

Writing Process Strategies

Listed below are suggestions for teaching skills associated with the various stages of the writing process. Although the stages are presented here in a linear and sequential manner (for clarity), the act of writing is seldom this organized. For example, a student may prewrite, draft, and then abandon a piece of writing, only to start over again at the prewriting stage. This recursive process is more aligned with the way we think—back and forth across ideas. It is important to help students recognize their own processes for chronicling their thinking in writing, rather than impose a lock-step method that gets in their way. Be flexible as a writing teacher!

Stage 1: Prewriting (Individual and Collaborative)

The ten strategies in this section are listed in alphabetical order. Select which ones to use—and in which order—based on the demands of the specific writing task upon which your students are working. (It would be unusual to use all ten strategies for one writing assignment.)

Strategies marked with an * are essential for formal writing assignments.

****Choosing an Audience, Purpose, and Form***

Providing opportunities for students to write for different audiences and purposes greatly enhances the legitimacy of the writing process. Students should identify their audience, purpose, and form prior to or during their prewriting. All too often, students are lulled into the single-audience/single-purpose mindset that governs their writing: teacher–grade. By providing students with flexibility and choice in audience, purpose, and form, writing takes on the dimension of a real-world venture, and the decision-making process necessitated by such variety produces energetic revision and refreshing writing. Discussions that address audience, purpose, and form remind students of the importance of the choices they make as writers. (See Student Handout/Overhead Transparency 2.2.)

Audience: Other students, college admissions officers, family members, other teachers, the general public, etc.

Purpose: To persuade, to inform, to pass along family stories, to demonstrate understanding, to entertain, etc.

Form: Essay, letter, story, poem, diary, article, etc.

Clustering

Clustering is based on the premise that working with the natural rhythms of the brain to create writing produces work that is rich in meaning. It is a nonlinear brainstorming process which helps writers discover the ideas and patterns of organization that characterize strong writing. Clustering often produces material that is abundant in memories, metaphor, and wholeness, making it an exciting technique for prompting creative writing. Its application to analytical writing or test review is equally impressive.

To introduce students to the clustering process, choose a broad idea accessible to all students, write it on the board and draw a circle around it. (You might also want to distribute Student Handout/Overhead Transparency 2.3 at this time.) Good first-time nucleus words include: “Childhood,” “Time,” “Fear,” “Happiness,” and even “School.”



Next, direct students to do the following:

1. Write the nucleus word in the center of the page and draw a circle around it. (This gives the brain a visual pattern of what it will be doing with ideas.)
2. Record what comes to mind when you think of the word in the circle. Write down all of the words and phrases that you associate with the nucleus word or with the other words that you add. Circle each one and connect it to the nucleus or the part of the cluster that prompted it. Don't censor yourself! Write down everything that comes to mind, even if it seems random and unconnected to the nucleus.
3. Generate as many associations as you can.
4. At some point during your cluster, you may feel a sense of direction emerging. When you feel that shift from free association toward direction, you're ready to write. If you don't feel a sense of direction, re-visit your completed cluster and highlight the ideas that seem most important to you at the moment.
5. Doing a quickwrite is a good next step. Write for 5–10 minutes about the highlighted ideas or emerging thoughts. Use words/ideas from the cluster that seem related and relevant.

Have students share their cluster writing and quickwrites with a partner, group, or the entire class. This follow-up exposes students to the variety of ideas and range of possibilities that clustering produces.

It is at step 4 that tidy timelines often go awry. Not all students will be ready for the quickwrite at the same time, so flexibility is needed. As some students move ahead with the quickwrite, you may need to work with others who are stuck in the idea-generation stage.

Use technology! Students enjoy using the *Inspiration* program to generate clusters and outlines. (See www.inspiration.com.) They also love to do quickwrites on the computer.

For an in-depth guide to clustering, see *Writing the Natural Way*, by Gabriele Rico (Los Angeles: St. Martin's Press, 1983).



Discussion

Students who have frequent opportunities to talk about their thinking are more likely to generate rich, more creatively written work. Discussion can be used at any point to help students clarify, explain, and expand their thinking and writing. Struggling writers really benefit from discussion as it helps them to generate and “try out” ideas before they commit them to paper. Discussion suggestions include the following:

- Have students create a cluster and a quickwrite for their initial ideas and then move into groups of three to share and compare their work. After the discussion, have students add to their quickwrites to capture any new ideas.
- Have students meet in small groups to determine the audience, purpose, and form for their papers. Later, students with a common audience can meet in groups to discuss how they are drafting their papers to address that audience.
- Have students meet in groups to discuss the research they are collecting for their papers and to share sources/compare notes. They might also discuss how to incorporate their research into their writing, when to paraphrase, when to quote, etc.
- Have students meet to discuss drawings or quickwrites from a visualization activity and help each other figure out what is most important in each of the drawings/quickwrites.
- Have students meet to discuss options for organizing their papers.

