

STETSON UNIVERSITY

Writing Program

Writing as a Process: Writing is Recursive

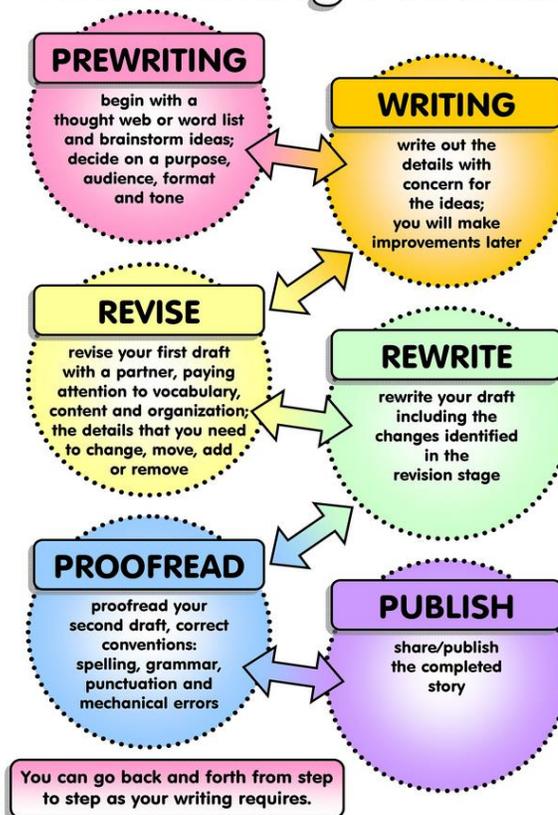
Writing is a process. Writers don't just sit down and produce an essay, well-formed and ideal in every respect—we work at the stages and steps. But writing is not only a process: it's also a measure of learning and your thinking, and so the process has to stop at various points so that your measure can be taken. Good academic writing is both a process *and* a product.

Writing is Recursive. “Recursive” simply means that each step you take in your writing process will feed into other steps: after you've drafted an essay, for instance, you'll go do a bit of verification of some of your facts—and if you discover that you've gotten something wrong, you'll go back to the draft and fix it. But doing that may well require you to loop back to a different section of your essay to rewrite or to take it out altogether—and that revision, in turn, might mean that you need to rethink your organization. At some point, you know that the work is done.

Prior to writing, you will probably be reading. At some point in your course work, there will be an assignment. **No matter your situation, expect to do a lot of thinking, reading, and rethinking during the drafting and revision process.**

Sometimes, writing teachers break down the process into **prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing**. After **prewriting**, you're ready to **draft**; after drafting you **revise**, considering the audience and arrangement; after revising, you **edit**. The following diagram shows this process.

The Writing Process



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Know the Right Moves for College Writing

To be successful at college-level writing, students need to be willing to learn the new moves. Writing for the demands of college is challenging, but it can be a little easier if students understand up front that readers at the college level expect to see certain skills be demonstrated.

- ✓ Know what a college-level essay looks like
- ✓ Keep the focus of your work narrow
- ✓ Know how to build a thesis statement and a topic sentence
- ✓ Introduce your sources with a purpose
- ✓ Show relationships between ideas
- ✓ Use sophisticated punctuation

Know What a College Level Essay Looks Like

While professors at Stetson have specific expectations for what their students turn in, students may not always understand the depth for the expectations. Some professors will show examples of what they want; some will not. In general, while each of your professors will provide a clear assignment, students may benefit from seeing an outline of what that assignment might entail.

The key differences are several:

- ✓ The need for a clear and directive thesis statement;
- ✓ The expectation of substantial consideration of other viewpoints and perspectives;
- ✓ The use of sources to develop and explore a point made by the writer (not just to support the point itself); and
- ✓ The need for the conclusion to do something other than summarize

On the next page, the outline demonstrates a complex, college-appropriate argumentative essay and here is a [link](#) to a video that demonstrates how to write a college-level essay.

