Improving Your Writing for AWC: The Whirlwind Tour

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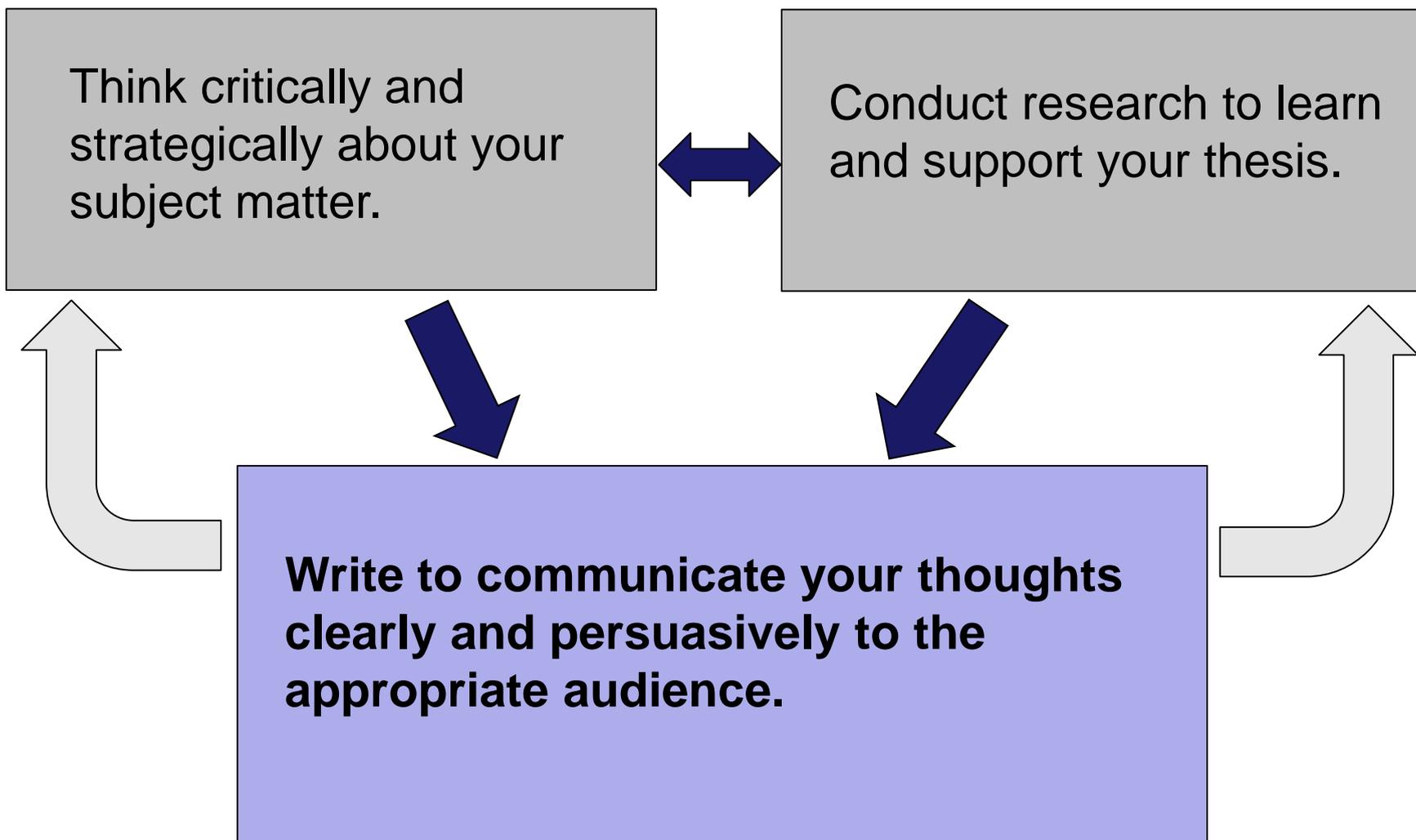(links updated 19 July 2016)

Writing Is A Tool

Think critically and strategically about your subject matter.

Conduct research to learn and support your thesis.

Write to communicate your thoughts clearly and persuasively to the appropriate audience.

Academic Writing

"Good academic writing is more than just writing. It is a process of critical thinking, research, and analysis that can only enhance an officer's ability to do his or her job effectively."

--*Academic Writing for Military Personnel* (Adam Chapnick and Craig Stone)

What We Will Discuss

- What are the traits of good writing in an academic context?

