



Cracking the Code on A+ Essays

Part 2: The Writing Process

The ABCDE writing process produces high quality writing every time

1. The Elements of Composition

2000 years ago, the Roman statesman Cicero, who was considered the greatest public speaker at the time, pointed out that composition includes five elements:

1. **Invention:** Invention is finding good ideas, facts, or arguments to include in your writing or speech. I often refer to it as content.
2. **Arrangement:** Once you have your ideas, arrangement means organizing them in the most effective order.
3. **Style:** Style is how you choose to express your ideas. It involves picking the right tone and way of speaking or writing to make your message clear and interesting to that specific audience.
4. **Memory:** Memory is about knowing your content well enough so that you can talk about it without always looking at your notes.
5. **Delivery:** Delivery is how you present your work to others. For a speech, it means using eye contact, voice, and body language to keep the audience's attention. In writing, it means making sure your ideas are easy to understand.

All five elements are crucial for speeches. For academic writing, #3 Style will be formal and #4 Memory would apply in class: the teacher might ask you to orally summarize your ideas without reference to notes. For our purposes, we can simplify the elements to **1) content, 2) arrangement, and 3) delivery.**

Most students just sit down and start writing, but smart writers don't do this. If you just sit down and start writing, you are simultaneously dealing with content, arrangement, and delivery. This is multi-tasking, and no one is good at it.

That's why smart writers do one step at a time. They know that what you do before you start writing is more important than what you do after. Process determines quality of outcome.

2. The ABCDE Process

1. Analyze the prompt: First determine the requirements of the task, so you know what you need to find. This is called “defining the scope of the task.”

2. Brainstorm: What do you already know about the topic? This tells you what gaps in your knowledge you need to fill in. Research and fill in the gaps.

3. Compile, chunk, and chuck: First, **compile** the information you need. Related ideas are **chunked** into groups. To avoid clutter and confusion, unrelated ideas are **chucked**. Summarize the remaining ideas in a bullet-point outline on one side of one sheet of paper. Instead of reading long sentences, you can quickly skim through the bullet-point ideas, identify gaps in explanations, and rearrange your points for a more logical flow.

It’s too hard to organize your work when it’s at the draft stage. An outline is perfect for this.

The outline becomes your essay map – all thinking is done at this stage.

Yes, the outline needs to be no longer than one side of one sheet of paper. This is to give you a snapshot of the entire work at a glance – think of it as a map of your essay.

Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister during World War II, once demanded of the First Lord of the Admiralty: “Pray state, this day, on one side of a sheet of paper, how the Royal Navy is being adapted to meet the conditions of modern warfare.”

An editor I follow has a reputation for fixing novels where the writer has gotten stuck and can’t resolve conflicts in the plot. When such an author comes to him for help, he asks to see the author’s outline. As a rule, these authors don’t have one, which is why they’re stuck. He tells them to come back only after they have gone through their novel and produced an outline - on one side of one sheet of paper. This exercise alone fixes the problem – for the first time, the author can see the entire story at a glance, and it becomes easy to identify where the problems are.

On a practical level, when students spend a lot of time writing a draft, they are reluctant to make changes because of all the effort they have put into writing. That’s why you do not want students to invest time in writing sentences and paragraphs at this point – they won’t want to change what they’ve done.

NEVER start writing without an outline. You're wasting your time.

4. Draft: Once you're happy with the outline, transform bullet points and information you've copied and pasted into a draft.

5. Edit: Edit the draft yourself several times before giving it to an editor, family member, or friend to check. This is then revised several more times before the final copy is published.

One of my favourite writers, the essayist Malcolm Gladwell, said in an interview about his writing process that his editor makes him revise his draft five or six times before the book is published. Gladwell is already one of the world's best writers, and even he has to revise his work multiple times before the public sees it.

When students read great writing and compare it to their own, they can get discouraged. It's important to tell them that what they are reading has probably been revised at least 10 times. The perfection they see on the page is the result of this powerful process.

2. The ABCDE Process

Analyze the prompt

- What is required to thoroughly answer the question? This determines the scope of what you need to do.

Brainstorm:

- What do you already know?
- What do you need to know? W5H questions are good prompts:
 - Who?
 - What?
 - Where?
 - When?
 - Why?
 - How?
- Play the role of Devil’s Advocate and test the strength of your arguments by considering counterarguments and refutations (explained later).

Compile, Chunk, Chuck

- Compile information. At this stage, copy and paste. Put quotation marks around anything you copy and always include the URL.
- Once you have enough information, chunk it into related groups.
- Chuck unrelated information. You don’t want clutter.
- The end result of this stage is a one-page outline.

Draft

- Transform your outline into a draft.

Edit

- If you want high quality, you’ll revise your draft several times.
- It’s easier to notice problems after a break.
- We are poor judges of our own work. Share your draft with a friend, family member, or editor.
- You’ll revise several more times.

3. How do you brainstorm?

Start with what you know and then figure out what you need to know.

First note in point-form what you already know about the issue. Essay topics are generally problem-oriented and fall into one of the following four categories, so you can start with these questions:

- What's the problem? Describe it.
- Who or what is to blame for the problem? Explain the cause-effect relationship.
- What's the solution? Explain.
- Is the solution practical vs alternatives?

What do you not know that you should know? Think about the information you need to find in order to have a better understanding of the issue. Your goal is to become much better informed about the topic so that you can provide a thorough answer to the question assigned by your teacher.

The W5H question prompts

What do you need to know? W5H questions are good prompts:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- Why?
- How?

