

A Writer's Workshop

Class Test Version

by

Bob Brannan

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A Writer's Workshop

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Chapter 1:

Practicing the Writing Process

The Writing Process:

Discovering Ideas

Organizing Ideas

Drafting

Revising

Editing

Proofreading

How Do We Begin to Write?

Setting out on any journey can be difficult, even if it is not as dangerous as the ocean voyage the young people above are headed toward. To become more accomplished writers is a journey, one that requires courage and commitment and begins with a decision to view ourselves as writers—not necessarily easy to do. Depending on past experiences, we have often already labeled ourselves as O.K., not so hot, or downright terrible. Many of us view the act of writing as mysterious, and the successful writer as someone who has lucked into a wonderful talent. But most people who write are not geniuses. Just like you, accomplished writers have to work hard at their craft. They often begin in confusion, uncertain and anxious about where the ideas will come from, produce some genuinely bad writing in their experimental drafts, and agonize over the final shape of their words—and what others will think of the work.

Whatever your past experiences with writing, you share in the common experience of everyone who seeks to commit words to paper. When you write, be it a brief paragraph or long essay, *you* are a writer, with all the hard work, the aggravation, and the satisfaction that comes along with it.

How do writers get started? To focus your efforts even before the process begins of gathering, arranging, and writing out ideas, ask yourself the following questions:

Questions to Ask at the Start of a Writing Project

1. What is my purpose?

People write for many reasons, often mixing several purposes in one writing project. One purpose usually predominates. Primary reasons for communicating with one another are to entertain, to explain ideas and information, and to persuade someone that a particular point of view or action is the best one. There are, of course, other reasons for writing: you might, for example, write a note to yourself, a letter, or a diary entry simply to record information or work through an idea or an emotion.

2. Who is my audience?

In school many of you have had only one reader: your teacher. However, in “real-world” writing, you will be expected to communicate effectively with different readers, ranging from a fairly general audience to a very specific one. Having a clear sense of who your audience is will help you make decisions about what and how much to say.

3. What, exactly, is the project?

If you are writing for yourself, you may have a fairly clear idea of what you want to say, but writing out what you want to accomplish will still help focus your work. In class your instructor will give you an assignment guide, or you will follow the assignment instructions in the text. In any case, from the outset you should determine what the writing project calls for: purpose, audience, overall organization, length, and due dates for drafts.

4. How can I develop a real interest in the project?

Perhaps the worst approach for producing good writing is to take the passive, I-don’t-care, *whatever* attitude toward your topic. Sometimes you will have to write to specific boundaries, sometimes not. When you have your topic pre-selected, it is still worthwhile to find some part of the topic that appeals to you. When you can choose from a wider variety of topics or select your own, take the time to find one that truly

interests you, rather than going for the first or seemingly easiest topic. If you can develop a commitment to the project, you will find that the long road toward the final paper can be enjoyable and ultimately fulfilling, beyond a mere grade.

Good writing is not easily accomplished; it takes time. Along the way it will help you to develop a clear overview of the project and then to use all the tools for writing success to your advantage. In class you can develop the habits of listening carefully, asking questions, and taking notes, especially when your instructor writes the information on the chalkboard or uses the overhead projector. When handouts are offered, take them home and study or complete them. During class activities and discussion, participate as fully as possible: this kind of behavior will help you to understand every writing assignment. Your instructor will often give the class supplemental instructions to help clarify the writing assignments in the text, and, of course, you should read the textbook student models that demonstrate what kind of paper to shoot for.

After Breaking Ground—into the Writing Process

We all have written paragraphs and essays in the past, and we all have gone through several steps to produce that work, so it is safe to say that we all have *a* writing process. For some of us the process has worked well, for others . . . not so well. The rest of this chapter explains a more formal version of the writing process that many of us already unconsciously practice, at least in part. However, this writing process varies with each individual, and you should freely adapt it to what works best for you.

Steps in the Writing Process

Gathering ideas, shaping them, and getting the words on paper are parts of a natural sequence for most of us, but writers seldom move through them like a train fixed on a track, beginning at one end and progressing to the final station. You will often find yourself brainstorming for ideas in the middle of your paper, editing a sentence as you notice an error, and sometimes substantially reorganizing when you thought the work was nearly complete. Formalized steps are meant as a helpful guide, and you will probably find yourself comfortably using many of them by the end of the term.

