

OUT OF THE CAVE  
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Steps to Writing an Essay

You will be able to use your writing as a means of inquiry only if you have the courage to begin writing before you know what you want to say. You must begin without having your thesis. Locating your thesis and organizing your paper around it comes later, on the path of Communication. When embarking on the path of Discovery, you don't need to worry about logical organization at all--you need to prevent yourself from worrying about it.

Breaking down the process of writing into separate steps helps engage in writing as genuine inquiry. The following steps will help you keep Discovery and Communication separate, and find the proper time to work on each while writing your essays.

1. **Choose your text(s).** If you are given a choice, choose the text (or texts) that most interests, intrigues, or perplexes you.
- 2a. **Locate your question** (if you have not been assigned one); or
- 2b. **Choose your question** (if you have been given a choice); or
- 2c. **Make the question your own** (if you have been assigned one).

To write a good essay, you need to have a good question. A good question:

- (a) must be a **real** question (for you)--you must not know the answer to it when you begin;
- (b) should be **perplexing**--it should arouse your curiosity;
- (c) should be **neither too broad nor too narrow**;
- (d) should engage you in **dialogue** with the text.

Write freely in order to set down your reactions, feelings, thoughts, and questions about the text(s) you have chosen. Use this free-writing as a means either to formulate several good questions about the text(s) or to build a bridge between your own interests and the question(s) you have been assigned. If you have a choice, choose the question that you would most like to work on--the one that generates the most "writing energy" in you. If you have no choice, "make the question your own" by finding a way to understand it that makes it perplexing and important to you.

In some cases, it will make more sense to locate your question first, and to be guided by your question in choosing your text(s). Use whichever order makes the most sense.

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3. **Re-read and take careful notes.** Now you have your question. Your eventual thesis will be your best answer to this question. **BUT YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER YET-- THAT IS WHY YOU ARE CHOOSING TO UNDERTAKE AN INQUIRY INTO THE QUESTION.** Re-read the text(s) with your question in mind, taking careful notes, writing freely as you read in order to articulate your responses to the text and your thoughts about it in order to perform the analysis and interpretation necessary to answer your question. Always mark the page number next to any quote or commentary in your notes so you know where to find the passage later.

4. **Write a first draft.** Relying on your notes as raw material, write a first draft in which you try to answer your question.

5. **Locate your thesis.** Read your draft over and look for your thesis. It will usually be in the final paragraph. Find it. Remember that your thesis is your best answer to your question. To be an effective thesis, it should be specific, interesting, and even surprising or controversial. If it is none of these, think of how to alter it. If you can't find your thesis, have someone else read your paper and see if she can find it. If neither of you can, you will need to return to steps 3 and 4 and work further to develop one.

6. **Write a second draft.** Write a second, completely different, draft of your essay. This draft should look nothing like your first draft. There you were pursuing the path of Discovery. You are now embarking on the path of Communication. In the first paragraph or two, you should (1) raise your question for your readers in a way that makes them interested in it, too, and (2) state the thesis you will defend in your essay. The rest of the paper should explain, support, and defend the thesis, thereby answering the question you raised in the opening paragraph(s).

7. **Revise your essay.** Re-write, re-organize, and revise the paper as many times as you need to until it is satisfying to both you and your those readers you have asked to read it (you should always have at least one, and preferably two, such readers).

8. **Edit and proofread your essay.** Carefully edit and proofread your essay, correcting all spelling errors, typographical errors, and errors in grammar and punctuation. Get all the help you need to perform this step effectively (but at the same time try to master these skills yourself, so that you are not forever dependent on others). Use spell-check, but do not rely on it alone to catch all your errors. This is a crucial step in public writing, for your finished essay communicates how much you care about your essay, how much you respect yourself as a writer. A reader who encounters a host of careless errors will wonder why she should care enough to read your paper, if you did not care enough to bring it to completion and to remove as many impediments as possible to her reading experience.

Now you are ready to "publish" your essay.

The only way to get through these eight steps successfully is to start writing **early**.