Advanced: Start by looking for evidence

What makes academic writing different is that you need to provide evidence for everything you say, for every claim you make. You can't present unsupported opinions. Prove to the reader that you know what you're talking about.

One brainstorming method that works well is to do an image search for statistics related to the topic. You can quickly get an idea of available proof. What reasons could I support with this data?

Body paragraphs proceed from general to specific:

- **Topic** sentence
- **Reason** in general terms
- Specific **evidence**
- More specific **example**
- What's the **significance** (the importance, the point) of what you're saying?

Your evidence is quite specific. Therefore, your reason, whatever it is, has to lead into the evidence, so you might as well start by figuring out what you can prove. Remember, data is the gold standard, so a good place to start is an image search for “statistics about...”

Devil's Advocate, Counterarguments & Refutations

When lawyers are preparing for a case, they brainstorm what the other side is going to argue. This is called “playing Devil's Advocate.” It means arguing against yourself in order to clarify your own reasoning.

For each argument you come up with, think of a **counterargument**, which is what the opposite side would argue. Then come up with a **refutation**, which is your response to the counterargument.

You can then include all three elements to build up the reasoning section of your body paragraphs (**TREES**).

A Framework for Critiquing Ideas

You can critique arguments in terms of facts, what those facts mean, how those facts should be interpreted, and whether they are relevant:

1. You can dispute **facts**.
2. You can dispute what the facts **mean**.
3. You can dispute **values**, i.e. whether facts should be interpreted positively or negatively.
4. You can dispute **relevance**.

It is easiest to understand this framework with reference to court cases:

1. Disagreements about facts

In a court case, the prosecution will argue that Mr. Smith was responsible for killing Mr. Jones. Mr. Smith's lawyer will argue that Mr. Smith didn't do it. This is an argument about the key facts of the matter: true vs not true.

2. Disagreements about definitions/meaning

You can argue about what something means.

In the courtroom example, if it turns out there is indisputable evidence that Mr. Smith killed Mr. Jones, such as video footage of Mr. Smith shooting Mr. Jones, then Mr. Smith's lawyer can dispute the meaning of the facts.

- The prosecution will argue that this was premeditated murder ("1st degree murder").
- His lawyer might argue that Mr. Smith only meant to frighten Mr. Jones, and the gun went off accidentally. This is no longer premeditated murder.

3. Disagreements about values

Many arguments come down to differences in values. After addressing facts and definitions, consider how values (e.g., freedom, fairness, well-being, justice) influence people's positions on an issue. Sometimes, it's not about which argument is "right" but about which values take priority.

In the court case example, the defense might argue that it's a good thing that Mr. Smith killed Mr. Jones because Mr. Jones had secretly been plotting a terror attack, and it's a good thing that he's now dead.

Note that these critiques are sequential: disagreeing about values assumes you're not disagreeing about the meaning of anything or about the facts. It's when you can't dispute the facts that you move on to disagreements about meaning, and when there's no ambiguity in the matter, you move on to disagreeing about values.

4. How to Develop Ideas and Avoid Information Gaps

Outlining Before Writing

Before you start writing, it's important to create a point-form (bullet point) **outline**. The outline is essential because it allows you to organize your ideas before drafting. It's where your thinking and planning should happen, NOT at the draft stage.

Using point form bullets is important: if you write everything in full sentences, it's much harder to see the connections between ideas. At this stage, you are only concerned with the quality of the ideas and their organization. If you write everything out in full sentences, it takes much longer to review your own content because you have to read so much.

ALL of your thinking goes in the outline. Follow this process and the writing stage becomes the EASIEST part of the assignment.

How to edit for content gaps: probing and clarifying questions

When reviewing or editing an essay, ask **probing** and **clarifying** questions to develop ideas more fully.

- Probing questions ask for more detail about vague or general statements.
- Clarifying questions ensure the meaning is clear.

Probing and clarifying questions help strengthen vague sections of writing.

Example: If a sentence says, "Kennedy was a prominent politician," a probing question might be: "What made him prominent?" "What major policies did he enact?" "What did he accomplish?"

5. How to Edit

Read aloud for proofreading

Reading your writing aloud helps you catch mistakes that your eyes might miss. The ear catches awkward or unnatural phrasing more effectively than the eyes, which often skip over errors in favor of meaning.

If you read a sentence aloud and it doesn't sound smooth or natural, it's a good indication that the sentence needs revising. Imagine you're writing for a younger, less informed audience. This will force you to clarify and simplify.

Prolix versus concise writing

"I apologize for the length of this letter. If I'd had more time, it would be shorter."

- Attributed to Oscar Wilde

The golden rule of editing: If you can say the same thing using fewer words, do it.

Most students' writing is thin: ideas are superficial and there is very little content to "sink your teeth into." As a result, students have trouble reaching the minimum word count for an assignment. They then maximize the number of words to describe every concept.

However, when you follow the ABCDE writing process, your problem will be having too much content. This is a good problem to have. That's why you will need to edit for conciseness - so you can fit in more of the great ideas you find.

Precise word choice & "visible" writing

Avoid vague or general nouns like "tool" or "vehicle" that don't create clear images in the reader's mind. Use specific nouns that readers can visualize. This technique, called "visible writing," enhances clarity and keeps the reader engaged.

Example: Instead of saying “I bought food,” say “I bought sweet and sour chicken balls from Mandarin.”

Avoiding Redundancy

Avoid using unnecessary double verbs or repeating the same idea in slightly different words. This creates redundancy and makes the writing less clear.

Example: Instead of “Half the population **is fed or supported** by synthetic fertilizers,” simplify to “Half the population **is fed** by synthetic fertilizers.”