The Writing Process

1. Discovering ideas
2. Organizing ideas
3. Drafting
4. Revising
5. Editing
6. Proofreading

Discovering Ideas

How many times have you been faced with a writing project and found your mind blank, with nothing to say? It is a common, frustrating occurrence. Instead of taking your frustration out on the keyboard (which can hurt your hand, and quickly become expensive) or simply giving up, you can try one or several of the following methods for discovering ideas.

Freewriting

Caution:
freewriting
is not a
draft!

If you have never heard the term “freewriting” (rapid, uncensored writing) before, you still may have practiced it as a quick rough draft. The primary value in fast drafting or freewriting is that we are moving forward and getting ideas on paper, some of which may be useable. The danger in freewriting is mistaking what we have produced for a solid first draft—or even a final draft!

No ideas at
all? Try
freewriting.

If you have no idea about what to write, you can freewrite to uncover a few usable ideas. If you already have a topic in hand, then you can try **focused freewriting**. In either case you will want to set aside a designated time, say five to ten minutes, and write non-stop, without censoring your ideas or worrying about grammar, spelling, and punctuation. If you run out of thoughts, still try to keep your pencil or keyboard active. It is not uncommon in a freewrite to produce sentences like the following:

Well I don't know what to say at this point and I think this freewritng stuff isnt going anywhere fast. Whose idea was it for me to try this king of writing anyway? May be Ill humor the teacher and keep it going for a few more minutes. Geez I just looked at the clock and I've got seven motre minutes to write!

Focused
freewrites
can help
after you
have some
direction.

The point is to keep producing words, even when it might seem there is no hope of getting anywhere. Although no one has been able to adequately explain it yet, just the act of writing triggers more words and then, often, usable ideas. The following example is a brief **focused freewrite**:

I get to chose from a list of places or come up with my own place. I don't k ow what the best way is. Maybe I'll try some of the outside places on the list I like the outdoors fishing, hnting, hiking in themountains. I like being around the trees and plants. I seem to have always liked being outside ever since I was a little kid. How about that trrehouse my brother and I built when we were how old? About 11 and 13. Eric was pretty good at figuring out how to get the main platform built and braced into the trees. He was always better at building stuff than I was but we worked preety ell on that job. Let's see I'm supposed to be comeing up with a description of something. May be the

treehouse could work. I wonder if it's still there? I could drive back into the old neighborhood and look I guess. How many trees, 3. We had to nail on to those big old catalpa trees in our backyard in South Bend. Dad would only let us put it up about ten-twelve feet from the ground. No way to get up high into those huge branches. . . .

In this freewrite, the author discovers several potential ideas for a descriptive paper -- the backyard itself, the tree house, or the author's former house might make interesting subjects to explore further.

Activity 1-1: Focused Freewrite

Select a topic from the following list and write nonstop on it for five minutes. Remember not to worry about grammar, spelling, or punctuation, and don't be concerned if the ideas get tangled.

