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اسم استاذ المادة: أ.م.د. علاء اسماعيل جلوب

المرحلة: الثالثة-صباحي

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Chapter Five:

Some Fundamentals of Writing: The process and the Product

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THE WRITING PROCESS

What do we mean by "the writing process"? It's the process you go through to get words on paper, the way you and other people proceed from an idea to a final product. There's no one right way, no single writing process, but recent research shows that good writing processes often have many similarities.

In the past, writing teachers divided the writing process into three stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Writing teachers today do the same thing, but there are two differences: Today's writing teachers would probably tell you different things to do in each of those stages. And today's writing teachers would caution you that writing does not usually progress linearly—in lock-step order from prewriting, then to writing, and then to rewriting.

Actually, the process is more recursive. Good writers move generally from prewriting to writing to rewriting, but are constantly looping back and forth in the process, doing a little prewriting when in the Writing stage, doing some writing when in the rewriting stage, and so forth. In reality, writers rarely move neatly from prewriting to writing to rewriting.

With that caution in mind, then, let's go ahead and consider the writing process as divided into the three stages of *prewriting*, *writing*, and *rewriting*. Just remember that the writing process is really somewhat recursive.

PREWRITING

Think of prewriting as the stage of preparing for that session (or those sessions) when you'll be doing the actual writing of the paper. During prewriting, you want to come up with a topic (which Chapter 2 helped you with), do your research (which Chapters 3 and 4 helped you with), and end up with everything you need either on paper in front of you (for example, on note and bibliography cards) or in your head, or both.

For short, relatively uncomplicated papers, keeping everything in your head is usually no problem. But for many research papers, most of us don't have the photographic memories required to keep all research material in our heads. That's why the bibliography card and note-taking processes we discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 are important. So one key to good prewriting for research papers is to be a good "bookkeeper."

Another key to good prewriting is to outline your paper, which we discussed in the last chapter. If you can develop a working outline early and constantly jot down key sources in the right places on the outline, you can be miles ahead when you start the writing stage.

We suggest, however, that you ignore advice to stick to your outline no matter what. Think of your outline as a way of tentatively organizing yourself for the writing stage, as a way of collecting all your ideas in a skeletal form, but not as something etched in bronze that will limit the creative thinking you could do in the writing stage. Let's talk about this point more, because it's significant.

Have you ever had ideas that you hadn't thought of during the prewriting stage occur to you while you were actually writing? That happens all the time to experienced writers, who value those ideas and try to construct a writing process that will allow—even encourage—those inspirations to happen.

If you haven't had those inspirations while writing, you've certainly had them while speaking: How often, when you're talking to somebody, do you even know how you'll end the sentence you're speaking? Not often. You have probably found that some really interesting ideas occurred to you *while you were talking*. That's the kind of experience you need to encourage while you're writing.

How do you *prevent* that experience from happening? You make the mistake of outlining your paper from beginning to end during the prewriting stage and then doggedly sticking to that outline no matter what when you're writing the paper. That way you put a straitjacket on your mind, not allowing it to wander, to discover new thoughts, new connections that didn't occur during prewriting.

How do you help that experience to happen? You do two things: First, you outline your paper as much as you can, finding ways to organize your writing so it will make sense to your reader (and to you). Then, with your outline in hand, you just start writing.

WRITING

This is where the rubber meets the road—where you find out if you really have a paper. We suggest you begin by immersing yourself in your subject by looking carefully at your outline and reviewing your important sources briefly. And then just start writing.

Imagine you're simply talking to your reader (to your instructor, perhaps? or to your class?), telling him or her what you want to say.

If you're writing an informative paper, imagine yourself simply telling your reader (conscious of your need to be organized, of course) what you've learned. That's what we have tried to do in this book.

If you're writing a persuasive paper, imagine yourself gently persuading your reader (again, conscious of your need to be organized) what you believe to be true.

