



Writing Quest

If you want to learn to write, first consider that writing is a complex thing and everyone has an opinion on it. Some treat writing as a flexible, reciprocating process or as a purpose-driven, reader-based product. Some think it's the application of writing habits to appropriate activities, or a representation of self, culture, values, or modes. There are many choices because there are so many ways to use writing and so many teachers with their own philosophies of learning. I believe that writing is all of these things, and the idea of a "Writing Quest" reflects this.

In this discussion, the metaphor of a quest is shown by a sequence of progressively advanced principles. The destination of our quest is the Great Pyramid of Egypt. Like the pyramid, our writing should have a broad knowledge base and a refined expression at the peak. Our writing starts with ideas that never are explored, but it focuses as it grows, like the narrowing of the pyramid sides. The principles of writing are organized from bottom to top, left to right. The left side of the pyramid is concerned with form, while the right side is concerned with function.

I'm interested in quests because it is a rich metaphor, and because at least one of my ancestors went on a quest to the Holy Land, as evidenced by the scallops shells on my family crest. This symbol indicates that once someone embarks on a mission, the shell is permanently open, and you can't put the halves of the shell back together. A quest is an appropriate cultural metaphor for writing because it has a physical goal in mind and it takes specific actions in a repetitive, daily routine to get there. A quest also requires the highest discipline, and in the end, the writer has undergone a change in self and clarification of personal values. I fully developed the quest metaphor in my book, *Writing the True Self*, while the following is primarily process-oriented, with the addition of principles to indicate that the lessons here can be transferred anywhere.

Comprehension: List the Specifics

When you are ready to explore college writing, all you really have is your will. You know a lot about writing and language, but you're probably frustrated by conflicting expectations. In high school, teachers asked us mostly to summarize other people's ideas. In college writing, we need to say something of our own that we can be proud of. The assignment is a good starting point. Read it. Listen to an explanation of it. Ask questions about it. Then make a list of potential topics and add details. To find out more, do a web search, do some reading, or talk to an expert.

Consideration: Choose an Audience

After you know what your topic is, it's crucial to find out about your audience. Writing for the general public is a good beginning, but narrowing that field can help you to get more specific ideas. Some people choose a relative or loved one as the audience, to get some connection. Next, decide what you want to do for them, hopefully something that they'd like, which then informs your statement of purpose. You can show consideration by asking people you already know what they feel about your topic, how it effects them directly, and why they are interested. Your writing will bring you closer together, which will make you feel grounded and purposeful.

Cognition: Think about Ideas

Think about your subject in the back of your mind, letting the ideas flow without trying to filter them. Focus on facts, not the connections between them. This is the brainstorming method of freewriting. If you prefer talking, record your voice for 30 minutes, listen to everything, and only write down what appealed to you. If you say something random, write down it anyway, because you may be tracing a thought that you haven't fully processed. Work through your thoughts systematically, to see how your argument is going to look.

Inspiration: Search your Feelings

Seek inspiration, that intangible quality that gives deeper meaning and direction to a piece of writing. Narrow down your audience so that you can consider their specific needs and connect with them personally. Avoid overgeneralizing about your listeners and their context, because it will lead to impersonal writing. With a preliminary idea about your reader, you can feel where they need to go, and figure out how to take them there later. Thinking usually involves dividing something into parts, but inspiration leads you to work comparatively, respecting boundaries.

Organization: Choose a Structure

Certain ideas work well together and make connections that are compelling. In order to coordinate properly and make sense logically, your ideas have to have organization and balance. Little ideas are a good start, but putting them into arguments gives energy and power. Forming coherent paragraphs is the next step. Group your thoughts into different categories, focusing on variety, which keeps you from repeating yourself and gives you direction. Using a diagram can help substantially, especially if you have never thought about something before.

Attention: Focus on what's Crucial

A few problems might come up at this stage, all of which can be solved with focus. If you care or know too much about an issue, your writing might be self-indulgently scattered, with no direction or intention, which confuses readers. If you care too little, or don't know enough, you might be stuck on one issue, without development or details. So gather your thoughts, visualize what your audience needs and narrow your focus with a thesis statement, which is a coherent expression of your argument. Focus on the need-to-know ideas, filing away anything that's not relevant. All of your choices should be informed by an understanding of audience and purpose.

Perception: Develop a Point of View

Although your topic is part of you, perspective gives you freedom in writing. As you decide how to approach the actual writing of the paper, choose the most important concepts from your thesis and be clear about them. Take these ideas and see how they orient to each other, through the thesis and argument. This will give you a sense of what you want to accomplish, and will help you to commit to that outcome. Finally, visualize how your audience fits into this specifically, and think about the point of view that will convince them effectively.

Expression: Find your Tone of Voice

Having considered your audience, topic, genre, and purpose, now let your voice be free as you express what comes to your mind. The tone of your voice will naturally change, based on your vision of the readers and sense of their needs, because it does so routinely on a daily basis. Voice is the most normal thing in the world, but if you work at it, voice can also be powerful because it develops that connection to readers. Clear and consistent prose with understanding builds trust, while appropriate sharing builds empathy and believability. Just as characters in novels fascinate us through dialogue, when you're writing an essay, the character is you.

Representation: Work on sentences

In the Expression step, you should have written a draft, perhaps 60% of the final length of the paper. Now you need to work on those sentences to make them clearer and meaningful. Novel ways of representing your ideas are a careful balance between the expected and the unknown. The essay genre calls for clear paragraphs, logical connections, and arguments with substantial claims and valid evidence. Average sentence length should be over 10 words, and paragraphs should have over eight sentences. But within these criteria, your voice is new and exciting, and your understanding of issues will speak to readers based on validity and sincerity.

Communication: Use your Friends

Find people you can work well with, and get advice about your paper in class or elsewhere. In a four participant read-aloud group, one person reads a paper, while another pays attention for praiseworthy ideas. The third person listens for unclear passages, and the last one thinks about possible revisions. A read-aloud group ensures honesty, direct communication, and a positive connection with the audience. Be sure to pause at the periods and commas. Then get an expert reader to proofread and edit. Sharing with others is a part of the process before the result.

Articulation: Don't Stop Revising

An articulate person uses good diction. Words make that crucial connection with the reader, so understand their meanings. Use the spell-checker dutifully, the grammar checker cautiously. Be sure that your sentences convey ideas in a clear, thoughtful, credible fashion, representing all of the thought and feeling that went into your writing process. Eliminate the negative, like word usage errors, slang, and passive voice. Accentuate the positive by tapping into the beauty of writing, adding detail through metaphors, contrast, and subtle use of literary devices.

Attention: You do Care

In the ideal scenario, you can show commitment to values through your writing and deeply affect the audience. Revise until you've achieved this goal, because your readers "don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." That caring attention can be for the reader directly, or through the medium of the discipline and mutual respect. Some aspects of excellent writing can't be taught. It is artistic and compelling for reasons you can't explain immediately. It can be calculated and predicted, but it's something that happens naturally. There is an effect on the audience during their reading of your work, and the sooner you decide that you want to pay attention to them and serve their needs, the better your writing will be.