Airport

Library

Restaurant

Cafeteria

Kitchen

Attic

Gym

Football field

Car wash

Woods

Beach

Swimming pool

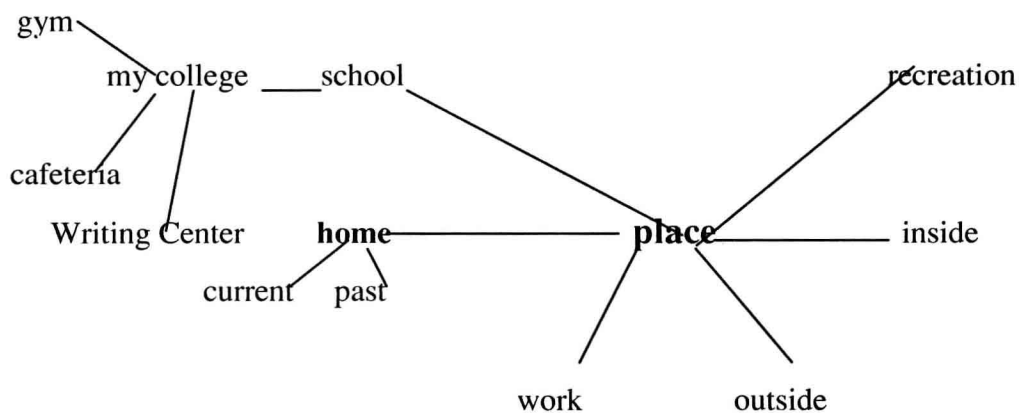
Interstate

Wharf

Zoo

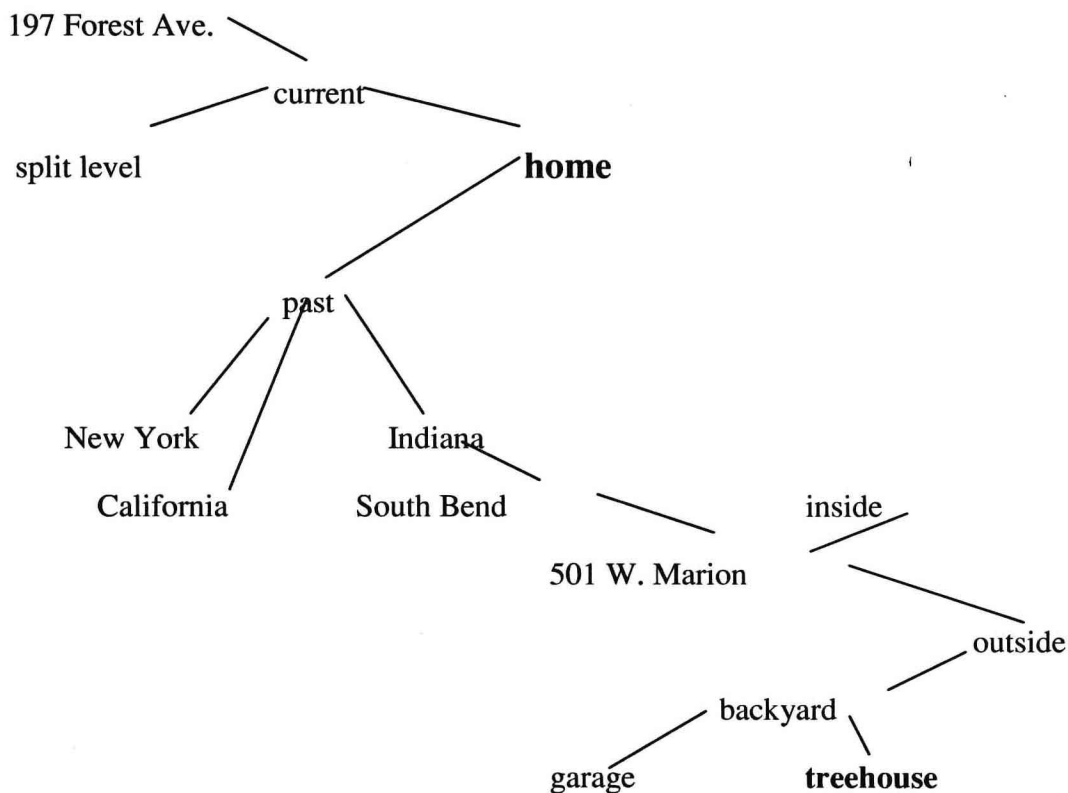
Clustering

Clustering is another good prewriting technique. This method asks you to write a single word or phrase in the center of a piece of paper and then to write down around it any word or phrase that the center word brings to mind. After you have one or several words connected to the original word, try to connect additional words to the second set. Keep extending your network of connected words until you find a grouping that seems of interest. Consider the following cluster:



General
cluster

If the author wanted to select the home cluster to begin a more **focused cluster**, the next step might look like this:



Focused
cluster

Now the author has arrived at the tree house as a possible topic for his description paragraph. He might choose to cluster again for specific details, or he might decide to try another method for generating, like brainstorming or listing.

Activity 1-2: Focused Clustering

Select a topic from the list in Activity 1-1 (or continue with the one you have already chosen) and create a focused cluster like the one above. Work for five minutes, trying to fill a page with word associations.

