

# Writing is a Process

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Hello everyone. I'm Vicki, with the Purdue Writing Lab. Welcome to the second video in our Introduction to Graduate Writing Series. Today we will be talking about writing as a process. Before we dive into our content, take a few minutes to jot some notes about your own process. When you are faced with a writing assignment, what do you typically do? How do you go from assignment to submission? Pause this video while you work. [pause for 15 seconds] Welcome back.

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Often, when we think about writing, we think about the document itself, the words on the page, the finished product, the thing that gets a grade. As a result of this mindset, writers often procrastinate on their projects, then binge write them--maybe even the night before. Their writing process includes very few steps: write, proofread, submit. While this may work well for short pieces such as reflections on class readings, this sort of process will not work well for longer, more sustained writing like journal articles or dissertations.

For writing at the graduate level, it is important to realize that "writing" is more than just the words on the page. It includes thinking, talking, researching, revising, etc.

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The work varies by stage. For example, early stages of writing might include conversations with other people, which we'll talk more about in the "Writing is a Social Endeavor" video later in the series. Later stages of writing might include rethinking your overall organization, if it doesn't seem to be working, or talking to someone about the writing to get feedback.

It is important to note that research and writing are not two separate things; they interconnect. The work of writing includes searching the field's literature, talking to people, collecting and analyzing data, making outlines, drafting, revising, and editing. These aspects of writing do not necessarily take place in a certain order, and you will likely revisit various aspects multiple times over the course of writing one document. For example, you might read some research to write up your literature review, then write the draft, then revise it. During revising, you might realize you need to identify some other sources to support what you are saying, so you return to collecting and reading scholarship in the field. You might find it helpful to return to conversation with others in your field as a way to collect more source material for use in the literature review.

All this process might seem a bit circular: write, talk, revise, think, write, think, revise, etc. But the end of the process is still a product--hopefully one that has reached a caliber of writing that will be accepted for publication in the journals in your field, so it is worth the effort.

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Before we move on to look at some specifics of process, it's worth commenting on the differences between revising and editing. It's common for inexperienced writers to equate the two. For novice writers, revising often means checking for errors before they turn in the final paper. As a graduate writer, you'll find it useful to think about revising and editing as two different aspects of the writing process. Revising is like renovation; editing is like redecorating. When you revise, you might demolish, rebuild, add entirely new material, completely restructure an argument. When you edit, you are making cosmetic changes: fixing grammar errors, rewriting a sentence to make it more clear, adjusting the format. Given the difference between revising and editing, I'd suggest waiting to edit until the very end of your process, right before you submit. If you are doing major revision, those sentences you need to edit may very well vanish entirely.

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We can think about the writing process at the document level, the idea level, and the identity level.

At the document level, the writing process looks a lot like what we just talked about. The various aspects of writing (thinking, researching, drafting, revising, discussing) happen at various times and in various orders or various combinations, often multiple times for one paper. At the graduate level, this process might include submitting the article to journals, getting reviewer feedback, revising, and resubmitting.

You might pause the video here to look at the notes you jotted earlier about your own writing process to date. How has it been similar to or different from what I described on the last slide? If you can identify places where your process has differed, you will be in good shape to approach the process of graduate-level writing. [pause 10 seconds]

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When we think about process at the document level, it is useful to consider how people approach writing. Sometimes writers spend significant amounts of time thinking and then they transcribe their thoughts onto the page. For short papers, this sometimes means that little revision is needed. For longer papers such as a 20-page journal article or a 200-page dissertation, it's important to note that keeping the entire thought process in one's head can be difficult if not impossible. Sometimes writers who think first and then write will find outlines useful.

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A second way people approach writing is what we might call a "write to think" model. Writers have a general topic and perhaps some data already. They may have read some scholarship, but they don't necessarily know exactly what they think of it all or exactly what they want to say or how it all relates. The result will be writing that moves the **writer** into a position or point rather than writing that is meant to communicate clearly to a **reader**. Sometimes this is called a zero draft, and it may be

nothing more than a big chunk of freewriting. It often lacks clear organization, and most reader-helps such as topic sentences or transitions may come at the ends of paragraphs rather than the beginnings. The writer has used the writing to figure out what they want to say. A zero draft will need significant revision in order to communicate clearly to a reader.

Neither of these approaches to tackling a document is superior to the other, and, in fact, writers may use both approaches, depending on the particular writing task, the timeline for completion, or their own familiarity with the material. The important point for you, today, is that both of these are writing process at the document level, and both come with drawbacks or advantages. Which you use is less important than that you understand what the next steps might be after writing in one fashion or the other.

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In addition to thinking about process at the document level, we can also think about process at the idea level. Ideas develop over time. What you start with when first approaching a research or writing project may not be what you end up with. For instance, as you read more of the scholarly literature, you may find that what you thought was the gap has shifted slightly because of work that other scholars have already done. As a result, your idea for a project might need to adjust.

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Scholars often work on one larger idea through multiple research projects, conference presentations, articles, etc. This contributes to process at the identity level, which we will talk about in the next section. These iterations of the “one larger idea” help to hone the topic over time--it may be narrowed, expanded, acquire a shifted focus, or become aligned with a different position than the writer originally started with.

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Sometimes these shifts occur during writing. Remember the “write to think” option that we talked about previously. Because the act of writing can help hone the idea over time, it is a good idea to start writing early in any research project. Don’t wait until the very end when all the data has been collected to start writing. Writing is not just the last step in any research project; it should be part of the process throughout.

