

Writing as a Complex Skill: An Introduction to the Subskills of Composition

by David Taylor

Are You a Bad Archer or a New Archer?

Let's say you're taking a college course entitled "Archery 101." It's one of the P.E. courses you must take to fulfill your degree requirements. Hey, "Archery" sounded more fun than "An Introduction to Track and Field."

First day of class. Out on the shooting range. Instructor hands you a bow and arrows. Says, "OK, sport, let's see how many bull's eyes you can make." This being the first time you've held a bow and arrow since playing cowboys and Indians as a child, you can barely hit the target. Needless to say, you make zero bull's eyes. Nada. Zilch. Zip. The Big Bad Goose Egg.

Question: Are you a bad archer or a new archer?

You're a new archer, of course. You've taken the course to get trained in the skills of archery. You know next to nothing about how to aim, how to breathe, how to pull the string, which fingers to use, where to grip the bow for best leverage, and all the rest. That's why you're taking the class.

You're new, not bad.

Same with Writing

For virtually all of you, this will be the first time you have taken a course that focuses exclusively on your training as a writer. You are the brand new archery student standing on the shooting range. You are about to receive detailed and intensive training in the skills of writing. All of you are starting with a blank slate in my view. You are new writers, not bad writers. This principle has important implications for you in this course:

- It would be unrealistic for you to expect your performance (number of bull's eyes) to be the same at the beginning of the course as at the end.
- As a result, your grade will ultimately be based on how well you develop skills over the next few weeks. To encourage this development, you are allowed to rewrite any paper for a higher grade, and you must submit a corrections sheet for any graded paper.

- As a person of normal intelligence (as evidenced by your presence in college), you should be reassured that, with the proper training and work, you will be more than able to master the skills needed to shoot bull's eyes when it comes to writing.

Writing as a Complex Skill

Like riding a bicycle, hitting a backhand in tennis, or sinking a three-pointer in basketball--writing is a complex skill. That means that to do it well, you must master various sub-skills that make the performance possible.

Take the 3-point shot in basketball. To pull off that performance, you must combine a number of skills in unison in order to achieve the performance: hand-eye coordination, balance, depth perception, gross and fine muscle control, and certainly technique: fingertip control, elbow in, one hand for push, one hand for guidance, a slight backward spin to give the ball lift and flight.

Sure, the accomplished players make it look simple. But what you're actually seeing is high level mastery of all the sub-skills which make the complex skill possible.

What kind of coaching have you had in writing? Has anyone ever broken down the long list of writing subskills for you? Have you practiced the subskills until the point that you can combine them to produce a satisfying performance?

Usually the answer to all of the above is "no" or "very little" at best. That's why you are here: to identify, understand and practice the subskills of writing and learn to combine them to produce a desired performance.

The Sub-Skills of Writing--Prewriting

One way to get at the sub-skills of writing is to list the standard steps used to describe the process of writing. Those steps are usually defined as:

Prewriting--Normally when asked what they do during the prewriting stage (which is everything you do to get ready to write) students respond: jot down notes/ideas and organize them. There are two problems with this answer:

1. It doesn't come close to employing the variety of subskills available in this stage.
2. It results in the writer attempting to perform a creative step (jot thoughts) and an analytical step (organize) at the same time. Those two acts, which take place in opposite hemispheres of the brain, are best kept separate.

In reality, organizing should be the last phase of the prewriting step. It should come only after your creativity has been unleashed by using such invention and discovery skills as

freewriting, looping, clustering, brainstorming, asking the reporter's questions and talking. The last is important because we are so good at it. But did you know that talking and writing come from the same place in your brain? Did you also know that the primary reason why you're better at talking than at writing is that you've practiced one a lot more than the other? It's true if we wrote as much as we talked, we could do both with equal ease.

So, please become familiar with the list of invention and discovery skills discussed in your handbook. We will be exploring these skills as the first step in every major piece of writing that we do.

The Special Role of Audience Analysis

[Audience analysis](#) is a part of the prewriting stage but deserves its own section for two reasons: it is so often skipped, yet it is a key to writing well and writing comfortably.