Brainstorming (listing)

In brainstorming, either by yourself or with others, you list in a word or phrase every idea that occurs to you when you think about the general topic at hand. If we extended the tree house topic from our clustering activity, we might end up with this sort of list:

Tree house:

mine and my brother's
no one else allowed
sturdy
good in rain
our gang

dad got the shingles
climbing the rope
sleeping outside
water balloon fights
creaking in the wind

General
brainstorming
list

If we **focused** the list, we could concentrate primarily on the specific words and sensory details that make for good description:

Tree house:**Specific words:**

ten-twelve feet off the ground
three catalpa trees
back yard
by red-brick patio
rope to climb—no stairs or ladder
rope to swing from
red shingles
white pine walls
painted slate gray

Sensory details:

sight: colors: red shingles, gray boards,
green leaves
sound: boards creaking, wind in the branches,
cars passing in the alley, mower,
boys laughing and shouting
touch: rough feel of bark, splinters,
rope in my hands, heat and humidity
smell: fumes from the cars passing,
cut grass, clean air after rain
taste: baloney sandwiches on white bread
with mustard, potato chips

Focused
brainstorming
list

Often after you have created a list that is somewhat focused, you will find yourself with a rough or scratch outline that you can then begin to work with, looking for patterns to arrange and ideas to delete or expand.

Activity 1-3: Brainstorming (listing)

Choose a new topic from the list in Activity 1-1 (or use the topic you have already chosen) and create a list of descriptive phrases that apply to your topic. Try to include words that help you to visualize the place and any other words that suggest sound, touch, taste, or smell.

Journalist's Questions

After you have a fairly clear idea of your writing topic, you can ask yourself the classic journalist's questions "who," "what," "when," "where," and "why." You should also add "how" and "what was the result." To continue with our tree house example:

Who: my older brother Eric, me, and our "gang"

What: our tree house, building it and playing in it

When: summer of 1979

Where: South Bend, Indiana, backyard of our house

Why: for a place of our own and besides tree houses are just fun

How: built it mostly by ourselves with some help from dad

What was the result: closer feeling between Eric and me and good times

Activity 1-4: Journalist's Questions

Select a topic from the list in Activity 1-1 (or continue with the one you have been working with) and create a list of answers to the questions above.

Patterns of Development

Another way to generate material for your paper is to turn the patterns of development into questions and then apply them to your topic.

Narration: telling a brief story to make a point

What kind of story could I tell to show someone the tree house?

Description: using vivid details to paint a picture

What details do I remember that could help show someone the tree house?

Illustration: giving examples to illustrate some point

What examples could I give to show the tree house?

Comparison/contrast: showing how your subject is like and unlike similar subjects

What could I compare or contrast the tree house to that my reader would know?

Classification/division: putting your subject into a group, separating it from others like it

What group does the tree house fit into? What other related group is the tree house different from?

Cause/effect: telling what actions can affect your subject, what effects can flow from it

How did the tree house come about? What were its effects on me?

Process analysis: telling how your subject works

How did the tree house work? What were regular activities I did there?

Definition: telling the essential characteristics of your subject

What makes the tree house unique?

Persuasion: trying to move someone to agreement with you or to some action

How could I persuade someone of the value a tree house can have for a child?

Activity 1-5: Patterns of Development

Select a topic from the list in Activity 1-1 (or continue with the one you have been working with) and create a list of questions like the ones above. Next, answer each question in a sentence or two.

Journal Entries

Keeping a journal in which you write for a few minutes every day can be a good general source of ideas. If you decide to keep a personal journal, or your instructor assigns one, you can benefit by additional daily writing, getting valuable practice in organizing and expressing your thoughts and perhaps gaining some insights into yourself and the world around you.

However, the journal entries in *A Writer's Workshop* are aimed at helping you to complete major writing assignments, paragraphs or essays. If you answer them carefully and thoughtfully, these entries will help you to discover, focus, organize, and develop ideas for writing. As you respond to the entries, remember that your ideas are what count: while it is never a bad idea to spend some time editing your writing (even journals), grammar, spelling, and punctuation should be a low priority.

Keeping a
Writer's
Journal

Let your
audience
help focus
your
material.

Considering Your Audience

While we sometimes write only for ourselves, we frequently write for others. These “others” may be a relatively general audience (though not the entire planet—not everyone on earth is interested in a particular piece of writing, or they may be quite specific. And we may be directing our work toward several kinds of readers, often a more specific group within a larger secondary audience. When you consider a subject to write about, you will usually find that knowing who you are writing to will help you *generate* and *select* interesting ideas.

If you were describing an action/adventure film like *Armageddon* to two friends, one who is a sci-fi fan and the other who prefers more serious, “literary” films, which of the two following paragraphs would you be more likely to match with your friends’ interests?