So how do you make writing part of the entire research project process? When you are first considering a particular research project, you might write about your thoughts--what do you already know from the literature, what do you wonder about, what seems to be missing, how might you address it, and what will be the difficulties. You can write some portions of an article before you’ve collected data. For instance, once your method has been determined, you might write up the methods section. But you can also write about your data as you collect it. This helps to preserve your thoughts as you go, and it also helps you think about what context you’ll need to include for readers, for instance in the literature review. It’s a good place to collect questions that arise as you look at what the data

seem to be telling you, which might lead to directions for further research or might send you back to the literature of the field for answers.

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As you work with the writing process, you will also be developing your identity as a scholar in your field of study. You will be learning how to be a member of a group of scholars. We talked in the first vidcast, *Writing is a Conversation*, about how to join the scholarly conversation through your writing. As you do this, as you write within your field, you'll want to be paying attention to how the writing process works at the identity level.

For instance, as you work on coursework, do you think about a writing assignment as writing this particular paper, on this particular topic, for this particular class, to get a grade and move on? Or do you approach it as a scholar, as a researcher and not as a student? In other words, are you thinking about how this paper fits into the overall trajectory of your potential research? How does it fit with your research interests? Can the assignment be tailored to further those research interests? Even though you are still a student, you are also a scholar in your field. You'll want to approach writing--whether assigned or not--from the perspective of a scholar.

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This means that you'll also want to think of both the research project and the writing of it as a piece of your lifetime work (or in this case, the work of your graduate years) and not just as an individual document. You might start with a particular project, but each additional project you undertake will likely develop from what came before. The jigsaw puzzle pieces of your graduate career may not form a straight line, but ideally they will all connect in some way.

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We've covered a lot of ground in this vidcast, and you may be wondering, "yes, but what does that look like in actual practice?" So before we conclude, I want to talk a little bit about habits you can form to support the writing process at all levels.

To begin, you'll want to create a writing habit. Write on a regular basis, even if you don't have a particular project that you are working on. For instance, you might spend some time every day writing your thoughts about the research you are doing or the things you are learning in classes. The job of scholar requires the dissemination of new work and, in many cases, this means in writing; hence, the job of scholar is that of writer. Make writing a habit and think of yourself as a writer now, while you are just getting started.

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Next, in order to form a writing habit, you'll likely want to track your work in some way. This can be done through time-based methods or words-based methods. For a time-based method, you choose a

certain amount of time to dedicate to writing. This might be 15-minutes a day for the whole week, 2-hours per week total, or some other amount that works with your schedule and your energy level. To form a habit, it is important to stick to whatever schedule you set. Since writing is an important part of your career, your writing time should be protected.

A words-based method works in a similar manner to the time-based method in terms of setting your schedule, but it requires that you set a certain number of words to write every day or weekly rather than a certain amount of time to spend writing. You can find more details about these methods and others in the Purdue OWL handout entitled “Staying Productive for Long Writing Tasks.” [\[include the link somewhere\]](#)

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In addition to making writing a habit right from the beginning, you’ll want to talk with your peers, colleagues, advisors, and mentors about writing as writing. It’s common to talk about the **content** of what you are writing. You’ll want to be sure to move the conversations to the **writing** itself. Talk about your process, your successes, your struggles, questions you have, strategies you wish you had, etc. For instance, while you might talk about content and organization (should this topic come before or after the other one in my literature review), you can also talk about the writing itself, about how a writer can make organization clear to a reader (if I’m the one writing, I know how these two things connect, but how do I show that to a reader without just saying “here’s how these things connect.” Or is it ok to be that blatant in writing for my field?).

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Lastly, make it a priority to receive feedback multiple times per document. In the early stages of a document, you’ll primarily want feedback that focuses on the ideas, methodology, structure, etc. At the end of the process, you’ll want to focus more on final proofreading and formatting. In the middle, your concern will be with content and clarity. Receiving feedback multiple times throughout the process of a single document allows you to get a breadth of feedback at the times that are most relevant to the work you are doing at that moment.

You can also get feedback from multiple people. You can get feedback from disciplinary insiders such as your advisor or your labmates, but you can also get it from disciplinary outsiders such as friends in other disciplines. We’ll talk more about feedback in the next vidcast, Writing is a Social Endeavor. For those of you who are affiliated with Purdue’s West Lafayette campus, you can get feedback on any document at any stage from the Writing Lab. If you are not at Purdue, check out the writing center at your own institution for help.

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Before we wrap up, pause this video for 10 minutes to write down your plan for developing writing process habits. When will you write on a regular basis and how will you track your progress? Who will you approach for insider and outsider feedback? [pause for 15 seconds]

Welcome back. I hope you are looking forward to implementing your writing habit plan.

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As you move forward in your graduate career, remember to think of yourself as a writer and to think of writing as a process. Create some writing process habits now and by the time you reach the thesis or dissertation years you'll be prepared to handle such a long-term research and writing project.

Thank you for joining me today. If you are interested in more information about graduate writing, check out the other vidcasts in the Introduction to Graduate Writing Series. If you are further along in your program, you might find our Intensive Writing Experience for thesis and dissertation writers of use. All materials for that program are available on the Purdue OWL. [[link](#)]

Happy Writing, Everyone!

