

The Writing Process

For many people, writing a document seems like something that is done in one sitting, producing a completely finished product at the end. That is daunting! In reality, writing is a process that is never finished. Writing is a skill you must practice in order to be proficient, but even the best writers, from Sandra Cisneros Cervantes to Alice Walker, can find writing to be challenging.

At the very basic level, the writing process begins with starting your draft. Once you are in the process of writing your draft, you will constantly add and remove parts that work and don't work. Writing doesn't really have an end; it generally has a due date. Because writing can always be improved and revised, there is never a truly finished product.

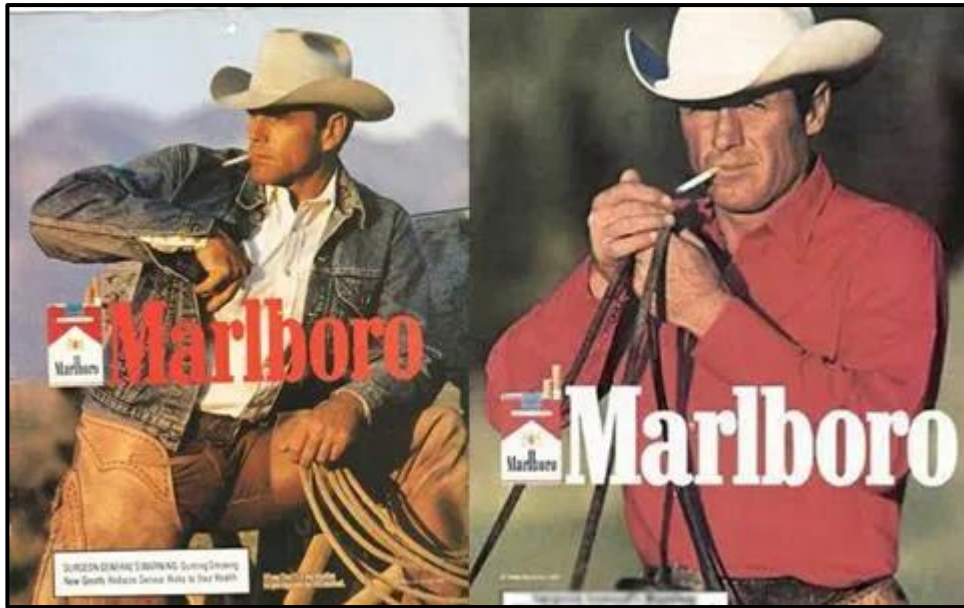
Getting Started

Getting started can often feel like the world's biggest hurdle, but there are ways to make this part of the writing process easier:

- Free-write about your topic
- List ideas you have about your topic
- Cluster your ideas
- Outline your paper

Not all of these techniques may work for you, but you only need one to begin planning your paper. If you feel like you know a lot about your topic and can work with less structured planning, freewriting may be for you. If you want a highly structured way of planning a paper, an outline may work for you. This handout will include a sample outline at the end the handout to give an example of what its like to plan a paper using a formal structure.

To begin writing, you need a topic to discuss. For example, let's say you have an assignment that asks you to look at an ad and analyze its impact on society. You decide to analyze an ad containing the Marlboro Man.



Exploring Your Topic

A close analysis is essential for a good paper. A close analysis simply means exploring the topic of your choice and sharing what you find in a way that can persuade your audience to accept your point of view as a considerable option. To reach this goal, you need to ask yourself good questions. Good questions for our Marlboro Man example would read something like:

- Why did the advertising agency choose this image?
- Who was the advertising agency's target demographic?
- What does a cowboy have to do with smoking?
- When did the ad campaign start?
- How long had the cigarette brand been around before this ad campaign?
- Did Marlboro cigarettes sell better or worse after this ad campaign?
- What do most people think of when they hear the term "Marlboro Man?"
- Is there any significance in where the Marlboro Man is looking?
- Why do both images show the Marlboro Man with his hand on either a rope or a rein?