1. *This movie makes you think an asteroid is really going to slam into earth. The opening special effects are great! Blazing chunks of rock rain down on New York City, exploding cars, tearing craters in the streets, punching holes through skyscrapers, and throwing people all over the place. The action is non-stop. From the meteorite bombardment, to Bruce Willis finding his daughter in bed with one of his oil drillers and then chasing after him with a shotgun, through the astronaut training and mission to blow up the asteroid—you can’t even get up to hit the restroom, or you’ll miss too much.*
2. *There’s plenty of action in the film, but not all of it is explosions. The relationships really make the movie interesting. Bruce Willis plays a loving father who is having difficulty communicating with his daughter and accepting that she has become a woman. To complicate matters, she is in love with one of Willis’s employees, who returns her love, and their relationship adds tension to the film. The audience is not sure how Willis will ultimately react to the young man. As the film progresses, several characters must make difficult personal decisions, ultimately testing their loyalty, courage, and sense of self-sacrifice.*

Clearly, the first version tries to capture the attention of the action fan while the second goes for the friend who favors more serious films.

Writers must constantly create and then select material based on what they think would interest their reader. While much writing appeals to a fairly large “general” audience, even within that group you can discover similarities and differences that will help you to write in a way that captures the reader’s attention. Notice some of these possible defining characteristics of potential readers:

Describing Your Audience

| | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| age | occupation | general knowledge |
| sex | education | particular knowledge of a subject |
| race | political affiliation | level of intelligence |
| ethnicity | religion | wants |
| country | social groups | needs |
| region | hobbies | goals |
| city | sports | prejudices |
| neighborhood | special interests | personality |

What are they like—your audience?

Human beings are a diverse group. If you can develop a real sense for your audience, you are much more likely to write in an engaging way—and come closer to enjoying the process of the writing.

Activity 1-6: Considering Your Audience

Assume that you have rented the film *The Wizard of Oz* for the evening, and you are trying to persuade two friends to join you. One friend doesn't mind animation but thinks a movie sixty years old would be boring. The other friend doesn't much like children's stories but does like horror and supernatural films. List three points you could make or examples you might choose to help convince your friends to watch the movie with you. (If you have not seen *The Wizard of Oz*, choose any film you have enjoyed, list two friends who might not like it for different reasons, and then list three examples/points that would help persuade each person.)

Organizing Ideas

If you have tried prewriting, you should now have some ideas for your paper. Before moving ahead, though, you must decide on a central point -- a **rough topic sentence** for a paragraph or a **working thesis sentence** for an essay -- in the form of the topic plus a statement that expresses an opinion, attitude, or feeling about it. For instance, in our tree house description the author might want to focus on adventure, in which case many of the examples and details he chooses would point toward the fun and excitement he had: "My brother and I had a world of good times in our backyard tree house."

Now you could just plunge into the draft, writing furiously and hoping for the best. Sometimes this approach works well, especially if the material falls into a natural order or if you are fortunate enough to have "a feel" for the best method of organizing the writing. But often we are not sure how to handle all the words sitting in front of us. This is the time to reconsider your purpose (to entertain, explain, or persuade), review the assignment instructions for suggestions, and try some informal or formal **outlining**. If we chose to describe a place, we might use a spatial method of organizing material (moving from one side to another, inside to outside, top to bottom) and then create a rough or "scratch" outline. Look again at the brainstorming we did for the tree house example:

Tree house:

I. Specific words:

ten-twelve feet off the ground
three catalpa trees
back yard
by red-brick patio
rope to climb—no stairs or ladder
rope to swing from
red shingles
white pine walls
painted slate gray

II. Sensory details:

sight: colors: red shingles, gray boards,
green leaves
sound: boards creaking, wind in the branches,
cars passing in the alley, mower,
boys laughing and shouting
touch: rough feel of bark, splinters,
rope in my hands, heat and humidity
smell: fumes from the cars passing,
cut grass, clean air after rain
taste: baloney sandwiches on white bread
with mustard, potato chips

Help focus
your paper
with a
central
point.