Now we will give you some advice on using the outline during this stage of the writing process. You prepared the outline during the prewriting stage to help you collect and organize your thoughts. We suggest you keep a pretty tight organization at the more general level of your paper: Divide your paper into several parts, and, if possible, stick to them. But once you get within a part of your paper, consult your outline to remind yourself of the points you would like to cover, and then just write. Don't worry too much about being completely organized down to the paragraph level. If you've organized your paper at the more general level, and if you imagine yourself talking on paper to your reader, you do two things:

- You'll stay much more organized than you might think.
- You'll allow those inspirations to happen that we mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

What do you then do with those inspirations when they occur? Obviously you hadn't accounted for them during your prewriting stage, so you may have ruined a perfectly good outline. Our advice is to trust your inspirations. That's why you need to think of your outline as "a suggested organization to start with." And that's why we suggest that you outline- but not too much.

Work with your inspirations rather than denying them, and trust that your best ideas will probably occur with the pen in your hand (or, even better, with your hands on the computer keyboard). When you're actually writing, rather than thinking about writing, your mind is actively, closely engaged with your topic and struggling to capture ideas with those elusive things: words. Many good ideas happen at this time. Inspiration, you see, is not a gift from the gods but, rather, a gift from your own mind.

REWRITING

Too often, students think of rewriting as simply fixing errors: correcting punctuation, spelling words correctly, and catching typos.

Rewriting is all of those things, of course, but experienced writers consider these things, too, during the rewriting stage:

Is my paper interesting throughout?

Are there places where I have not been clear?

Is my organization the best?

Have I used enough details so that my reader can see what I mean?

Are there places where I've been too wordy?

Do my ideas follow logically from one to the next?

Does my layout (the size of paragraphs and the appearance of the page) seem inviting?

Have I chosen my words carefully?

Although rewriting is a time to fix errors, it is also a time to be sure that your paper makes sense—that it works for your reader in all ways.

THE PARTS OF THE PAPER

All research papers do not look alike. We tend to think of them as having an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, but some of the best research writing is much more creative. Let's consider two beginnings that were written by professional writers who were writing books that involved considerable research. You will be able to tell from these beginnings that the structure of the research writing is far from typical.

Here are the very first sentences from John McPhee's best-seller, *coming into the Country*, a book about contemporary Alaska:

My bandanna is rolled on the diagonal and retains water fairly well. I keep it knotted around my head, and now and again dip it into the river. The water is forty-six degrees.¹

Notice that McPhee seems to be talking to us (as we recommended in the previous section of this chapter). Notice also that this is not a standard introduction.

Here are the first five sentences from Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-.Aid Acid Test*, a book about the drug society in California in the 1960s:

That's good thinking there, Cool Breeze. Cool Breeze is a kid with three or four days' beard sitting next to me on the stamped metal bottom of the open back part of a pickup truck. Bouncing along. Dipping and rising and rolling on these rotten springs like a boat. Out the back of the truck the city of San Francisco is bouncing down the hill, all those endless staggers of bay windows, slums with a view, bouncing and streaming down the hill.

Again, notice that this doesn't seem like a standard introduction and that it seems as if the writer is talking to us.

These two excerpts are from highly successful books by highly successful authors who frequently write books based on extensive research.

Can you write your paper in that style? Well, you should feel free to try. There's nothing that says a research paper has to be dull. In fact, these two writers are obviously trying very hard to be as engaging as possible, and we think they succeed.

On the other hand, there are times when a more straightforward organization is preferable. Most technical and business writing—the kind you're likely to do outside of college—tends to follow the traditional formula of "tell them what you're going to tell them (the introduction), tell them (the main points), then tell them what you told them (the conclusion)." Despite the fact that we've all heard it many times before, it's a good formula and one that need not result in papers that are boring to writers and readers alike.

So although we acknowledge the creative research paper can be an extremely fine one and although we do not want to discourage you from trying that style, we will now show you the type of organization that research papers have traditionally followed.

THE OVERALL ORGANIZATION

On the facing page is a model showing the organization of a standard research paper, one that can successfully communicate in a straightforward way to a reader.

You may have as many main points as you wish, of course. And each main point could be a paragraph, or a page, or ten pages, or a chapter. We're simply showing you a model that can apply regardless of the length.

Within the main point sections, you may wish to have some sub-sections, depending on the length of your paper. How far you carry this organization—down to the paragraph level, for example—is up to you. At some point, you may just wish to write about a section or subsection without worrying about the organization.