- What process should you follow when you write?

- What are some specific strategies for improving your writing?

- Where can you go for more guidance?

Traits of Good Academic Writing

1. Has something useful / important to say

2. Is based on a relevant, precise, manageable thesis

3. Says enough to fully explain/support the thesis and each supporting idea but doesn't say anything irrelevant

4. Is well researched

5. Considers alternative ideas or counterarguments
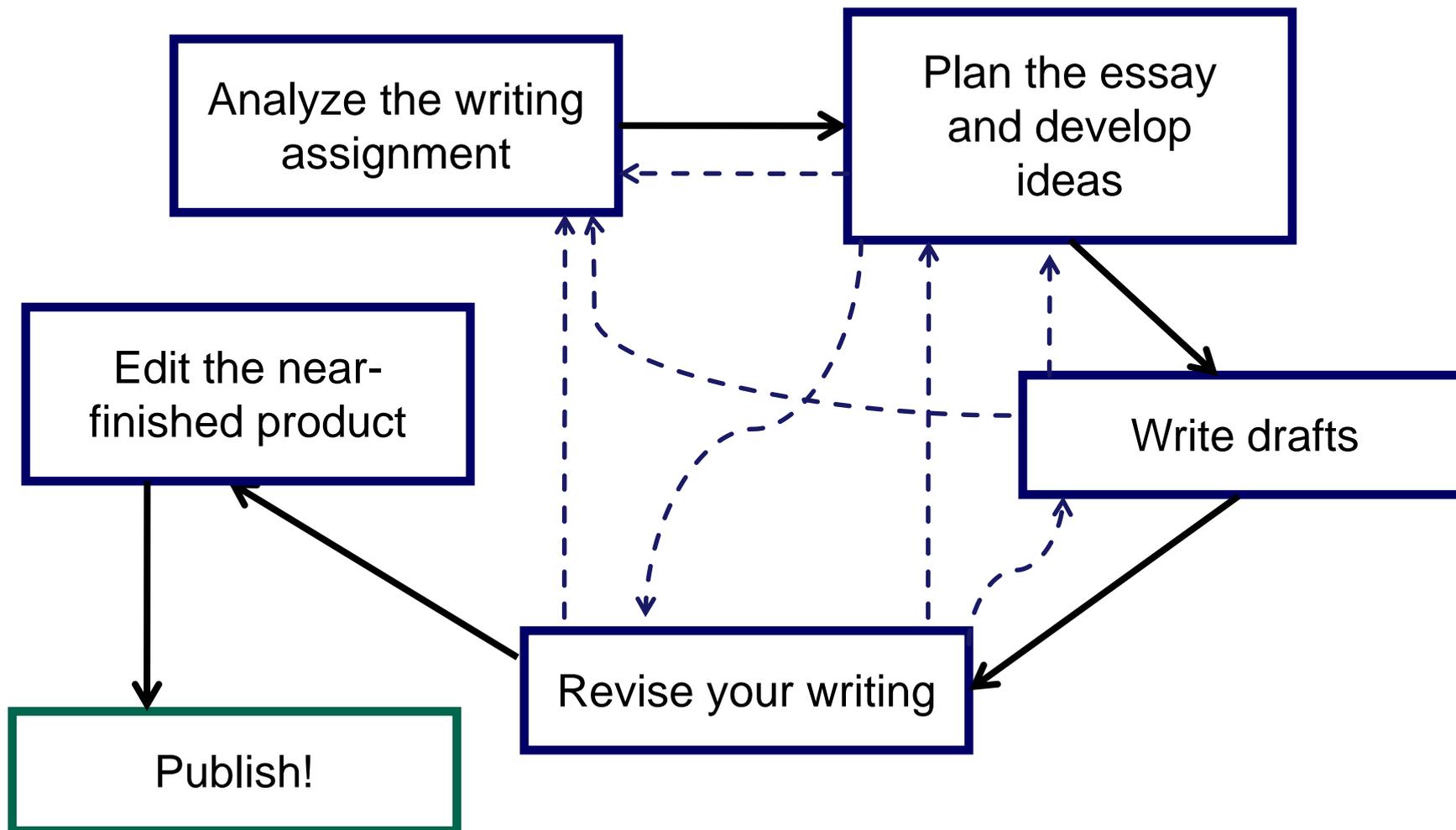
Traits of Good Academic Writing

6. Is logically organized

7. Uses organizational strategies to guide the reader

8. Gains and holds the reader's interest

9. Presents ideas in clear language

10. Has a straightforward, suitable, fluent style ("Good academic writing should go almost unnoticed.")

11. Conforms to standard English grammar

Stages of Writing

Analyze the writing assignment → Plan the essay and develop ideas

Plan the essay and develop ideas → Write drafts

Write drafts → Revise your writing

Revise your writing → Edit the near-finished product

Edit the near-finished product → Publish!

