



The Process of Writing

By Kathleen Hern

And, for god's sake, don't even think about grammar and spelling.

Your goal at this stage is to create and discover. Generate a wealth of material, more than you could possibly use, so that you can later select what's best. If you rush this part of the process, you are shutting down an opportunity to learn, and your paper will probably be less insightful than it might have been.

Don't get hung up on organization or transitions when you are brainstorming because it's not even your paper yet — it's simply the raw material you will build your paper from. And put a gag on the critic inside your head who says things like "that's so simplistic," "you've never been able to write," and "your thoughts are all over the place."

In her wonderful book "Writing Down the Bones," Natalie Goldberg stresses that it's important to keep your creator and your editor separated when you write. Having an editor hover-

To keep my editor at bay, I repeat a simple phrase to myself over and over: "This is only a draft." Doing this frees me up to write more quickly and smoothly — I generate two fast pages of material, rather than one grammatically flawless but anguished paragraph. And though there will certainly be rough spots on those two pages, I know that I can clean them up later.

Then, after letting my creator run free for a while, I bring the editor back out to assess how things are going: Am I fulfilling the assignment? Is my topic focussed enough? What areas seem scattered? Am I leaving out anything important? What should I do next? At this stage of editing, I focus on the more fundamental issues of organization, clarity, and idea development, rather than putting much energy into polishing up individual sentences.

I follow this pattern of alternating between creator and editor until I finish the project. Toward the end, as the overall structure becomes

The following is a reprint of one of last year's columns, on a topic essential to becoming a stronger writer.

To begin writing this column, I sat down at the computer and wrote everything that came to mind on my topic. I typed as quickly as I could, racing to capture my ideas before they dissolved, and slapping the return bar a couple of times whenever something new occurred to me.

The burst of writing I ended up with wasn't even close to something I could hand in. It had the disconnected, manic quality of the conversation an insane person has with herself while sitting next to you on the bus. There were typos and half-expressed thoughts, atrocious punctuation, and three different attempts at a beginning, none of which was very good.

But it was exactly what I needed — material to work with.

Sometimes students arrive at the Academic Support Center overwhelmed and defeated, almost convinced their case is hopeless and having come to me as their last resort.

But the situation is rarely as dire as people think. I've found that one of the most common problems people have with their writing is one of unrealistic expectations. They believe that thoughts should flow from their brains to their pens to their paper in perfect, finished form, like spun gold from a fairy tale loom. And when it doesn't work that way, they panic.

Good writing goes through many different stages before it reaches its final form — from freestyle brainstorming through the last nit-picky semi-colon adjustment. This is true for experienced writers and novices alike

And what a lot of JFKU students don't realize is that it is essential, especially during the earlier stages of your writing, to make a mess.

Before you start worrying about your organization or determining a thesis statement, let yourself play with ideas. Write down everything that comes to mind, no matter how silly it may seem. Ask yourself questions about the topic and try to answer them. Make lists. Draw diagrams.

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ing over your shoulder when you are trying to create will either shut you down entirely or make your process so slow and agonizing that you may never want to do it again.

When I write, I alternate between the two roles. After I've done a fair amount of brainstorming, I step back and look over what I've created with a critical, editing eye. I try to put my finger on what my main point is and how all the different parts fit together, and I sketch out a rough outline.

Then, once I've got a plan of action for my writing, I get back into my creator mode and begin drafting. At this stage I'm no longer generating raw material for the piece, I'm writing the piece itself. But I still need to lock my editor in a soundproof compartment at the other side of my brain. Like most people, if I worry too much about the final product when I'm writing, I just can't write. Even if I've done extensive brainstorming and a decent outline, it's not going to be flawless on the first try.

solid and the ideas seem clear and complete, I turn my editor toward such finer concerns as punctuation, word choice, and grammar.

If you haven't done a lot of writing, this process may surprise you. Good writing looks effortless and natural, the pieces fitting together like a custom-tailored suit. What a lot of people don't realize is that the process of getting there is never that smooth — it's filled with pricked fingers, uneven seams, and abandoned efforts. And it takes several fittings to get it to hang just right.

The trick lies in cleaning up your messes so well that no one knows you made them.

Kathleen Hern, a professional writer and JFKU faculty member, provides free writing assistance to students through the Academic Support Center, 510-253-2295. Copies of all past columns are available through the Center.

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