

The Writing Process

We look at the writing process as a working process that does not only include the actual writing, but also all the activities that have to be performed in order to be able to write a text.

The writing process consists of different stages. These stages cannot be clearly separated from each other: Each stage affects the other stages and during your writing process, you often switch between different stages.

Getting an idea of the topic:

In this stage, you do your first inquiry and you find a topic about which you are going to write. Activities in this stage include a lot of reading, but at this stage, you shouldn't read too thoroughly but get an overview about your topic in general. While looking for possible topics and while reading, you should already take notes on interesting topics, issues and questions.

At the end of this stage, you should get a narrow and focused topic out of your general topic. It would be best if you came up with a question that you are going to answer within your paper or with a hypothesis that you are going to test.

Collecting data:

In this stage, you collect all the material that you need to write your paper. This will probably include further and more systematic reading. If you make an empirical inquiry, you gather data by applying the method you have chosen. Sometimes you have to go back from this stage to the stage of orientation, for example if you find out that you cannot find enough material to answer the question you have chosen. In this case, you would have to reconsider the focus of your topic. Just like the first stage, this stage can and should already be accompanied by writing: You should write protocols (of your empirical work as well as of your reading) and note all your thoughts and ideas with regard to your paper.

Organizing the data and developing an outline:

Organizing your data means that you have to find relations between all the elements you have found. You have to answer questions like: Which elements belong together? Is one element dependent of another? Is one superior to another?

This should lead to a first outline of your paper. Of course, the organization of your material depends on the material you have found. But you might also have to go back to the stage of collecting data if you realize, while developing the outline, that there is still information missing.

Producing written text:

Although you should have already written some pre-texts (notes, protocols...), this is where you start your real first draft. You write down what you have found out, but the same time you might find something out while writing, as writing helps you to clear your thoughts and to get new ideas. Therefore, the process can again be recursive: While writing your first draft, you might realize that you have to change the outline of your paper (and you go back to the stage of organization) or you realize that you still need some more information about something (and you go back to the stage of collecting data). Yet, at this stage, you should not go back to the first stage and change your whole topic. Also keep in mind that this is your first draft that hasn't to be perfect yet: Instead of focusing on grammar and style, you should focus on content, argumentation and structure.

From now on, the process gets more linear as you usually don't go back to the previous stages. What follows is the stage of...

Revising:

After you have written your first draft, your task is to transform your text in a way that the reader can follow your thoughts easily. You should revise your text in different steps:

Firstly, check on content: Have you written down everything important? Have you given all the important information? Have you written down all the necessary definitions?

Secondly, check on structure: Do the headlines of the chapters represent the content of the chapters? Is your argumentation comprehensible?

Thirdly, check on style: Do you use language for special purposes? Is there colloquial language in your text? Have you written in a clear and comprehensible way? Have you used the present tense?

Finally, check on grammar, orthography and punctuation.

It might even be helpful to rewrite the total text or parts of it.

Editing:

This should really be the last step before you hand in your paper and should not be done before you have revised your text thoroughly. You go through your whole text and check if everything is OK. This does not only mean spelling mistakes but also the layout of the paper and your citations. Also check on all the additional elements that may have to be included in your paper (attachments, tables of images/abbreviations etc.).