Stage 1: Analyze the Writing Assignment

Analyze the Writing Assignment

1. What topic are you going to write about?

    • What are the current and important issues in your field? What are people talking about right now? What conversation do you want to enter?

    • What are the major questions being asked by experts or practitioners?

    • What is controversial?

    • What are you an expert on?

    • Or what do you need to know more about?

    • What are the pressing problems in your field? What might the solutions be?

    • Is there a new or emerging issue that people need to be talking about?

    • Is a problem looming that needs to be headed off?

2. What is the *purpose* of the assignment?

- Explain a process?

- Argue for a particular course of action?

- Argue for a particular interpretation?

- Solve a problem?

- Analyze a text? (e.g., book review)

- Demonstrate your knowledge? (e.g., essay exam)

   What does your writing need to accomplish? May be more than one purpose (e.g., explain a process and propose ways to make it more efficient).

Analyze the Writing Assignment

3. Who are your intended readers?

- What do they already know?

- What terms will need to be defined? What will need to be explained?

- What attitude are they likely to have toward your thesis?

- What do you want your reader to do after reading?

Analyze the Writing Assignment

Develop America's Airmen Today ... for Tomorrow

4. What research will be required?

- What aspects of your topic do you need to learn more about?

- What kind of evidence will *your audience* find persuasive? (quantitative data, expert testimony, examples, historical evidence, etc.)

- What are the possible sources for evidence? (journals, books, interviews, eyewitness accounts, etc.)

- Who are the recognized experts? What are the seminal books and articles in the field?

- What information will you need to cite your sources?

The First Command

5. How long must the essay be?

- Choose a topic suitable for the page-length requirement

6. What timetable will you follow?

- Set a tentative timeline for finalizing the thesis, doing research, developing a formal outline, drafting each major part of your essay

- Build in time to let your drafts "rest"

- Allocate significant time to revision and editing

Stage 2: Plan the Essay and Develop Ideas

Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

Tools for developing your ideas:

