

UGRC 110

Academic Writing

Session 7 – The Academic Essay
(The Process Approach to Writing)

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Session Overview

- Writing involves series of steps or activities known as the writing process. This includes several steps that build on one another. First of all, there is the pre-writing stage where you choose a topic, think about your purpose and audience, discover ideas about your topic and research and gather information on your topic. The second stage is the drafting stage. This involves outlining your ideas and writing the first rough version of your essay. The third is the revision stage. This stage involves rewriting the essay as many times as possible until the ideas become clearer, more detailed, and better organized. This means that you may have to reorganize sentences and paragraphs. The fourth and the final stage is the editing stage.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section you will be able to do the following:

- Choose and narrow a topic to make it more focused
- Think about your purpose, audience, and point of view and relate to them
- Discover ideas about your topic
- Research your topic

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Choosing and narrowing your topic
- Discovering ideas to write about
- researching your topic
- Planning
- First draft

Reading List

- A) Chapter 1, Elbow, *Writing With Power*
- B) Units 1-4, Meyers (2005) *Gateways to Academic Writing*
pp. 2-42



Topic One

CHOOSING AND NARROWING A TOPIC



Choosing and Narrowing a Topic

- Let us assume that you have been asked to write an academic essay but no topic has been prescribed by the instructor; i.e. you have been asked to find your own topic. In this situation, the topic that comes to your mind may be a broad one. For example, you may want to write about 'Ghana'. But this means that you have to write everything and anything about Ghana. It is not possible to write everything you know about Ghana so you need to narrow this topic to a manageable scope. For example, you may choose to discuss 'education in Ghana', or 'Politics in Ghana', or 'Tradition and Culture in Ghana', etc. Let's say you have chosen to discuss 'Politics in Ghana'. 'Politics in Ghana' is still a very broad topic because it implies you will discuss everything and anything about this topic (e.g. the long history of politics in Ghana, current political issues, national politics, local politics, elections, etc). You can't possibly handle all of these, so, once again, you need to narrow it to have a clearer focus. For example, you may choose to write about 'Electioneering Campaigns in Ghanaian Politics' or 'Military Regimes in Ghana' or 'The Role of Political Parties in Ghana'.
- As soon as you have a topic, whether self-selected or lecturer-assigned, you have to carefully analyse the writing task to determine what your audience would expect of you. Think about the following: your **purpose**, your **audience** and your **point** of view.



Choosing and narrowing Topic- PURPOSE

- **Purpose**
- As you are considering a specific topic or an assigned one, think about the purpose for which you are writing such a paper. Though the general aim of most writing is to communicate, an essay must have a purpose. There are three major purposes for which a paper may be written. These are to entertain your readers, inform your readers, or to persuade your readers to accept a particular viewpoint. For example, an essay on 'Environmental Pollution' may seek to inform your readers about the causes of environmental pollution, or to persuade your readers to take a particular action against those who pollute the environment. Ask yourself the following questions: Why am I writing this essay and what exactly do I want to achieve with this piece of writing? An essay can have more than one purpose. For example you may want to write on a particular festival in Ghana to explain to your readers how it is celebrated (inform), and/or urge your readers to try and participate in one (persuade)

Choosing and narrowing Topic- AUDIENCE

- Your audience are the people who read your essay and they are also an important part of the writing process. Many aspects of your writing—for example how you express yourself, the types of sentence structure you choose, your choice of words, amount of details and examples you include, your attitude towards the topic—depend heavily on your audience. You need to know your audience by their age, their educational background, their knowledge about the topic and expectations as readers to plan your essay. For most academic essays, your lecturer is your audience. Supposing you are writing on ‘Agents of Socialisation in Ghana’ for your Sociology lecturer, who obviously knows a great deal about the topic, you are all the same not expected to ignore giving enough details in the essay. Note that your lecturer wants to know if you understand the topic and whether you can clearly write about it. You therefore need to provide enough information to demonstrate your knowledge of the subject. Include enough background information, relevant details and define technical terms if there are any to make your essay easy to understand and follow.

Choosing and narrowing Topic- POINT OF VIEW

- Another important thing to consider when writing is your point of view. This refers to the perspective from which you are writing the essay. Choosing a point of view will depend on your topic, your purpose, and your audience.
- There are three types of point of view. These are first, second, and third persons point of view.
- For an essay narrating an event in which you participated, you may find the first person pronoun (I, we,) more appropriate.
- The second person pronoun (you) may be more appropriate in an essay that explains how something is done or how a particular research is carried out.
- In Academic Writing, however, the third person (he/she/it, and they) is used because it is less personal, more formal and more detached than the other points of view.

Activity

Choose two of the following broad topics and narrow it down to a topic that can be managed within a two-to four-page essay.

1. Safe transportation
2. Population explosion
3. Mental illness

Topic Two

DISCOVERING IDEAS TO WRITE ABOUT



Discovering Ideas to Write About

- As I have mentioned in the introduction to this section, writing is a process of discovery. Another important, but not so easy, aspect of writing is finding enough to say about your topic.
- There are some techniques that you can use to generate ideas on your topic. The most common methods are described below.
- Study each one of them and try using them before deciding on the one that best works for you.

