

THE WRITING PROCESS

A Narrative Explanation of the Writing Process

Writing is a process that is not necessarily linear. We talk about it as if it is linear, as if one goes from point A to point B to point C in a clear progression, as one travels from home to work every morning, without stopping. Carrying on with that journey metaphor, writing is more like waking up in the morning, smelling the coffee one's significant other is brewing and wondering just what it is that makes coffee smell so good and taste so bitter (without the sugar and cream and assorted flavorings one may add).

So, wiping the eye gunk from the corner of your eyes, you wander to the computer and begin "googling" terms: *coffee*, *coffee smell*, *what makes coffee smell so good*. Before you know it, you've been reading for an hour about aroma molecules and Starbucks recipes for special coffees. You even find a web site that discusses how smells can affect one's driving. Coffee smells, evidently, help one concentrate.

By now your own coffee is cold, and your significant other is rather put out that the first thing you do in the morning is to get on the computer rather than paste your lips to his (or hers). So you say, "We need to have some time together, away from all distractions," and you suggest a road trip, say, to San Antonio. So the two of you go to San Antonio and have a great time. Before you leave, you stop at a coffee shop, and you chat with the young clerk behind the counter. She tells you that she is a second-generation American citizen, whose grandparents were illegal immigrants from the city of Zacatecas. She works part-time and is finishing a master's degree in software engineering at St. Mary's University. You are cheered to hear her success story, and you ask her if she has ever visited the hometown from which her grandparents originated. She says no, so you suggest a road trip. However, as much as she would love to visit Zacatecas, now is not a good time for her, as she is writing the final draft of her master's thesis and will then be taking a position with a local software firm, but it just happens to be a good time for you and your significant other. You have had such a great time away from home in San Antonio that you aren't ready to end the experience. So you head south instead of north (or east or west) out of San Antonio.

It's a long trip. On the way, you and your companion brush up on your Spanish. By the time you reach Zacatecas, you feel like a well-seasoned traveler (too many adventures to relate here—see the book). You rent an apartment at the Hostal Villa Colonial and decide to stay a week. Before you know it, you've been there a year, and you've had enough adventures to write a book about all the pleasures of Zacatecas. Which you do. And the first line in the book is "It all began with waking up one morning in Belton, Texas, and smelling coffee brewing."

A Linear Explanation of the Writing Process

If you prefer a more linear description of the writing process, one that translates well for notes, here goes. Writing is a process that can be described as stages:

1. In the first stage one **generates ideas**. Writers have all kinds of tricks they use to come up with ideas. If you don't have the time, the money, or the language skills for a road trip, you can brainstorm, ask the "reporter's questions" (who? what? when? where? how? why?), keep a journal, or freewrite, to name a few techniques.
2. In the second stage of writing, you begin to **shape those ideas**. You discard ideas that seem flimsy or weak or uninteresting. You think of the main idea you want to develop and begin arranging in an orderly sequence your readers can understand the examples, details, and stories that support your main idea.
3. Then you put what you've written aside for a while, a few minutes if you're a procrastinator and your paper is due the next morning, a few hours to a few days if you have organized your time more wisely. (Right!) When you return to your writing, you're ready to review it (RE-view, see again), to **revise** it. Maybe the introduction makes you retch because it is so boring, so you playfully write a more riveting beginning, a story, maybe, that will catch your readers' attention and lead into the main idea you introduce later in the paper. Maybe your word choice reminds you of second grade, so you search for wonderfully evocative words that will convey every nuance of your experience.
4. Finally, you have what you think is a complete draft, but you know that grammar is your weakness, so you **edit** the essay for spelling and grammar weaknesses. (Thank the Goad Lard for spill chick!)

You then print out your essay, providing a copy for your teacher (or editor or immediate supervisor) to be evaluated.

Explanation of Free writing

Most people get frustrated with writing because they haven't allowed themselves enough time to work through the stages of writing. Though the stages look linear in your notes, they aren't, really; there are always digressions, and those digressions are necessary to good writing. Some digressions convince you of what you **don't want** to write about (or what you really aren't experienced to write about), which can be just as important as knowing what you **do want** to write about.

So don't skip the "generating ideas" stage. I suggest beginning with free writing. Choose any word or phrase with which to begin.