- Freewriting

- Brainstorming list

- Journalist's questions (who, what, where, when, why, how)
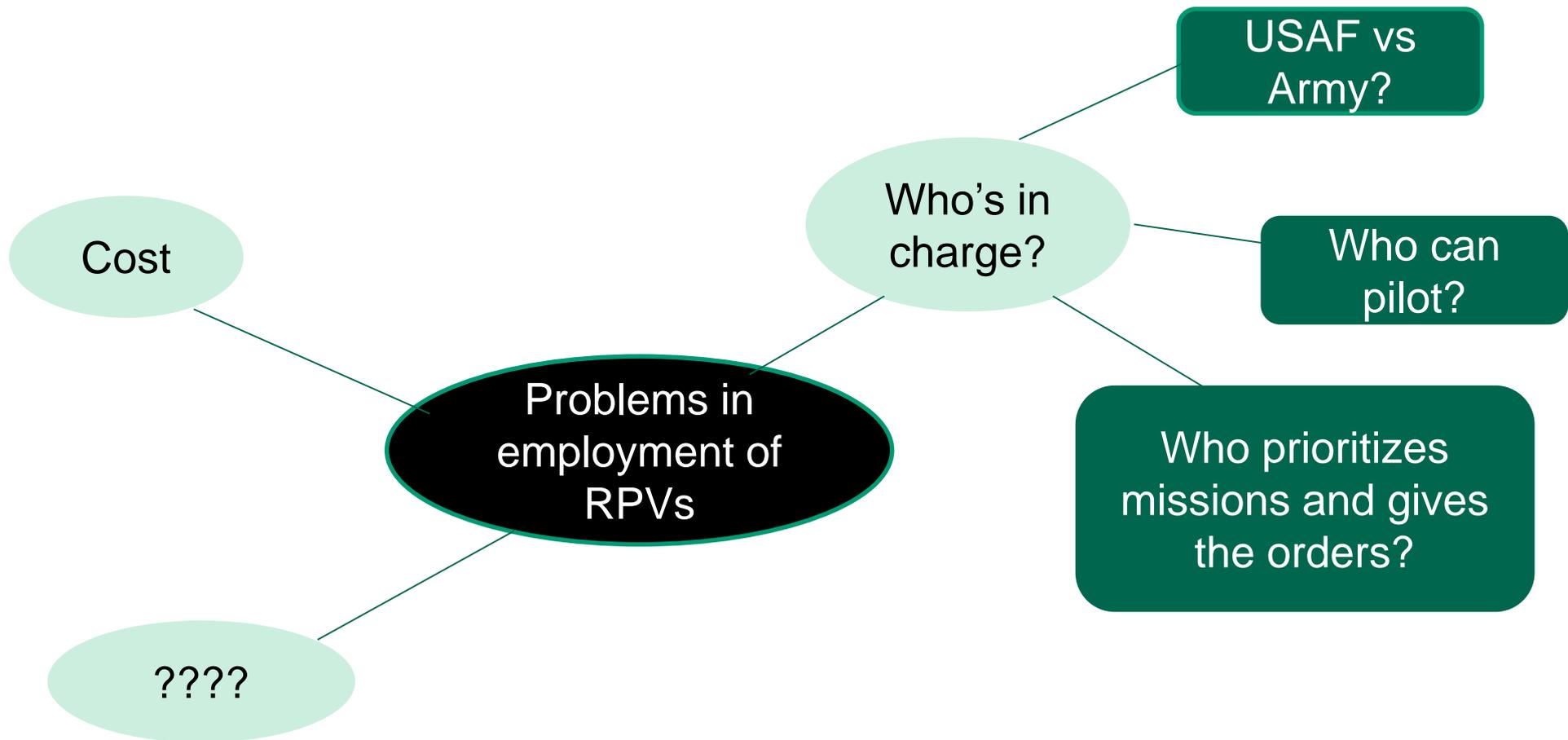
- Classical topics, stasis questions, tagmemics
  (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/673/02/)

