

How To Become a Better Writer



“You want me to write a paper?” you think to yourself just after hearing your teacher give the assignment. “Couldn’t you give me something easier to do—like scrub the classroom floor with a toothbrush?”

As you move up in school, the number (and length) of writing assignments increases. It doesn’t take long before you realize you have to write well to succeed in almost every class. And after you leave school, writing will still be important—for example, a job application or a college entrance essay.

What if you don’t think you have a great natural talent for writing? Relax. You don’t have to be Shakespeare to learn how to express your ideas in a clear and well-organized way. Here are some tips that can make you a better writer.

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1. Choose the right topic

You’ll be living with this topic until the paper is finished, so make sure it’s something you enjoy. Even if your teacher assigns the topic, try to find a way to make it interesting.

Sometimes, it’s harder to choose your own topic. Teachers often say, “Just write what you know best.” But that doesn’t seem so easy after you’ve stared at a blank piece of paper for 15 minutes or so.

Actually, you probably have lots more ideas for papers in your brain than you think you do. Here are a few tips on picking a topic:

- **Hobbies or personal interests.** Whether you like to collect rocks or work on cars, play video games or listen to popular music, that interest can turn into a paper.
- **Things you’ve done that you can explain how to do.** Ever gone scuba diving? Raised a hamster? Grown up as the youngest child in a family with five children? Then you have a topic for a paper.
- **Questions you’d like to have answered.** Wonder why there are time zones? Do some research and write about it. Want to know about opportunities for careers in science? There’s another paper waiting to be written.

2. Give yourself time to think and reflect

Once you’ve chosen your topic, go to the library and check out some books on the subject. Go online to learn more.

Make some notes. Usually, it’s best to take notes on index cards. Be sure to write down the source of the information so you can give proper credit.

Now spend some time brainstorming. Jot down any words, phrases or ideas that come to mind. This brainstorming may take only 15 minutes—or you might work on it off and on for a couple of hours. In fact, it helps to work awhile, go do something else and then come back to your topic later.

When you look back over your notes, you’re likely to see some key ideas emerging. Try to group the ideas that seem to belong together. Use colored pens and circle all the ideas that relate to one thought in red, to a second thought in blue and so on.

You might not use some of the ideas you jotted down. Don’t think of those extra ideas as wasted thoughts. They just helped you clarify what you wanted to say.



3. Write a thesis statement

Your paper should be organized around a *thesis statement*, or central idea. It is more specific than your topic, and it should reflect your point of view or an argument you want to make in your paper. “Snorkeling” is not a thesis statement. “You can learn a lot about marine life from snorkeling” is.



And here it is—an easy-to-follow method for writing a paper. You’re going to be writing a lot more papers as the years go by, so you’ll be glad you’ve learned these secrets ... in time for your next writing assignment. After all, writing a paper this way is a lot easier than scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush!

4. Make an outline

You’ve heard it before and you’ve probably ignored the advice: Making an outline before you start to write will help you organize your thoughts clearly. Brainstorming and grouping ideas together may be all the outlining you need. Or you may want to create a more formal written outline.

Outlines move from major topics to smaller subtopics. Those subtopics are supported with specific details or examples. Here’s how one outline might look:

- I. Sports played on land.**
(Your major topic.)
 - A. Sports played on a court.**
(One subtopic.)
 - 1. A description of basketball.**
(A supporting example.)
 - 2. A description of handball.**
(Another supporting example.)
 - B. Sports played on fields.**
(A second subtopic.)
 - 1. A description of football.**
(A supporting example.)
 - 2. A description of soccer.**
(Another supporting example.)
- II. Sports played in water ...**

5. Write a draft

Get all your ideas on paper. Focus more on the facts (*who, what, when, where, why* and *how*) than on grammar and spelling.

This draft will be rough. Do not panic. Before most people write a good second draft, they write a so-so first draft.

6. Revise

Put your first draft away for a while. Then read it aloud if you can. Listen carefully for places that don’t seem to make sense or ideas that don’t exactly seem to follow those in the previous sentence.

Now write a second draft. It will be a lot better—but it’s still not ready to be turned in. Check carefully for spelling, punctuation and grammar.

7. Prepare a final copy and turn it in

After you’re sure you’ve found all the errors and everything makes sense, it’s time to recopy or print out your final paper. Then all you have to do is be sure you turn it in on time!



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