I'll choose a phrase for you: **“Grandmother’s teeth.”**

- ◆ Write/type the phrase “grandmother’s teeth” at the top of a page.
- ◆ Timing yourself for five to ten minutes, write whatever comes to your mind in response to that phrase. DO NOT STOP. Write nonsense, if you have to, but just keep writing.
- ◆ After five to ten minutes, stop. Read what you have written, locate the “center of gravity” of your free writing—that is, locate a main idea or phrase that strikes you.
- ◆ Write the idea or phrase you identified as your “center of gravity,” and time yourself for five or ten more minutes. Write without stopping.
- ◆ Stop when your time is up. Read what you have written, and locate the “center of gravity,” the main idea or thought that seems to have come out of this free writing.
- ◆ On another sheet of paper, write the “center of gravity” you identified above. Time yourself for another ten minutes of writing.

When you finish this free writing, perhaps you will have an idea that will be worth exploring in a longer piece of writing (or a poem or a song). Maybe you were so distracted that what you wrote doesn’t make sense. Good. Your mind is clear now, and you can begin again (more free writing, or brainstorming, or questions, etc.).

It Works

Below is a copy of actual free writing (with pen, not keyboard) I did in class once while my students were writing similarly on the topic.

1st free writing on “Grandmother’s Teeth”

This morning I looked in the mirror while putting on my make- up and noticed how my mouth now has two long lines each sloping downward from each corner of my mouth. I stared at my reflection and then closed my teeth firmly. It was my grandmother’s face I saw—her face, her gray hair, her small mouth with the downward corners at the bottom, her thin lips. “How did I get to this?” I wondered. “How had I become my grandmother at 42 years of age.” I remember how my grandmother kept her teeth in a glass at night. She, however, was a lot more sensitive to people seeing her without her teeth than my grandfather. I saw my grandfather’s false teeth in that glass more than I saw my grandmother’s. But I knew even as a small child that my grandmother had false teeth. And here I am now, standing in front of this mirror, seeing the beginning of crow’s feet or just tiny wrinkles around my eyes. This is what it comes to, I thought, no matter how much you try to escape your past. It’s written here on your face, on that mouth

with the sour downward curve. No matter how I tried to be optimistic, to be happy, to smile, to turn those corners up in joy, heredity takes over. It's the Scott mouth, if not the Scott heart.

Center of Gravity: The Scott mouth—what do I mean by that?

The Scott Mouth

What do I mean by the Scott mouth but not the Scott heart? Well, the Scotts were my grandmother Ruby Benton's family. They were short people. The women tended to plumpness—or even fatness—in old age; the men were thin, with protruding Adam's apples. It's not that I didn't like the Scotts. I certainly loved my grandmother. But it's that even at an early age I knew that the Scotts looked at life with a rather jaundiced eye. They were not bitter, necessarily, but they complained. My grandmother's maiden sister, Robbie, best exemplifies what I saw as typical Scott characteristics. Nothing pleased my great-aunt Robbie, not the old people she often cared for, not my happy-go-lucky grandfather, Leonard Benton, my Papa, her sister's husband. Aunt Robbie referred to my grandfather as "him," as "he," as if my grandfather didn't exist as an individual. He didn't work as he should. He wasn't as responsible as he should be. We had to prepare breakfast for him.

Center of gravity : Typical Scott characteristics
Aunt Robbie as a Typical Scott

I remember listening to my Aunt Robbie complaining about her sister's husband, my Papa. She didn't like his tobacco, she didn't like his drinking coffee on the front porch, she didn't like his staying out late. She complained about his being hard of hearing. Nothing my aunt Robbie said was ever positive. She was a short, plump woman with tiny hands, and her face was pinched. Her face was pinched. One day, after a morning of listening to Aunt Robbie's complaining, my grandmother took me aside and said, "I get tired of hearing Robbie complain about Leonard. He has his faults, but it isn't Robbie's place to complain. I can complain [about Leonard] but it sure bothers me when she does."

I think it was this early experience that taught me that we must begin early to work on, to create, an attitude that will become difficult to abandon in old age. I did not want to be like my aunt Robbie. I did not want to be pinched and negative, and so I have tried over the years to overcome this negative attitude that the Scotts instilled in me at an early age.

From the free writings above, I have identified a focus that I can use for a personal essay, with anecdotes. Here are some preliminary ideas I've written down for shaping that essay.

Focus: Because I recognized within my family a trait of negativity, I have tried over the years to encourage a more positive attitude in myself and in others whom I can influence.

- ◆ I'll identify and describe that negativity, using my aunt Robbie as an example. As a contrast, I could describe other family members who exemplify the kind of positive outlook I would like to cultivate in myself (Aunt Ruth).
- ◆ I can discuss how I have encouraged a positive attitude in myself, providing situations and examples from my experience.
- ◆ I can describe how I have influenced others to have a more positive attitude. Perhaps I'll write about some of the conscious choices I have made as a mother of two children.