- Clustering

- Writer's notebook

Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

Clustering

```
                                              ┌──────────────┐
                                              │  USAF vs     │
                                              │  Army?       │
                                              └──────────────┘

                              ╭─────────────╮         ┌──────────────┐
            ╭──────╮          │  Who's in   │         │  Who can     │
            │ Cost │          │  charge?    │         │  pilot?      │
            ╰──────╯          ╰─────────────╯         └──────────────┘

                  ╭────────────────╮        ┌─────────────────────┐
                  │  Problems in   │        │  Who prioritizes    │
                  │  employment of │        │  missions and gives │
                  │  RPVs          │        │  the orders?        │
                  ╰────────────────╯        └─────────────────────┘

            ╭──────╮
            │ ???? │
            ╰──────╯
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Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

Thesis (main idea):

- Should state an argument you intend to support

- Should be relevant (timely, addresses something that matters)

- Should be precise (not vague, defined in concrete terms)

- Should be manageable (can support all parts of thesis, incorporate research, and address objections within page requirements)

- May change as you research and write

Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

Sample Thesis from Lt Col David K. Moeller, "Updating a Cold War Relic: Ensuring That the New Air Force Doctrine Document 3 Reflects Current Air Force Roles and Missions," *Air & Space Power Journal* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 30-34.

During the process of updating and renumbering AFDD 2 to AFDD 3, doctrine writers should revise the content to provide Airmen a true capstone document that articulates foundational air, space, and cyber concepts and offers guidance for operational-level planning and synchronization during joint operations. Expanding this document to accurately reflect the capabilities that air, space, and cyber forces bring to the wide range of military operations will enhance our understanding of Air Force roles and missions, provide planning guidance to operational-level staffs, and create a single-source reference document that addresses the relationship among air, space, and cyberspace concepts, planning, and operations.

Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

Basic structure of all essays:

- Introduction with thesis, background

- Body that provides background and develops evidence to demonstrate thesis

- Conclusion

Moeller's essay in *ASPJ* (previous slide)

- Introduction with background that defines problem and thesis

- What does AFDD 2 say? (discusses by chapter)

- What should AFDD 3 say? (introduces construct and discusses by section)

- Conclusion (why proposal is important, how it will solve problem)

Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

- Outline to organize your material

- To divide, you need at least two parts (if there's an A, there must be a B)

- Use good subordination:

  A. Word processing programs
     1. Microsoft Word
     2. Word Perfect

- Bad subordination:

  A. Word processing programs
     1. Microsoft Word
     2. Useful
     3. Obsolete

Example from University of Hawaii

Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

- For more information on how to develop a formal outline:

    -- https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/01/

    -- any college writing handbook such as St. Martin's or Little, Brown

Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

Various ways to organize body:

- Spatial (e.g., by region of the world)

- Chronological (e.g., by major conflict)

- General-to-specific (general principle followed by examples; recommendation followed by reasons; interpretation of facts followed by supporting data)

- Specific-to-general (specific data followed by general principle)

- Problem-solution

- Climactic organization (in order of increasing drama or significance)

- Most familiar to least familiar

- Simplest to most complex

Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

- Each paragraph should have one identifiable idea/topic

- All contents in that paragraph should relate to that topic

- Should be clear how the paragraph topic relates to the essay thesis

- Each paragraph should be adequately developed

- Very short paragraphs probably indicate underdeveloped ideas

- Very long paragraphs may indicate poor organization and lack of transitions between ideas

- Good discussion at https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/606/01/

Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

- Outline and essay should have **unity** and **coherence**

- Apply this checklist:

  - Is each main section relevant to the main idea of the essay (thesis)?

  - Within main sections of the outline, does each example or detail support the principal idea of that section?

  - Do the ideas follow in a clear sequence?

  - Are the parts of the essay logically connected?

  - Are the connections clear and smooth?

    From *Little, Brown Handbook*, 8th edition.

Plan Essay and Develop Ideas

- How will you use document design to communicate?

- What parts does your subject matter break into? (sections of your paper)

- What headings will you use to organize the essay (sections, subsections)?

- What tables and illustrations will support your points?

- If you want to reprint someone else's table or illustration, you must cite the source (and get permission if you intend to publish).

- Refer to the *AU Style and Author Guide* (sections 1.18, 1.33, and 1.55).

Stage 3: Write the Draft

Write a Draft

- Don't worry about grammatical correctness at all while writing your draft.

- Don't revise much while writing, especially during first draft.

