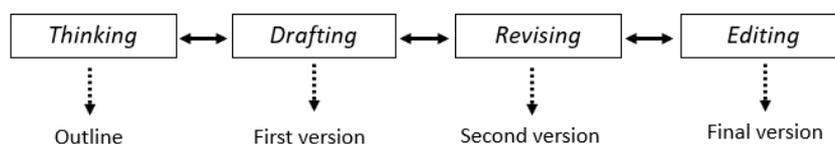


Academic writing: the writing process

How do you approach a writing task? Which steps should you go through and what do you have to think about before you start writing? It is important to know that writing a paper (or report, thesis, etc) is a process. You have to think before you start writing, and your first version is not the version that you hand in. The writing process can start when you have a topic and a research question. These are the phases; the dotted arrows indicate the result of each phase:



These phases apply to all types of writing tasks. All of these phases are important. Going through the phases in this order makes the process more efficient; it may prevent you from getting stuck or having to delete section that turn out be not relevant. However, as the two-sided arrows indicate, this is not a linear process. You will most likely go back and forth between the phases. These phases can be applied to the entire paper, but also to each part or chapter separately. Different parts of your text can be in different writing phases.

Thinking

A writing task starts with thinking. First, you need to know what you will be writing about: your topic, the problem you will be addressing, your research question. You will probably need to do some reading for this. Read the assignment carefully, and check the criteria or rubric that will be used to grade your paper. Once you have a description of the problem and research question, you can start thinking about **the purpose, type of research question, and target audience** (see handout 'Purpose and target audience'). This will help you decide on the content, structure, and form of your text. Combined with the content of the research question, this results in the main idea behind your report:

Purpose + audience + research question =
Main idea behind your report

"I want to [purpose] [audience] about [research question]"

Next, think about how you are going to approach this. What is going to be your line of reasoning, or **story line**? For example, if your research question is "What are the possible effects of a Western vegan dietary pattern on female fertility?" your story line could be that you are first going to investigate which dietary deficiencies are common in vegan women, and then investigate the relationship between those deficiencies and female fertility. This general story line will help you focus and stick to the topic, find relevant information, and structure the information in your report.

Then you can start **finding and selecting relevant information**. Selecting is important, because you won't have the time to read everything you find. Don't reading everything in detail just yet, but make an overview of the information you have, and start organizing the information. Depending on the problem, research question, aim, and available information, you can decide on a logical way to **organize the information**. For example, you could use a thematic organizing principle, or geographical, chronological, methodological, from problem to solution, or from options with pros and cons to a decision.

The next step is to make an **outline** for your paper. An outline is an overview of the content and structure of your paper (which topics will be covered in which chapters, sections, or parts), that you can use as a blueprint or map when writing your paper. It can look like a table of contents without page numbers, but it can also look like a diagram.

Box 1. Make a plan

Completing a writing task on time is a complex task that required many skills. It helps to divide the task into smaller subtasks and focus on one step at the time. Smaller and more concrete subtasks result in less procrastination. "Today, I'm going to make an outline" works much better than "Today, I'm going to work on the paper again".

Drafting

Write your (provisional) heading and subheadings, and start writing according to the outline you created. Start reading the most relevant sources first, and put the relevant information at the appropriate places in your report. Basically, you will be reading and writing at the same time. If you try to read everything first, you will start to forget things or mix things up. You don't have to read all sources from beginning to end. Based on your story line and outline, you know what information you need. While reading, you may also run into new relevant sources or search terms.

In the drafting phase, your mantra should be: **"Production over Perfection"**. The most important thing is that you are writing. It doesn't matter how well it's written, so don't focus on details like grammar and spelling. No one is going to read your first draft, except yourself. This means you can also write down any ideas you have about possible interpretations, explanations, solutions; whatever is relevant for your research question and story line.

Write in your own words, or mark sections that you still have to re-write in your own words. Keep track of the sources you use, but don't worry about the referencing style yet.

A paper is often not written chronologically. Once you have the description of the problem, research question, and outline, there is no need to write the introduction first. It is usually best to start with a part that is relatively easy to write, fresh in your mind, or that you are most excited about. This can be the methods, results, or section on your favorite topic.

