



How I Write by Erin

My writing process is always evolving. When I was less experienced, my tendency was to get lost in the research process and then write my assignments in one fell swoop under the pressure of a looming deadline (usually very late at night!). This caused unnecessary stress and left little time for revisions.

Over the years, I've worked hard to develop writing habits to minimize this last minute 'crunch,' and I have to say, it has made me a stronger writer and has made the process much more enjoyable. I've broken my process into a series of steps (below). Hopefully some of these stages will be useful to you!

Getting Started

When tackling a piece of writing, the very first thing I do is think about what I'm trying to accomplish. If I'm writing something for a class, I will read over the assignment outline very carefully and make a point form list of what is required in the assignment (sort of like a "To Do List"). I like to have a clear purpose right from the start to keep my writing process focused. If there are many topics to choose from, I'll identify which ones I find most interesting and then jot down some preliminary ideas to get a sense of what topic I have the most to say about.

Conducting Research

Now that I have a rough idea of my topic and the general purpose of my writing, I'll start to conduct some preliminary research. Before I get too deep into the assignment, I want to make sure I'll be able to find enough information on my topic. I start by casting a wide net to get a general idea of my topic. I'll typically conduct several searches using the library database, trying out different search terms. Before reading a source, I'll review the abstract or skim the body of the text to make sure it's relevant. Once I have a general grasp of my topic, I try to establish a more specific focus.

At this stage I start to develop a working thesis (or purpose statement, depending on the assignment). This is a draft statement that outlines what I plan to argue, analyze, or examine in my paper. I call it a 'working' statement because it will usually evolve throughout the research and writing process. Having a draft statement allows me to be more efficient with my research. I love conducting research, so it's very easy for me to get stuck in this stage of the writing process. Having a game plan helps me maintain forward momentum and avoid too many tangents.

Over the years, I've developed a note-taking system that helps me organize my sources and keep track of my ideas. I always type the full bibliographic citation at the top of the page, that way there's no last minute searches for citation information. As I review my sources, I paraphrase important ideas or facts that I think will be useful in supporting my working thesis or purpose statement. I always include the page numbers, so it's easy to keep track of where the information came from. When I come across a key passage, I carefully record it as a direct quotation in case I want to quote the author in my paper.

Reviewing sources will also trigger my own ideas or questions. These initial thoughts can be incredibly useful, but it's easy to forget them if I don't jot them down. I italicize my own ideas so that they're clearly separated in my notes to avoid accidental plagiarism.

Pre-Writing and Planning

Before I can start writing a draft of my paper, I need to take some time to organize my ideas and research. At this point, I'll review my research notes with my initial italicized comments, then I'll do some rough writing that no one will read but me. This is sort of like a dry run, which helps me reflect on my research and sort out my ideas. This pre-writing stage might take the form of bullet points, sentences, or complete paragraphs. The important part is that I'm jotting my ideas down on paper and reflecting and elaborating upon them. This rough writing helps me identify my main ideas.

From this pre-writing, I will create a mind map, so I can see all of the elements of my argument, and how they might fit together. I'll often create several mind maps before I'm ready to re-organize my ideas and research in a more linear way, under major headings. The headings help me identify the main sections of my paper. I then ask: do these sections look balanced? Do any of these sections need more research? At this point, I will update my working thesis/purpose statement. I will then develop my linear map into a full outline that includes the research I will be using to support my arguments. Once I have an outline, I'm ready to start creating my first draft.

Writing

I find the writing stage the most challenging. I tend to edit when I write, which can really hinder the flow of ideas. When I find myself staring at a blank page or editing the same paragraph over and over, I will set a timer for 20 or 30 minutes and start writing the old fashioned way: pen on paper. It's easy to revise quickly on the computer, so writing by hand for a limited amount of time forces me to press forward avoiding premature edits. The more words I can get on the page, the more easily they tend to flow!

When I first started tackling essays, I would try to write them in one sitting, which wasn't very enjoyable. Over the years I've learned I work best in short spurts, so it's important I start writing as soon as possible so I can spread out the writing process. This helps reduce stress.

Revising

Once I have a draft of my paper, I like to take a break and return to my writing with fresh eyes. I start the revision process by examining the overall structure. Is my argument clear? Are the sections presented in a logical order? Are my claims supported? As I read through my draft, I try to imagine the questions an outside reader might ask.

When I'm happy with the big picture, I turn my attention to the smaller details like awkward sentences or ambiguous wording. For my final edits I like to work from a hard copy, reading my paper aloud. This forces me to check over my work more slowly, helping me catch typos, repetitive language, and grammatical errors. I'm always tinkering with word choice, so this process tends to last until an external deadline makes me stop. Once I've submitted my work, I like to do something I really enjoy to celebrate. Writing is hard work and it's important to take the time to celebrate a job well done.