- Start writing whatever part of the essay you want to.

- If you get stuck, move on to another part.

- If you can't find the right word, leave a blank. If you think of more than one way to say something, put both alternatives in brackets and decide later.

- Before you take a break, write the first sentence of the next paragraph.

Write a Draft

- Keep your writer's notebook with you when you're not writing.

- Don't be a critic while you write.

- Refer often to your outline and thesis statement.

- But if you get a better idea, follow it.

- Hit "save" very often!!

Write a Draft

Introduction:

- Sets the context
- Explains why the topic matters
- Gains the reader's interest
- States the thesis
- Usually previews the main points and structure of the essay
- https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/724/01/

Write a Draft

Some ways to introduce your paper:

- Ask a question
- Use an interesting (related!) anecdote
- Quote an expert
- Give an attention-getting statistic
- Summarize the argument your thesis refutes
- Provide background
- Introduce a specific, relevant historical situation (not "throughout history")
- Define a term (not "according to Webster's")

Write a Draft

- Conclusion reemphasizes your main idea and provides closure

- Some strategies:
  - Summarize your main points
  - Restate the thesis but also reflect on its implications
  - Many of the same techniques for introductions can be used (quotation, relevant anecdote, etc.)
  - Call for future action
  - Make a prediction about the future
  - Warn about the consequences if action isn't taken
  - Make sure the reader gets the significance of your thesis
  - Don't raise new ideas
  - Don't draw conclusions unwarranted by your evidence
  - Don't apologize for your conclusions

Write a Draft

Using sources well to support your argument:

- Integrate quotations into your argument. Don't include a quotation you aren't going to discuss.

- Don't use a quotation merely to repeat what you've just said.

- Quote source when there's no other clear way to say it or the original writer's words are especially good. Otherwise, consider paraphrasing.

- Paraphrase = put source's idea in *your own words* (not just change a couple of the source's words).

- Rule of thumb: If your quotation is 8 lines or more, make it a block quotation. (p. 137 in *AU Style and Author Guide*)

Write a Draft

Ways to integrate quotations into your text:

- Integrate phrases or parts of sentences into your own sentences.

- Ex: One should not forget that Pres. Ronald Reagan once said that he "dream[ed]" of a "world free of nuclear weapons."[1]

- Ex: Chapter 2 begins by declaring that "the overriding objective of any military force is to . . . conduct the nation's wars."[2]

- He said, according to Samuel Huntington, as Smith argues . . . (quoting entire sentences).

- Ex: As the great Roman strategist Vegetius once wrote, "Si vis pacem para bellum" (If you desire peace, prepare for war).[3]

Examples from Summer 2010 *Air and Space Power Journal*

Write a Draft

Ways to integrate quotations into your text:

- Use colon before quotation if your sentence and the quotation are both complete sentences.

- Ex: The GAO report of 2008 also used the term "Coast Guard Option" to describe one choice for equipping the National Guard for its domestic-support mission: "Under an alternative approach modeled after the Coast Guard, DHS would have authority and would provide funding to the National Guard Bureau to organize, train, and *equip the National* Guard with unique capabilities for civil support missions. The National Guard would maintain its existing command and control relationship for civil support operations" (emphasis added).[4]

Example from Summer 2010 *Air and Space Power Journal*, p. 42

Write a Draft

Ways to integrate quotations into your text:

- Use block quotations for long quotes. (p. 137 of *Style Guide*)

- Insert a word/phrase in brackets if necessary to clarify meaning.

- Ex: "A JFO is a trained and certified service member who can . . . perform [terminal guidance operations]."[5]

- Make quotation fit grammar of your sentence.

- Ex: However, recognizing that the core role of airpower is offense, he "maintain[s] that the heart of simultaneous offense/defense is offense. In other words, offense is the best defense."[6]

Examples from Summer 2010 *Air and Space Power Journal*

Stage 4: Revise the Draft

Revise the Draft

- Revising is *re-seeing*—not correcting errors.

- Take a break before you revise.

- Look at each paragraph. Does it have a topic sentence? Does it explain/support that topic sentence?

- A trick from Purdue University Writing Lab: Highlight the thesis statement and topic sentence of each paragraph. Now you can see the skeleton of the paper—the argument you are making. Is it logically and coherently organized?

- At end of each section, ask how it helps you advance your argument.

- Does your research adequately support each part of your thesis?

Revise the Draft

- Have you made smooth transitions between ideas?

- Have you used cue words to show transitions and relationships?

  - Repeat key terms

  - Use parallel sentence structure for similar ideas

  - Use sequence words (first, later, finally…)

  - Use relationship terms (on the other hand, moreover, nevertheless)

  - Use terms that show analysis (fittingly, surprisingly, as expected)

  - But don't use the same transition devices over and over; don't need a transition word where the relationship is obvious

  - Transition sentence between two paragraphs usually comes at beginning of second paragraph rather than end of the first para.

  - http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/trans1.html

Revise the Draft

But of what benefit is a foundation in military **art**? **First**, a thorough understanding of . . . military power forms the foundation required to provide political leaders with sound and believable military advice. **The American military must be able to do more than say "can do"** or, on rare occasions, "cannot do." **The military must also be able to say "should do" and "should not do"** as the situation warrants. . . .