*INTRODUCTION TO TOPIC, WITH
ARGUMENTATIVE THESIS*

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*EXPLANATION OF ISSUE, WITH
APPROPRIATE BACKGROUND
INFORMATION TO PROVIDE
SPECIFIC CONTEXT FOR
ARGUMENTS' VALUE AND
RELEVANCE*



*SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF
VARIOUS POSITIONS ON THE
ARGUMENT, WITH APPROPRIATE
SOURCE REFERENCES WHERE
NEEDED*



*EXPLANATION OF WRITER'S
POSITION THAT REBUTS OR
ADVANCES OTHER ARGUMENTS
AND CONSIDERS IMPLICATIONS OF
WRITER'S POSITION*



*CONCLUSION: THAT DRAWS
ATTENTION TO POTENTIAL
OUTCOMES, PRIORITIZES MOST
SIGNIFICANT PART OF
ARGUMENT, CALLS FOR SPECIFIC
OR IMMEDIATE ACTION, OR
POINTS OUT CONSEQUENCES OF
INACTION*

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Keep Your Focus Narrow

Many students come to college thinking that “arguing” in an essay means to present a well-supported position. The definition of “argue” thus becomes a defense rather than an inquiry. However, sophisticated thinkers and writers seek to advance and deepen the understanding via **discussion**; thus, at college we seek to encourage deeper discussions with the goal to have a richer and fuller understanding. To do this well, it’s important to go deeply into a subject rather than stay on the surface. While the approach of defending a position rather than exploring its layers may feel somewhat easier, there are only so many ways to learn from general subjects; we learn more, and find opportunities for growth and development more easily, when we **narrow down** the field of interest. As we work with an idea and consider it carefully, we continue to narrow it down, zeroing in on a particular angle or position that interests us and meets the needs of the assignment.

Identifying a position requires several steps:

- **First**, understand the **subject** area from which the argument must come.
- **Second**, break that subject area down into **topics**
- **Third**, focus on developing a **question** whose answer can be identified and defended. As the subject undergoes continual narrowing and focusing, specific questions develop; the reasoned, detailed, careful answer to those questions becomes the argument.
- **Fourth**, **read**, **research**, and **discuss** the potential answers to the question you’re asking so that your writing is multidimensional and well supported. The Guide’s chapter on “Using Your Resources” deals with this element of the process.

For more help on narrowing down your topic, here is a [video](#) providing some additional help.

Remember: A true **argument** requires that other perspectives be taken into account. Because once you have found a **focus** and can easily develop an **opinion** or come to a **position** on the questions that have been created, this can provide an opportunity for a discussion, exploration of different perspectives, and dialogue about values. Finding answers to the questions are now initial to the **thesis statement**.

- **Opinion**: statement of writer’s general attitude toward a specific subject, issue or event

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- **Position:** announcement of writer's general attitude toward a specific subject, issue, or event, with explanation of reasons
- **Argument:** statement that captures a spirit of debate and discussion about a specific topic, issue, or event

Is This an Academic Argument? Is Every Assignment an Argument?

Not every writing assignment students get in their courses will be an argument essay. As mentioned earlier, students here write lab reports, correspondence, proposals, brochures, arguments, applications, evaluations, analyses, and host of others.

We also ask that students consider and evaluate questions and ideas, formulate their own responses to those ideas, and then do something with those responses: argue, defend, propose, compare, and analyze are some of the things we do with our responses to ideas. Each kind of assignment has a different purpose.

Generally speaking, arguments take two kinds of shapes: one is a shape that actively argues with its reader from the start, presenting its position and systematically defending against its opposition by marshalling evidence that will defeat an opposing viewpoint. This focuses on difference. One other popular shape starts from position of unity and common ground, and then, as each element of common ground on a position is discussed, the writer's position becomes clearer. This approach focuses on similarity.

Here is a [link](#) that shows brief examples and descriptions of what assignments students may encounter in college.

Know the Two Most Important Kinds of Sentences: Thesis and Topic Sentences

Thesis statements and **topic sentences** perform nearly the same function in your writing: each one makes a claim, or states something debatable, and each one serves as a central focus connecting several ideas.

A thesis statement demonstrates three specific elements:

1. *It states a main idea, which the essay will go on to explain and develop*
2. *It goes beyond statements of fact or announcement-type statements*
3. *It offers the reader some idea of the direction of the essay*

Thesis Statement

Avoid these...

