing the first draft?
- (8) Did you make any changes in words
- as you were writing the first draft?
  - after you wrote the first draft?
  - both in and after writing the first draft?
- (9) How many times did you edit your essay to eliminate mechanical mistakes?
- (10) If you edited your essay more than once, did you
- edit for different things each time?
  - edit the same way each time?
- (11) Did you share your writing with your classmates or other people and then consider their suggestions in revision?

## Description of your writing process

What do you do when you are faced with a writing assignment? How do you proceed? Do you prepare for days or do you write at one stretch? The following two essays, one written by an American student, and the other written by a Chinese student, answer these questions respectively.

Read them through and you will learn more about the writing process.

## Writing sample 1

### Writing My Way

Why is this such a difficult assignment? After all, it's my writing process I'm supposed to describe, so no one else can lecture me and say I'm wrong. What's the problem?—Wait a minute. I think I may have discovered a clue. That word, "wrong." There's always something wrong with what I write, so I guess there's something wrong with my process, too. How can any process which produces nothing better than mine does, possibly be worth describing? Obviously, if I had amassed great fame and fortune through my writing, I would feel justified in exploring my process for the benefit of mankind, but...

Sometimes when I'm stuck about how to begin, I just start writing—anything—whatever I think of. Often this gets thrown out, usually altered, and only rarely does it get to stay, but at least it gets me started.

This preliminary agonizing is part of the necessary prewriting process, and I believe the more I write, the more time I spend on the stage. I used to think writing meant taking pen in hand and putting words on paper, but this describes only the physical act, not the creative process involved in deciding what to write, and describing the thought process is a rather difficult task. Fragments of ideas and snatches of thoughts rise, sink, and rise again like bubbles in a viscous (黏稠的) liquid. Many times a day, while shopping or waiting in line somewhere, I shake the assignment container and watch the bubbles form again, hoping to discover a pattern, a solution to the problem of what or how to write about a particular subject.

Sometimes, after hours or days of agitation, it suddenly becomes clear. I know what I want to say and rush to put them down on paper before I forget. Of course, I have learned that the brilliant, perfect solution which appears at the end of a long day may, when exposed to scrutiny in the next morning's light, have changed into something dull and totally worthless. Occasionally when I have something I really want to say, the words seem to rush to get through pen to paper. This happens rarely, but it is exciting and satisfying when it does.

Seldom does a whole essay flow smoothly. There are always spots which are rough, sentences so awkward that I finally disown them, and paragraphs which refuse to fit together smoothly.

Sometimes most of the essay is satisfactory, but I have trouble with the conclusion, or I find that the introduction just doesn't work because the essay I thought it was introducing isn't the essay I wrote. Trouble spots like these are smoothed out in revision.



After I have completed the basic structure of the essay, I begin to revise. Writing, like jelly, needs to be set for a while before you can tell what it is really like. I must put it away for a few hours or overnight now and then so that I can take a fresh look and see what needs changing or is worth keeping. I have awakened at 5 a.m. knowing how I should change something, so ideas must percolate even in my subconscious. This may go on for days, with a few changes here one time and more somewhere else the next day.

With all these changes, my rough draft usually becomes such a messy conglomeration (混合物) of insertions and deletions (with alternative words and phrases in parentheses) that I can't even read it. At this point, I recopy, or even better, type a draft. Sometimes seeing sentences typed makes their faults more apparent or helps highlight awkward patterns.

Finally, because I can't think of a better way to say anything, or because I have run out of time, I type a final draft, heave a fatalistic sigh, and turn to something else. It seems that my writing process involves tossing ideas about, finally managing to get something on paper, and then revising and revising it. This seems to be a fairly standard procedure for many writers, so maybe I have something in common with the rich and famous after all.

### Activity 3

**Answer the following questions based on the above passage.**

1. How do you characterize this writer's writing process? How recursive is it?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What insights into writing does this essay help you gain?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What specific advice does this essay contain about the various stages of the writing process?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Writing sample 2

### My Writing Process

As a Chinese student with 13 years of training in English, I think the biggest torture of learning English is to write an English essay, and the biggest joy is to read it again after the teacher checks it and gives it a high mark. Through all these

years' training, I have formed my particular writing process, which takes three steps: prewriting, drafting, and revising.