Guided Critiques

Allowing students to share with each other the various stages of the prewriting process helps them see the range of ideas prompted by a topic, develop greater insight into the requirements of a topic, and identify strengths and weaknesses in one another’s work that can shape additional writing. The following are two effective approaches to critiquing:

- Have the writer “tell the paper” from his/her prewriting notes. The listener(s) responds orally, stating what is clear or unclear, what is especially good, and what can be improved. The listener(s) should be as specific as possible in formulating responses. It can be very helpful to tape listener’s comments and/or have a recorder write down ideas for the writer.
- Have students respond in writing to each other’s prewriting, guided by specific questions you have prepared.

Suggested questions: “What patterns do you see in the prewriting that seem important?” “What main idea(s) seem to come from this prewriting?” “If you were to outline the main and supporting ideas from this prewriting (knowing that you won’t use everything in the prewriting), what would the outline look like?” “What questions can you ask the writer to prompt him/her to add more to his/her prewriting?”



Guided Visualization

Use specific questions to prompt your students to explore their ideas and evaluate their approach to a topic. All-purpose questions like “What more do I need to know about this topic?” may help students find direction in their approach to writing. Questions more specific to particular topics may provide students with possible approaches they have not yet considered. (See examples below.) It is often helpful to have students relax and close their eyes while listening to—and thinking about—your questions. At the end of the guided visualization, they can open their eyes and quickwrite their thoughts.

A few examples:

- **Writing topic: *biography*.** (Students should have paper and pencil on their desks and be ready to write.) Ask students to relax and close their eyes. Remind them of the writing assignment and tell them to picture the person son they’ve chosen for their biography. Ask a series of questions to help your students visualize their person more clearly, e.g., “What does your person look like?” “What does he or she ‘sound’ like—can you hear his/her voice?” “What makes this person special?” Ask students to open their eyes and—without talking— draw or write all the ideas they can remember from their visualization.
- **Writing topic: *argument*.** (Students should have paper or a graphic organizer handout and pencil ready on their desks.) Ask students to relax and close their eyes. Remind them of the writing assignment and tell them to picture themselves explaining their position on their topic to an audience. Ask a series of questions to help your students clarify their position and anticipate how others might disagree with their ideas. Examples: “What are the two major points in your argument that you are trying to explain to your audience?” “What do you look like as you explain these points?” “Are you passionate, sad, angry, happy?” “Why?” “What is your audience saying to you as they disagree?” “Why do they disagree with you?” Ask students to open their eyes and—without talking—draw, write, or complete a graphic organizer of all the ideas they can remember from their visualization.
- **Variation:** Some students get lost if the teacher asks too many questions during the visualization. To accommodate these students, try the following variation: Ask students to close their eyes and relax. Ask one question and give students a few seconds to think/visualize; then have students write or draw in response to the question. Continue with several more questions.

Listing and Grouping

The purpose of listing is to generate and organize ideas in a nonjudgmental, exploratory manner. Listing also helps students recall what they already know about a topic and discover what they may need to find out about it. Listing alone sometimes suffices as a prewriting activity. There may be other occasions when students use their lists to group items. Grouping items under headings such as “Order of Importance,” “Chronology,” and “Topic/Subtopic” may be useful to students as they consider how to organize their information.



For example, students who are writing a biography might be asked to generate a list of the person's traits. The list might look like this:

- Male
- Brown hair
- Brown eyes
- Tall
- Always wears tennis shoes and white socks
- Loves his sister
- Drives a blue Honda Civic with a smashed front bumper
- Laughs a lot
- Caring
- Likes to read magazines
- 17 years old
- Hates spaghetti
- Loves tacos
- Wants to be an electrical engineer
- Wants to go to college out of state
- Has tons of CDs

Using this list, the student can then come up with categories for grouping similar ideas:

Example

Physical traits: male, brown hair, brown eyes, tall, tennis shoes/white socks, 17 years old

Likes/dislikes: magazines, spaghetti, tacos

Emotional traits: loves his sister, caring, laughs a lot **Goals:** college, engineer

Things he owns: Honda Civic, CD's

Using these categories, the student can determine a possible organizational scheme and decide what to include or exclude.

***Models**

Models of the type of writing in which students are engaged are enormously powerful tools that provide students with ideas about how to approach, structure, and enrich a piece of writing. Published works, student papers from previous classes, and teacher writing are fine sources for models. Good published works can be found in almost any anthology of essays. In addition to samples collected from your own students, other works can be found in student publications such as *Merlyn's Pen* and online at <http://english.unitechnology.ac.nz/>. Guided reading of models and follow-up discussions enhance what students derive from reviewing the works of others.