Second, but perhaps more important, a sound knowledge of the **art** of war provides a conceptual framework for analyzing strategic and tactical problems, technological developments, and the impact of related issues on military operations.

From Dennis Drew, *Recapitalizing the Air Force Intellect*, p. 20.

Revise the Draft

- Define abstract concepts using examples or concrete terms

- Ex: "General Liu insightfully relates airpower's development to the concept of a nuclear threshold—the point in a conflict at which nuclear weapons would be used." (Jiang, *ASPJ*, Summer 2010, p. 87)

- Don't overuse jargon (insider language, military alphabet soup), especially if your audience will include "outsiders" or nonspecialists

- Tone of academic writing should be measured, careful, reasonable, confident--not arrogant, sarcastic, emotional, or biting

Revise the Draft

- Consider forming a writing group
- Develop a personal checklist of problem areas

- http://writing.umn.edu/
  (University of Minnesota Writing Center)

- http://writingcenter.unc.edu/
  (University of North Carolina Writing Center)

A Few Words about Essay Exams

- The stages of writing apply to essay exams (though revising and editing are minimized)

- **<u>Essential</u>** that you analyze question and plan your response

- **<u>Essential</u>** that you answer the question actually being asked

- **<u>Essential</u>** that you answer all parts of the question

- Look for the verb that tells you what to do (analyze, explain, explain why, describe, summarize, compare and contrast, evaluate, give the reasons)

- Look for the words that define the scope and limit of topic (in Operation Desert Storm, using three readings, effects of upcoming elections in the Sudan, the Kandahar region, ethnic tensions in insurgencies, nuclear deterrence in Cold War)

A Few Words about Essay Exams

- Before you write, make a rough outline (main points you will use to answer each part of question, examples you will use to support)

- Purpose is to demonstrate your knowledge, so draw heavily on readings, lectures, class discussions to support your points

- Have brief introduction that clearly states your thesis, which answers the question

- Follow your outline closely; don't follow tangents

A Few Words about Essay Exams

- Break discussion into paragraphs

- Use transitions to establish connections and show relationships among ideas

- After writing essay, make sure thesis is clearly stated and answers all parts of question, major points are stated and supported

- Try to reread and fix egregious errors (e.g., incomplete sentences, missing punctuation); run spell checker

- For 2 hr exam, I would plan for 15 minutes, write for 1.5 hrs, and revise/edit for 15 minutes

- https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/737/01/

Stage 5: Edit the Draft

Edit the Draft

- Edit a hard copy

- Read the draft slowly and read it aloud

- Keep a checklist of your grammatical mistakes, other mechanical problems

- Don't rely on grammar check

Edit the Draft

Revise wordy phrases:

- *to* instead of *in order to*

- *now* instead of *at the present time*

- *because* instead of *due to the fact that* or *as a consequence of*

- *for* instead of *for the purpose of*

- *we must* instead of *it is imperative that we*

- *if* instead of *in the event that*

- *by* instead of *by means of*

- *today* instead of *in today's world*

- *expansion* instead of *the process of expansion*

- *Middle East* instead of *the area of the Middle East*

- *several missions* instead of *several of the missions*

Edit the Draft

Cut unnecessary phrases:

- *in my opinion*

- *last but not least*

- *at the end of the day*

- *for all intents and purposes*

- *as far as I'm concerned*

- *it goes without saying*

- *needless to say*

- *with all due respect*

- *rest assured*

Edit the Draft

Don't overuse adjectives and adverbs.

- Use *very* rarely (*this mission is crucial* is better than *this mission is very important*)

- Don't use two adj/adv with similar meanings

- *Extremely exhausted* is no different from *exhausted*

- *Completely finished* isn't any more done than *finished*

- *Each and every one of you* doesn't include any more than *every one of you*

- *He is certainly wrong* doesn't make him any more wrong than *he is wrong*

- *I am really sure* doesn't make me any more sure than *I am sure*

Edit the Draft

- Vary sentence length (not all short and choppy, not all long and complex)

- Avoid pretentious nonsense (develop a "baloney detector"):

  To perpetuate our endeavor of providing funds for our elderly citizens as we do at the present moment, we will face the exigency of enhanced contributions from all our citizens.

  We cannot continue to fund Social Security and Medicare for the elderly unless we raise taxes.

  From *The Little, Brown Handbook*, 8th ed.

Edit the Draft

Eliminate filler and redundancies:

- Resources are categorized as anything used to complete the mission. Proper management and control of Air Force resources is vital to the success of the Air Force.

- A resource is anything used to complete the mission. Proper management of resources is vital to the success of the Air Force.

- Highly polished surfaces such as stainless steel can create underexposure. What happens is that the light from the flash is reflected back to the light sensor and shuts down the flash.

- Highly polished surfaces such as stainless steel can create underexposure when the light from the flash is reflected back to the light sensor and shuts down the flash.

Edit the Draft

Avoid redundant phrases (bold terms can be deleted):

- **potential** risk, **possible** risk

- this **particular** one

- might **possibly**

Prefer simple words where they mean as much as complex ones:

- **use** is better than **utilize**

- **use** is better than **usage**