Too vague: Scientists should understand stem cells are bad.

Too broad: Scientists should understand everything about stem cell research.

Too narrow: Scientists should understand stem cells research is bad because such cells are extracted from fetuses.

Strong Thesis: As a group, we believe stem cell research has both positive and negative aspects when used in the development of medicine.

Whereas a thesis statement captures the main idea of an essay and provides structure and direction, a **topic sentence** introduces a paragraph's main claim or idea. When we read a well put-together paragraph, we can identify the topic sentence relatively easily: it's the one making a claim, and the other sentences are adding support and explanation.

A topic sentence usually appears at either the beginning or the end of a paragraph. One reason for this placement is to signal the reader: This is important information.

Here is a [link](#) to learn more about topic sentences:

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Introduce Your Sources With Purpose

Inexperienced writers often use this particular technique:

“Prostitution in Dubai is ruining the city’s reputation” (Alesia).

While functional, this approach to using a source is so minimal as to be almost ineffective. However, look at the difference between that example and the next, paying close attention to the introduction of the source as well as the mention of the origin of the source material:

Shakar Alesia, a prominent sociologist, warns in Dubai News that “Prostitution in Dubai is ruining the city’s reputation” (Alesia).

In the second example, the student has **introduced** the speaker by name, has provided the reader with some idea of the speaker’s **credentials**, and has given the **source** from which the speaker’s words have been drawn. Finally, in the parentheses, the student has **documented** the source.

Notice in the second example, the use of “warn” as the verb introducing the quotation. Choosing your words and embedding useful information carefully provides readers with a richer, more complete experience.

Show Relationships between Ideas

Show us how your thinking forms a whole, forms a coherent unified idea by using **transitional words and phrases**. These may be used between paragraphs, to show the big connections among the ideas in your writing, or between sentences, to show the train of thinking that leads you to connect one claim to the next. The link below is a useful reference for students looking for just the right word to show the relationship between two paragraphs’ or two sentences’ main ideas:

<https://nsargumentwritingblog.wordpress.com/2012/11/11/transition-words-useful-for-argument-writing/>

Understand and Use Sophisticated Punctuation

Sentence punctuation involves using **commas, semicolons, colons, periods, parentheses**, and **dashes** to coordinate sections of sentences (phrases and clauses) into coherent wholes.

An **independent clause** is one that can function on its own as a sentence: it has a subject and a verb. When you put together independent clauses, you need to signal that coordination with some sort of punctuation.

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Link independent clauses in four ways:

- Comma plus conjunction: *I wasn't ready for school to start, but it started anyway*
- Semicolon: *I wasn't ready for school to start; it seemed like summer should have stretched on forever*
- Semicolon and transitional word/phrase: *I wasn't ready for school to start; however, the first day turned out to be enjoyable.*
- Colon: *I wasn't ready for school to start: time had sped past me all summer*

Link *items in a series* with some sort of punctuation. You can use commas or semicolons depending on your intended effect:

- Commas: *We can look at the increased coral deaths, melting polar ice caps, and the gradual decline of biodiversity as evidence of climate change.*
- Semicolons: *Resolving the climate problems will take increased attention from governments; stronger sanctions for violators; and a genuine realization that our species is in trouble.*

Colons and dashes set *off examples* and *explanations* so that each one gets the proper attention from the reader:

- Colons: *It doesn't get any easier than this: I can pass some of my classes just by doing the work.*
- Dashes: *I can pass some of my classes just by doing the assignments—I guess that means I'd better schedule time for homework.*

Use colons, dashes, and parentheses to set *off the important information* from the rest of the sentence:

- Commas: *Before we can tackle our serious problems, most importantly humanitarian crises in Darfur and the African continent, we have to admit that they exist.*
- Dashes: *It doesn't take much milk to make pancakes—just a cup or so will do it—but using skim milk instead of whole milk will reduce calories.*
- Parentheses: *I know a lot about being a student (since I've been one for 12 years already), so let me give you some advice.*

For additional references, visit these sites:

[Punctuation Guide at Purdue](#)

[The Punctuation Guide](#)