The following approaches work well:

- Give each student a copy of the model to review as you project the model as an overhead transparency. Have students look at various attributes of the writing, focusing on those areas you want to highlight for instruction. Underline or highlight the attributes on the overhead transparency and have students mark their models. For example, if the goal is to show students how to write a descriptive biography, then read a biography model with students, highlighting the descriptive attributes of the work as you go.

Other possible features to highlight include:

- How the piece is organized
 - How the writer introduces the piece and/or concludes it
 - Where the thesis is located and how it is written
 - Wording that is especially effective
 - How the writer transitions from paragraph to paragraph
 - How quotations are embedded in the paper
 - How the writer interprets each quotation and uses it as evidence
 - Where topic sentences are located in the paper and how they are worded
 - How the writer uses a variety of sentence lengths and styles
- Give each student a copy of the model and a copy of the writing assignment rubric. Review the criteria on the rubric to be sure students understand them all. Have students work in small groups of 3–4 to examine the model, looking for examples of the criteria on the rubric. For example, if the rubric identifies a strong thesis statement as an element of an effective paper, then students would look for the model’s thesis statement and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. This process allows students to see real examples of the rubric criteria before they start writing their own papers. It also gives them an opportunity to internalize the expectations for the writing assignment.

****Planning***

Planning will help students develop a logical order for presenting their ideas. Prior to drafting, students should review their prewriting and—keeping in mind their audience, purpose, and form—determine an organizational scheme. Their work could be organized by chronology, importance, or some other scheme. Strategies like outlining, listing, and grouping, as well as individual conferences with classmates and teachers, can help students determine the best organizational scheme for their papers.



Activities to help students understand how to organize include the following:

- Share and discuss different organizational schemes with students. What does it mean to organize by chronology (time sequence), by order of importance, by main idea and sub-ideas, or by different characteristics? Demonstrate, or develop with students, a variety of graphic organizers that show these organizational schemes in a writing assignment.
- Have the whole class create several possible organizational schemes for the same topic. This practice helps students see that writing on the same topic can be organized in many different ways; it also helps them practice manipulating their ideas into different organizational patterns.
- Give small groups of students a particular organizational scheme into which they must fit their topic. Have students discuss their results, struggles, and logic in their groups and then share with the class. This collaboration will help them determine which organizational scheme seems most useful, given a particular writing assignment.
- Have students work individually to develop several organizational ideas for their own papers. Then encourage them to select the organizational scheme that seems most logical and justify why. Have them share this information in small groups or with the class.
- Have students work together in small groups or with partners on the same topic/assignment. Instruct them to collaboratively develop an organizational plan for their specific topic/writing focus. This activity is beneficial for reluctant/struggling writers and will give you time to work with small groups or individuals, as needed.
- Students benefit greatly from activities which afford them the opportunity to dabble with different organizational schemes for the same topic and/or different organizational schemes for different topics. They are generally amazed when they discover that several options exist; they are equally amazed when one or two of those schemes make the most sense!

Quickwriting

Quickwriting is essentially timed freewriting on a specific topic. Given a prompt, students write nonstop for approximately 5–10 minutes. Their pens should not leave the paper. If students run out of ideas, encourage them to rewrite the last word or phrase until a new idea weaves its way into their work. Quickwriting allows students to explore ideas without fear of criticism and without the early editing that can inhibit expression.



Writing encourages writing. Because it reduces anxiety about writing, quickwriting is an excellent tool for prompting the thought and focus central to the entire writing process. Create quickwrite prompts to fit the specific needs of your students' writing assignment. (See examples below.)

Examples

Writing Task:	<i>Biography</i>
Quickwrite Prompt:	<i>(Use after a guided visualization where students have closed their eyes and imagined the person about whom they are writing.) Write down all the traits you can think of about your person and explain why this person is important to you.</i>
Writing Task:	<i>Argument</i>
Quickwrite Prompt:	<i>(Use after students have identified their position on a topic.) Imagine that you are someone who does NOT agree with the position you've just identified. Why do you not agree with it? What makes you disagree? What experiences have you had that make you disagree?</i>
Writing Task:	<i>Autobiography</i>
Quickwrite Prompt:	<i>How would your parents or other family members describe you to another person? Why would they give these descriptions?</i>

Reading and Research

Often a writing task is related to a reading or research task with the reading or research serving as a springboard for the writing. For example, a literary analysis paper is rooted in a novel, short story, poem, etc. A controversial issue paper would have to take into account multiple perspectives on an issue and would require some research. The research and reading processes must be fully supported with time and instruction in order for students to be able to ultimately use their experiences for writing. Students should know what the writing task is before they embark on their reading or research. They must also learn how to read closely for details they might use in their writing and how to research effectively to generate appropriate material for their writing. These experiences are best done in collaboration with other students so they have the opportunity to share processes and ideas and support one another's developing understanding of the text or a topic. Depending on the writing task, reading and research can take a significant amount of time.