Revising

In the revising phase, you re-read your text in order to improve it. You are writing the second version, and now it does matter how well things are written. Keep your readers in mind, you are not writing for yourself. Focus on larger elements such as the structure, line of reasoning, and clarity of your text; see Box 2 for examples.

There are several strategies to revise your paper. You can just re-read your paper to **detect, diagnose, and repair potential problems**. When you detect a section that may be problematic, you diagnose what exactly the problem is and what causes it, and then try to fix it. For example: when a paragraph is

not clear, this could be because there is no interpretation or conclusion at the end, and you can fix this by adding a closing sentence.

You can also re-read the paper while focusing on one aspect that is very important for the writing assignment, or that you know is not your strong suit; for example: are your arguments clear, convincing, and supported by evidence; or do you paraphrase or summarize external sources correctly. If there are criteria or a rubric for the writing assignment, you can use this to determine what to focus on.

Reverse outlining is a commonly used strategy to improve the general structure and paragraphs; several examples and instructions can be found online (see suggestions for further reading).

Asking for **feedback** is also a common in this phase. Sometimes you get feedback from a teacher or other student as part of the course, but if not, you can ask a fellow student for feedback. Make sure your reviewer knows what to look for: give instructions on what to focus on, or ask questions, see Box 2.

Box 2. Examples of revision topics/questions

- Is the line of reasoning clear and consistent throughout the text?
- What information is redundant or missing?
- Does the conclusion answer the research question?
- Do all headings match the content of that chapter or section?
- Can you replace text by a table or figure, or the other way around?
- Do all paragraphs have one topic or message, and a topic sentence and closing sentence?
- Are transitions clear; do you use appropriate signaling words?
- Have you written in your own words, and do you cite sources when needed?
- Do you use appropriate terminology in a consistent way?
- Is the writing style appropriate for the intended audience? Is everything clear?

You can do several revision rounds, but always do at least one. After revising all chapters or parts, don't forget to also focus on the connections and transitions between the chapters or parts. You are done revising when you are happy with the content, general structure, paragraphs, and formulations.

Editing

This is where you make the final improvements, usually at a sentence level. When re-reading your paper in this phase, try to focus on grammar, spelling, and punctuation instead of content. For this, it helps to print out your paper: it is easier to spot mistakes on paper than on a computer screen. If you are not sure whether a sentence is correct or easy to read, try reading it out loud. If you struggle, your reader will also struggle with it, so you have to rephrase the sentence. Reading out loud will also tell you where you may need punctuation: observe where you need to pause briefly in order to read the sentence correctly. Don't forget to pay attention to the citing and referencing style, and the layout of the text and tables/figures.

In this phase, you can ask anyone to proofread your paper, it doesn't have to be someone who understands the content. Don't forget to give your proofreader instructions on what to focus on.

Group work and the writing process

A group paper follows the same phases as an individual paper, but there are some aspects that require more attention. It is important to do the thinking steps together as a group, so that you all have the exact same idea about the aim, problem definition, research question. etc. When the outline is finished, you can divide the writing work. It is best to have all group members write a part of the paper. You all need to practice to improve your writing.

While you each write a different part of the paper, you will need to communicate a lot. Not only about the content, but also about the tone and writing style, layout of paragraphs (indent or blank line?), layout of tables and figures, the style of the references, layout of subheadings, use of terminology and abbreviations, etc. In addition, you can share relevant information such as search terms and important sources or findings.

Peer review is easy to organize in group projects, and has the added benefit of familiarizing all group members with the entire paper. Special attention needs to be paid to merging all parts of the report together. The end result should be a coherent paper, that is consistent in terms of writing style and layout. It works best to make one group member responsible for the final editing.

Suggestions for further reading

About the writing process

A book about the writing process and writing strategies, with lots of information about the thinking phase:

Jong, J. de. (2017). Effective strategies for academic writing. Uitgeverij Coutinho.

E-book available at WUR Library:

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1562641>

Purdue Online Writing Lab (2021). https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/invention_starting_the_writing_process.html

About Reverse outlining

Reverse outlining is a revision technique in which you make an outline based on the text you have written. This will help you see the structure of the text more clearly, and whether you have covered all topics you intended to cover. It will also help you see which paragraphs can be improved. A lot of information about reverse outlining can be found online, including instructions and examples. Some sources:

<https://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/02/09/reverse-outlines/>

Or if you prefer a clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZxphibAqb4>



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