- **signs** is better than **signage**

- **help** is often better than **facilitate**

- **source** is better than **origination point**

Edit the Draft

That is sometimes your friend, sometimes your enemy:

- Aardvark told her *that* she was the one *that* he wanted to go with. (enemy)

- Aardvark told her she was the one he wanted to go with. (better)

- Aardvark maintains her yard is too large.

- Aardvark maintains *that* her yard is too large. (friend—better)

Above examples from *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing*

- Rule of thumb: *That* is usually your friend right after an action verb when it introduces a direct object clause.

- Ex: The study confirms older Americans save at a higher rate than those under 40.

- The study confirms *that* older Americans save at a higher rate than those under 40. (friend—better)

Edit the Draft

Minimize *there is/there are*:

- *There were* many cost overruns that doomed the tanker project.
- Many cost overruns doomed the tanker project.

- *There is* now a procedure in place to close that loophole.
- A procedure is now in place to close that loophole.

- *There are* several ethnic groups fighting for the same territory.
- Several ethnic groups are fighting for the same territory.

- *There are* three possible solutions to the problem. (good)
- Three possible solutions exist for the problem. (awkward)

Edit the Draft

Don't bury verbs by turning them into nouns:

- The commander was asked **to give an explanation** of his decision.
- The commander was asked **to explain** his decision. (better)

- Congress **made the decision** to fund the weapons program.
- Congress **decided** to fund the weapons program. (better)

- We **have a tendency to procrastinate** on writing assignments.
- We **tend** to procrastinate on writing assignments. (better)

- *Make an attempt* vs. *attempt* (better)
- *Provide a recommendation* vs. *recommend* (better)
- *Make changes in* vs. *change* (better)
- *Is indicative of* vs. *indicates* (better)

Edit the Draft

Prefer active voice:

- On-site calibration and repairs are performed by the local unit. (passive)
- The local unit performs on-site calibration and repairs. (active)

- Active voice: Subject of the sentence performs the action
  The senator criticized General Jones.

- Passive voice: Subject of the sentence doesn't perform action
  General Jones was criticized by the senator.
  General Jones was criticized in the hearings.

Edit the Draft

Not all "to be" verbs indicate passive voice:

- Nonmilitary space assets **are** important in establishing space superiority for global and theater operations. (not passive)

- **AFSPC/CC is responsible** for providing Air Force space forces to an AETF when required. (not passive)

- Air Force space forces **are provided by AFSPC/CC** to an AETF when required. (passive)

- **AFSPC/CC provides** Air Force space forces to an AETF when required. (not passive)

Edit the Draft

Use parallel grammatical forms for elements that have the same function and importance (e.g., lists):

- Some leaders **focus** on insignificant details, **spend** resources on minor problems, and **they** ignore serious issues.

- Some leaders **focus** on insignificant details, **spend** resources on minor problems, and **ignore** serious issues.

- Plain English standards include the following: (1) a **logical, orderly sequence**, (2) **write** in a clear, uncluttered style, and (3) **using** active voice.

- Plain English standards include the following: (1) **present** material in a logical, orderly sequence, (2) **write** in a clear, uncluttered style, and (3) **write** in active voice.

Edit the Draft

Subjects and verbs agree in number:

- A long **<u>list</u>** of requirements and deadlines usually **<u>intimidates</u>**.

- First, a thorough **<u>understanding</u>** of the purposes, capabilities, and limitations of military power **<u>forms</u>** the foundation required to provide political leaders with sound and believable military advice.

- Either the accountants **<u>or</u>** the **<u>CFO</u>** **<u>is</u>** responsible for reviewing the internal audit reports.

- Either the CFO **<u>or</u>** the **<u>accountants</u>** **<u>are</u>** responsible for reviewing the internal audit reports.

Edit the Draft

Pronouns and antecedents agree in number:

- The **commander** is required to rate **his or her** [not their] staff before 30 September.

- **Commanders** are required to rate **their** staffs before 30 September.

Additional Online Resources

- OWL (Online Writing Lab) at Purdue University:
  https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/ (especially the General Writing and Research and Citation tabs)

- University of North Carolina Writing Center:
  http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/ (many topics, including writing book reviews and essay exams)

- University of Richmond Writer's Web:
  http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb.html

- Merriam-Webster OnLine:
  http://www.merriam-webster.com/ (dictionary and thesaurus)

- Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips:
  http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/ (articles and podcasts)

- *Chicago Manual of Style Online*:
  http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html

- *AU Style and Author Guide*:
  http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/style/

- Twitter feeds: @GrammarGirl, @GrammarMonkeys, @MerriamWebster, @AdviceToWriters, @CopyCurmudgeon, @ChicagoManual

Additional Print Resources

- *Air University Style and Author Guide*
- *Chicago Manual of Style*
- *St. Martin's Handbook*
- *Little, Brown Handbook*
- *A Writer's Reference*, Diana Hacker
- *Elements of Style*, Strunk and White
- *Edit Yourself*, Bruce Ross-Larson
- *Words Fail Me*, Patricia T. O'Conner
- *Academic Writing for Military Personnel*, Adam Chapnick and Craig Stone
- *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing*, Mignon Fogarty

Demorah Hayes
Air Force Research Institute
Air University Press