Discovering Ideas to Write About-

FREE WRITING

- Freewriting means jotting down in rough sentences or phrases everything that comes to mind about a possible topic. When freewriting, you write non-stop for a limited period of time, usually five to ten minutes.
- Write whatever comes to mind regardless of its relevance to your topic. Do not worry about finding the exact words to express your thought, spelling and punctuating correctly, or organising the material in a particular way. Instead, let your mind run free to explore ideas
- Your initial ideas and impressions will become clearer after you have put them on paper and these may lead to other ideas and impressions. Doing this will help you develop the habit of thinking while you write. Let us look at the following example of freewriting on the topic, “Things that annoy me”:



FREE WRITING

There are a lot of things that I get annoyed by. One of them that comes to mind is politishans, infact I am so annoyed about them that I don't even want to say anything about them. They are all the same and they are not to be trusted. Another thing that bothers me are people who keep complaining about everything but does nothing about them. If you are having trouble, do something about it. Don't just keep complaining and just talsikng. I'm also really annoyed by traffic on our roads. This is partly because there are toomany cars on our roads. Everybody wants to own a car. Anyway you can't blame them because the public transportation system is also not reliable.

- Note that in this freewriting we can find something to write about politicians, traffic congestion in Accra, the bad nature of roads etc. These are potentially interesting topics to develop into full essays, and the important point is that they were generated through freewriting.

Discovering Ideas to Write About-

BRAINSTORMING

- Brainstorming involves listing everything you can think of about your topic. Put down facts, impressions, reactions as well as emotions. You can list them by putting down phrases and words instead of complete sentences.
- With this technique as well, give yourself a time limit. This will force ideas to come faster.
- The following is an example of brainstorming on an issue that we can pick from my freewriting above: the misuse of electronic communication devices.

The misuse of electronic communication devices.

- ✓ What electronic devices do I use?
- ✓ For what purpose?
- ✓ Where do people use electronic tools?
- ✓ Where/When should such devices be banned?
- ✓ Where/When can electronic comm. devices constitute a danger?

BRAINSTORMING

- ✓ Do people need to be in touch all the time?
 - ✓ What dangers associated with the use of mobile phones while driving?
 - ✓ Why don't students turn off cell phones in class?
 - ✓ Why do people keep their cell phones on at public gatherings?
 - ✓ Why do people carry more than one phone at a time?
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- Note that not every question will yield details that will show how dangerous or annoying the misuse of these devices are, however, some may provide enough information to be further developed into a complete essay.

 - Brainstorming is more structured than freewriting because the writer focuses on only the topic instead of writing whatever comes to mind. Brainstorming also works well when it is done in groups of two or three people.

Discovering Ideas to Write About-

CLUSTERING

- Clustering, also known as mapping or webbing is also a good way to generate ideas on topics.
- It is a visual way to discover ideas and their relationships and will help you gather details to use in your first draft.
- To begin, get a blank sheet of paper, write the general topic in the middle of the paper and draw a circle around it.
- Think of ideas and details related to this topic. Next, write down ideas and details related to these sub-topics and continue in this way until you run out of ideas.
- Refer to the module for an illustrations

Activity

- Take a sheet of paper. Set a clock or timer for five minutes and freewrite on one of the following broad topics (use an extra sheet of paper if you need to).
 1. World Wide Web
 2. Urban problems
 3. Marriage
- Review your freewriting and identify a usable idea that might serve as a topic for an essay. Brainstorm or do clustering on your chosen topic for five minutes to further develop ideas on this topic.

Topic Three

RESEARCHING YOUR TOPIC



Researching Your Topic

- As you can see from our discussions so far, gathering information on your topic begins with jotting down what you know or have learnt about your subject or topic. You put down facts, ideas, opinions, or emotions using one of the techniques we have discussed above.
- You will have to examine these details and decide which is most important to your purpose. However, you can continue to gather information to add details such as facts, opinions, ideas, statistics, or quotations. You can do so by making note from what others have written or said about your topic.
- Research can be done in various ways: library / internet research, interviewing/serving questionnaire, and observation.
- Let us discuss each of these.



Researching Your Topic- Library and Internet Research

- Visit the library and the internet, if available.
- Look for related books or articles in the library or online sources of information.
- Reading what others have written about your topic may suggest new approaches, or reveal issues that will help you determine what you already know or do not know about your topic.
- When conducting a search on the internet, evaluate the credibility of the source and also note down the URL address for documentation purposes. To determine the credibility of a source, find out whether the source is scholarly, whether it is recent enough, whether the author is an expert in the field, or whether the author approached the topic fairly and objectively.
- Make notes while reading sources and be sure to record the publication data (author, title, publisher, page numbers, and date). You must to acknowledge sources that you have used in your essay to indicate that they have borrowed information.

Researching Your Topic- Interviewing

- Interviewing is one of the brilliant ways to obtain information from people. These may be people who might be more familiar with your subject than you are or experts in that particular field.
- Interview such persons by asking them relevant questions about your topic. This gives you expert perspectives from which to view your topic.
- You need to prepare for your interview carefully. Spend some time to think of questions that will draw useful information from the interview.
- As you ask questions, take notes on interesting issues and subtopics that may arise.
- Interviewing provides both social interaction and an opportunity to focus on details and specifics.
- A questionnaire survey is a form of interviewing, except that it essentially in the written mode.

Topic four

PLANNING



Planning

- A plan is an outline of the points you wish to develop fully in your essay.
- It displays the relationship among the ideas you wish to express.
- A good plan does not only give you a graphic representation of what your essay will look like, but also it guides you on how to develop the points.
- You may modify your plan as you go along.

Topic five

THE FIRST DRAFT



Writing the First Draft

- The first draft comes after planning.
- This is the second stage in the writing process and is the first real attempt at writing the full essay. This can be done in various ways.
- You may choose to write a working introduction, the body paragraphs and the concluding paragraph in this sequence.
- Another method is to write only the body paragraphs before attempting to write the introductory and concluding paragraphs.
- In all these, your plan must guide you