My prewriting consists of establishing a thesis and working out an outline. To find the thesis, I brainstorm for ideas. Then I go through the list of ideas and search for a theme I am interested in. Finally I develop a thesis from my ideas and make a rough outline. The time needed for prewriting depends on the type of essay and my familiarity with the topic, and it usually takes about 20 minutes to write an essay of 350 words.

At the drafting step, I expound my thesis by providing specific material. I always pay special attention to my introductory paragraph, because a good introduction attracts readers more than any other part of an essay. Before moving on to the second paragraph, I usually have denied two or three unsatisfactory introductions. The body of the essay is relatively easier to write. However, quite often, I cannot find an English word for my meaning. To achieve smoothness of writing, I make do with a Chinese equivalent, and when the paragraph comes to an end, I consult a Chinese-English dictionary as well as an English-English one. It often happens that my thinking gets stuck in the middle of drafting. If an immediate way out is impossible and if time permits, I will put my draft aside to do some relevant reading or divert my attention to something else. When I come back, I am in a better state of mind to find a resolution.

When the draft is finished, the only work left is revising. However, I put this task off for a few hours so that I can take a fresh look at my draft, reconsider the content, and discover and correct the mistakes in spelling, grammar, mechanics, and so on. When I finish revising once or twice, I hand in my essay as a final product.

My writing process takes great effort and a painfully long time, but it has rewarded me a lot during the past years.

#### ◦ Activity 4 ◦

**Answer the following questions based on the above two passages.**

1. What is the Chinese writer's writing process? How many stages does it contain?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What are the similarities and differences between the writing processes of the two writers?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What are the differences between your own writing process and those mentioned in the above two passages?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Summary: writing is rewriting

Writing is not a single-step linear process. Instead, it is a recursive process that includes different stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

Writing is rewriting. This is clearly stated by the American writing expert Donald M. Murray in his work *A Writer Teaches Writing*:

All effective writers know writing is rewriting. The inexperienced writer feels a revision is a failure. The amateur believes the writer is the person who can sit down and rip off an essay or a report. The professional writer knows better. Rewriting is what you do when you are a writer, for it is an essential part of the process of writing. It is the way in which you fit ideas into language.

As we stated earlier, it is not easy to distinctly divide the three stages of the writing process. Sometimes they come together. Think about your own writing. When writing a rough draft or answering an examination question, how many times have you combined writing and rewriting by crossing out a word, a sentence, or a paragraph and substituting a more appropriate choice? You have probably done so many times. You have probably also written sentences or paragraphs (writing) in your exploration of a subject (prewriting) and revised them on the spot (rewriting) before incorporating them into an essay. The fact that these steps frequently occur simultaneously reinforces the statement that writing is a recursive creative process that involves considerable trial and error as the piece of writing unfolds and takes shape.



## Writing assignments

- 1** Write an essay of about 300 words to describe your writing process. Use the “Questionnaire on the Writing Process” in Activity 2 as hints.
- 2** What was your first day of college classes like? How did you feel about it? Write an essay of about 300 words on this topic. Include specific examples to support your ideas. Pay attention to the different stages of your writing process.

# Unit review

## 写作过程

写作不是一个能够一次性完成的线性过程，而是一个交叉进行的循环过程，包括写前准备、写作和改写三个阶段。

## 写前准备阶段

写前准备指写作前的准备和计划工作，由三部分构成：评估读者期待和自己的写作意图，构思话题和制定计划。这三部分之间没有固定的先后顺序，各部分之间可自由切换。

## 写作阶段

写作阶段即撰写草稿的阶段。在这个阶段，写作者最重要的任务是集中精力将现有的思想写出来，不必过度纠结于措辞、句子结构或段落结构。

## 改写阶段

改写指对草稿进行修改和编辑。修改意味着针对草稿中不够完善的内容重新思考、规划，进而对写作内容进行调整或补充；编辑指订正措辞、句法、拼写、标点符号和稿件格式等方面的错误。

## 结论

写作是一个创造性的发现过程，写作者在不断试写、犯错、纠错和发现新思想与新素材的过程中实现自己的写作目的，因此，写作过程的三个阶段相互交叉、循环往复，直至写作者满意为止。