As speakers, we are expert at analyzing our audiences and adapting our tone, style, structure, content and purpose accordingly. We do this analysis and adaptation so often every day and so adeptly that we rarely even think about it. For example, let's say you're having a real conflict with one of your coworkers.

If you were describing this conflict to a best friend, you might say something like: "Dude! You won't believe what that wacko Jason Summers did at work today. Man, he really makes me want to spit tobacco. If he tries to make me look bad in front of customers one more time, I swear I might have to take his head off and mail it to his momma."

If you were describing this conflict to your boss, you would adopt a much different tone of voice, style of language, content, structure and more. It might go something like: "Excuse me, sir. May I speak to you privately for a moment? Thank you. You know that I really enjoy working here at the Regal Cineplex. Most of all, I appreciate how you have let me fit my work schedule around my school schedule. I value this job a great deal. But I need to talk to you about a conflict I'm having with another employee and ask for your advice as to what to do."

You make this kind of complex shift virtually every day of your life. The rhetorical sophistication you demonstrate by shifting between audiences is a much a part of your language skills as pronunciation and talking in complete sentences. So, why can't you apply the same skill of audience analysis and adaptation to your writing?

Because you are a **new writer, not a bad writer.**

A significant number of the problems that I see in freshman writing are caused by not having spelled out good answers to the questions about your audience. Without specific direction in crucial areas of tone, style, rhetorical stance, purpose, content and structure,

the writing often drifts out of control. A ship without a rudder. A team without a leader.

In this course, we will always do an audience analysis for every piece of major writing.

The Sub-Skills of Writing--Drafting/Composing

If you've read the assigned essay, "[Four Mistakes Writers Make](#)," you're aware of the common problem new writers face when drafting: being "headwriters." Trying to compose and edit a sentence in your head before getting it down is really an attempt (usually unconscious) to shorten the writing process by combining drafting with revising and editing. But as "[Four Mistakes Writers Make](#)" points out, drafting is an especially creative time when you are trying to discover thought and put it into words. Trying to edit/correct those words at the same time is an analytical step that directly inhibits the creative part.

It goes even deeper: As you know, the human brain is divided into two hemispheres, left and right. One hemisphere is mainly responsible for creativity, intuition, and feeling. The other usually controls rationality, analysis, logic. When drafting, if you are trying to be creative and analytical at the same time, you can end up with cross-lateral interference, which often gets experienced as a form of "writer's block."

Simply put: In the drafting/composing stage, write fast without much stopping so that you stay in contact with the creative process of putting thought and feeling into words. Save the editing of it for the next stage.

The Sub-Skills of Writing--Revising

Once again, new writers get into trouble in this stage by trying to combine revising with the next stage--editing. Maybe we should call this stage something different--"Shaping." Usually a first draft is like a lump of clay that is going to be a bust--someone's head and face. But in the draft, the face's features are still vague and doughy, just beginning to emerge. The goal of the revising/shaping stage is whittle away at the clay until the features stand out in sharp relief. Clear. Distinct. A unique, identifiable face.

In terms of writing, this "shaping" means to overlay a distinct structure on the lumpy draft, cutting out what doesn't belong and sharpening the connections between what is left. Shaping also means reworking the structure and wording of sentences so that your meaning comes through clearly and your thoughts flow together to provide the effect you want.

The Sub-Skills of Writing--Editing

Finally. We have arrived at the thing most new writers associate with writing and writing well: grammar, punctuation and other conventions of standard written English. Nothing could be further than truth.

Sure, grammar is important. But it's important in the same way that dribbling is important in basketball. Dribbling is a fundamental skill. But being a good basketball player is about a lot more than being a good dribbler. Being a good writer is also about a lot more than knowing where the commas go.

Unfortunately, much of your writing training has focused on this aspect of writing, often to the exclusion of the others that we've discussed here. That emphasis has created a wrong impression in many of your minds about what is important when it comes to writing. Please erase that memory bank. Replace it with this one: Do a great job at the true skills of writing--prewriting, audience analysis, drafting and shaping--and the editing stuff will take care of itself. If it doesn't, there are computer programs and handbooks to help. Invest your energy and time where it will pay the greatest dividend.

Redirecting your focus from editing to the real skills involved in writing is the first and most important step you can take from being a new writer to a good writer.