Questions like the examples above dig past the face value of the topic. You don't need to know all the answers right away, so keep the following in mind while you start writing:

- Writing is a conversation
- Things aren't black and white, so explore the grey area
- Build on and add to existing ideas
- Use topic sentences in your paragraphs

Once you have created a list of questions about your topic, the first part of editing begins. Most of us have due dates and length requirements, so we have to carefully choose a question or limited number of questions to explore in our writing (2 or 3 questions can be chosen for a longer paper). Using our Marlboro Man example, we'll choose a question that is both interesting and exploratory:

What do most people think of when they hear the term "Marlboro Man?"

The question selected above has several facets of exploration:

- Cultural values of the American Cowboy
- Use of those values as a marketing strategy
- Endurance of the Marlboro Man campaign

At this point in the writing process, we have a topic and three areas within that topic to explore. Now, we need a thesis (main idea or argument) that answers the question we found interesting. A thesis is formulated by the content you read about your chosen topic. In this case, let's pretend we have read a lot about the Marlboro Man and the American Cowboy culture. Using what we learned through our resources, we can construct an answer to the question we selected about our topic.

In this example, the answer to our question may be that most people think of a rugged cowboy in the Wild West. We can turn that into our main idea/thesis:

When most people think of the term "Marlboro Man," they think of a strong, rugged cowboy. This enduring perception of the Marlboro Man has created an image that extends beyond cigarettes and into the mythical fabric of American culture.

With a thesis, we can create a general outline for our paper that will visually show us where our ideas are going and how they will prove our thesis with evidence from our research sources. An example outline looks something like this:

- Main Idea/Thesis
 - Supporting Topic 1
 - Supporting Topic 2
 - Supporting Topic 3
- Supporting Topic 1
 - Evidence from resources
- Supporting Topic 2
 - Evidence from resources
- Supporting Topic 3
 - Evidence from resources
- Conclusion

Using our example topic, the outline would look something like this:

- When most people think of the term “Marlboro Man,” they think of a strong, rugged cowboy. This enduring perception of the Marlboro Man has created an image that extends beyond cigarettes and into the fabric of mythical American culture.
 - Cultural values of the American Cowboy
 - Use of American Cowboy culture as a marketing strategy
 - Endurance of Marlboro Man campaign
- Cultural value of the American Cowboy
 - Evidence from resources
- Use of American Cowboy culture as a marketing strategy
 - Evidence from resources
- Endurance of the Marlboro Man campaign
 - Evidence from resources
- Conclusion that summarizes all of the supporting topics and their relationship to proving your main idea/thesis

The method above provides enough structure to give you a formula to fill in the blanks, and it can also be easily adapted to a shorter or longer paper as needed.

Helpful Tips

Even with a structure as simple as the example outline, you can get stalled in the writing process. You may not know how to convey the evidence found to support your ideas, you may become fatigued with writing, or you may just get bored. To break that rut, try some of the following tips:

- **Start your writing assignments early**—the earlier you start your writing, the more time you have to get your paper reviewed and make revisions.
- Take a break—this can be grabbing a snack, taking a walk, or watching an episode of your favorite TV show.
- Write in short sentences—keep sentences simple and short; use one topic per sentence in order to keep your ideas clear.
- Remember there is no such thing as a perfect paper—a common misperception is that papers can reach a state of perfection. In reality, a perfect paper would always keep growing in length and refinement, and you would never stop writing it.
- Provide evidence at all times—Instructors want your ideas about your topic, but they need to see you have evidence to support your main idea/thesis. **Every time you make a claim about anything in your papers, you must provide evidence to support that claim.**
- Get your paper peer reviewed—it's always a good idea to get a second pair of eyes on your writing. Ask a friend or a Writing Center tutor to look over your paper with you to give you feedback.

No matter what stage of the writing process you are in or what discipline your writing for, Writing Center tutors are happy to be your audience and offer constructive feedback. To make an appointment, contact us:

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