Now let's look at the individual parts of this model. (You can find a specific example of each part in Chapter 7, "A Sample Research Paper.")

THE INTRODUCTION

An introduction should serve two functions: gaining the reader's interest and stating the topic of the paper clearly. The excerpts we just quoted by McPhee

and Wolfe certainly gain the reader's interest, though McPhee and Wolfe never state, explicitly, their overall purposes. Then again, their purposes are quite different from yours.

A good way to begin a paper is with an intriguing fact you learned in your research: "Did you know that the soldiers who died in the Alamo probably would have been court-martialed for insubordination if they had survived?" Or try to think of something relevant to your paper that will genuinely intrigue the reader.

A good way to state the topic of your paper clearly is to use the thesis sentence you developed as you did your research (Chapter 2 discussed how to develop a good thesis sentence). You may wish to reword it to fit it into the context of your introduction, however.

THE MAIN POINTS

This section is generally self-explanatory, but there are two special considerations.

First, be sure the reader knows unmistakably that you've moved from one main point to the next. For longer papers, you can accomplish this goal easily by using headings. We use them frequently in this book, and we explain them in Chapter 14. You will also wish to state your main point clearly near the beginning of the first paragraph of that section:

We've looked at some reasons the soldiers might have been guilty of insubordination. Now consider some reasons they might not have been guilty. . . .

Second, be sure to use support for your main point that is detailed enough for your reader to understand what you're saying. One common problem with any college writing is that the support is too general.

Let's consider an example. Suppose you want to show that the Olympics around the turn of the century had controversies that produced international bitterness. During your research, you read that the English officials in the 1908 Olympics were blatantly biased against the Americans. A poor writer, one who wrote mainly in generalities, would probably leave out colorful details and make only a bland point such as this:

The way the English Officials handled the 1908 marathon was very controversial since they were obviously biased against an American competitor. For example, officials helped the Italian competitor so that the American wouldn't win.

The writer left out all the thrill of the race and the heat of the controversy. A better writer could have made the point by adding the details:

The way the English Officials handled the 1908 marathon was very controversial since they were obviously biased against an American competitor. For example, officials helped the Italian competitor so that the American wouldn't win.

The Italian, Pietri, was leading the race, followed at some distance by an American, Johnny Hayes. Pietri was so exhausted when he entered the stadium for the finish that he turned the wrong way. When he saw his mistake, he did something not uncommon for marathon runners—he col-lapsed (Paul and Orr 36). In *The Olympic Games*, C. Robert Paul and Jack Orr tell the rest of the story:

No one else was yet on the stadium track, of course, so little Pietri just lay there for a minute. There were scattered shouts, "Give him a hand, there," "Help him, help him!" Finally, officials illegally lifted him to his feet and began pushing him toward the finish. He fell down three times more, but each time he was helped up. The Italian was standing there in a daze when into the stadium roared the American Johnny Hayes. When the British officials saw yet another American victory in the making, they picked up Pietri and literally dragged him across the finish line. Hayes finished under his own power, thirty seconds later (36-38).

Clearly, this blatant partisanship did not make the British look like very good hosts for the Olympics.

See the difference details make? The first general version may conjure pictures in the writer's mind because the writer had the advantage of doing the research and reading the entire story. But general statements often conjure nothing in the reader's mind. As a writer, you need to show the reader the pictures you have seen and wish to communicate.

THE CONCLUSION

The conclusion usually serves two purposes: It summarizes the main points, and it provides a sense of finality (so the reader doesn't turn the last page and expect to find more text). You may wonder why you need to summarize since you've already made your main points. In a short paper, you probably do not have to summarize. A summary would seem redundant at best, a boring finale at worst. But in a longer paper—even just a few pages—your reader might have gotten so engaged with each main point that he or she would appreciate a reminder of what's gone before. In that case, a summary is useful. As for providing a sense of finality, you generally want something called a clincher. Clinchers often demonstrate a final flair, like a gymnast finishing with a flourish at the end of a routine. You want to do the same thing, but you don't necessarily have to be flashy. One good clincher is simply a reference to something you used in the introduction, a reminder to the reader that you have now come full circle. And to finish a shorter paper and even some longer ones, just stop.