The author might choose to arrange the material in a description of the tree and the tree house from bottom to top:

Rough outline

1. by red-brick patio (base of tree)
2. three catalpa trees (focus on lower trunks)
3. rope to climb
4. ten-twelve feet from ground (bottom of tree house)
5. white pine walls
6. red shingles (on roof)
7. rope to swing from (tied over the tree house)

Creating a
“scratch”
outline

Once this structure is established, additional details (for example, were there windows?) and some or all of the sensory details (the chalky smell of the brick, the rough feel of the bark, the deep yellow of the rope) from the other list can be integrated.

Activity 1-7: Rough Outlines

Look back at your list from Activity #3 and rearrange the examples/details, moving from one side of your place to another, inside to outside, top to bottom, or front to back.

More formal outlines are particularly useful for longer writing projects, and when you move into essay writing, you might try one. Below notice the pattern of a formal outline: Thesis statement (controlling idea of essay)

- I. First topic sentence (first main supporting idea) } paragraph one
 - A. First supporting example
 - 1. First specific supporting detail
 - 2. Second specific supporting detail
 - a. Additional supporting detail
 - b. Additional supporting detail
 - B. Second supporting example
 - II. Second topic sentence (second main supporting idea) } paragraph two
- This pattern continues for the length of the essay.

Formal
outline for
an essay

Drafting

With your material in hand and the overall shape of your paper determined, you can confidently begin the *first* draft (remember that more drafts will come).

However, before jumping into the writing, take a moment to prepare your surroundings. If you feel comfortable working in the middle of noise and activity, great, but many people do not compose well in this situation. If you are a person who needs quiet for concentration, find a place that will give you this (admittedly, difficult sometimes). Try to set aside ample time to complete whatever writing goal you have determined; perhaps thirty minutes is enough, perhaps several hours is more like it. Take a few minutes to decide what you need to be comfortable while you write: soft (loud?) music, a window, a glass of juice, food, a relaxing chair? Are you more productive curled up in bed, or do

Create a
comfortable
writing
space.

you get more done in the library or a computer lab? Try to create whatever environment helps you work most efficiently.

As you begin to write, stay focused on your main idea (topic or thesis sentence), purpose, and audience. In the first draft your goal is to produce a useable paper for the upcoming revision, so try not to concern yourself too much with grammar, spelling, and punctuation (though it is common for writers to occasionally backtrack to correct minor errors as they go). Since you are trying to get ideas on paper, constantly interrupting yourself to fine-tune phrasing and sentences often breaks the rhythm of your writing. That flow of words is important in several ways, including helping ideas blend into a solid unit of thought. Start-stop writing can lead to problems in unity as too many related ideas come piling into your paragraph. However, rereading your work in progress, especially for content, can also keep you connected to each unfolding idea.

Try to keep at your work for the scheduled time (going beyond if you find the words coming easily), and resist the impulse to be negative about the draft. There will be ample time to look more critically at your writing later. If you are usually a fast writer but find your draft on this particular occasion becoming scattered, force yourself to slow down and be a bit more reflective. If, on the other hand, you typically write slowly and are not having good luck with a draft, try speeding up. Be willing to experiment with different approaches. Many people are comfortable composing at a keyboard; others prefer to draft on paper. But if you are not moving well with either medium, try switching. Finally, if you have difficulty resuming a draft after you have ended a writing session, you might try leaving an idea or even a sentence unfinished and then beginning at that point. Your former idea and sentences can help move you forward.

If you reach a place where no words are coming (writer's block), you might try one or several of the following solutions:

Breaking Out of Writer's Block

1. Return to your central point. Be sure that you have written out a working topic or thesis sentence at the top of the page, where you can reread it frequently as you compose.
2. Try any of the discovery methods listed in this chapter (clustering, listing, etc.)
3. Talk to yourself on paper. Begin a conversation about the problems you are encountering.
4. Talk to yourself out loud, or have a conversation with another person. Often just having someone else listen can help clarify a fuzzy idea or give you a new direction.
5. Read what others have written. *A Writer's Workshop* offers many models of the kind of assignments you will be working on. See how other writers have solved the problems.
6. Try some bad writing. To get around the "perfection syndrome" that sometimes freezes us in our tracks, deliberately write the worst sentences you can think up as you move through your paper. Say to yourself, "I know this is junk writing, but that's what I'm trying for." You might be surprised at how many useable ideas and even sentences result.
7. If you are writing an essay and the introduction is a problem, just jump into the body paragraphs. If your first body paragraph is not working, move on to the next.

In drafting, keep self-criticism to a minimum.