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How the Pros Do It

What forty years of research about writing shows us is that there are seven primary differences between successful writers and unsuccessful writers:

1. Successful writers have developed a number of different heuristics for the invention process, while unsuccessful writers tend to have few heuristics or none.
2. Successful writers don't wait around for inspiration; they get something down on paper as fast as they can.
3. Successful writers make a plan before they write, but their plans are flexible and subject to revision.
4. This plan is, almost always, a *rhetorical* plan: that is, a plan that has a particular purpose and audience in mind and keeps the writer aware of that purpose and that audience. In other words, "I'm going to write about Parkinson's disease" is not sufficient.
5. The plan does not go into an enormous amount of detail concerning the actual content of the writing. That is, successful writers usually don't know exactly what they are going to write before they start, and they *trust the writing process itself to help generate their material*.
6. Successful writers revise much more than unsuccessful writers do. They revise while they are writing, and they expect to do at least two drafts of any particular piece of writing.
7. Unsuccessful writers tend to make only lower-order (word- and sentence-level) changes during the revision process, while successful writers tend to make higher-level, conceptual changes.

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The Standard Model of the Writing Process: The "Think, Then Write" Model

1. Choose a topic.
2. Narrow it.
3. Write a thesis.
4. Make an outline.
5. Write a draft.
6. Revise.
7. Edit.

The Composing Processes of Expert Academic Writers

1. Starting point: perception of a problem. Expert writers feel an uncertainty, doubt a theory, note a piece of unexplained data, puzzle over an observation, confront a view that seems mistaken, or otherwise articulate a question or problem.

2. Exploration. The expert writer gathers data through library or laboratory and field research and through probing of memory, explores ideas in a journal or research log, in the margins of texts, or on note cards or the backs of envelopes; analyzes, compares, puzzles, talks with others, writes to self, focuses intensely on the problem. The expert writer often explores ideas by rapid drafting of potential pieces of the essay or by making notes, doodles, or tentative outlines.

3. Incubation. The writer takes time off from the problem, does other things, and lets ideas cook in the subconscious.

The first three stages are all recursive—as writers alternate between exploration and incubation, their perception of the problem may change. Often the thesis statement arises during this recursive process, as a moment of discovery and clarification—an "aha!" experience ("So this is my point!")—not a formulaic planning device at the very start of the process.

4. Writing the first draft. Expert writers try to get ideas down on paper in preliminary form. Some writers make an informal outline prior to writing; others discover direction as they write, often pursuing different branches of ideas without worrying about coherence. To avoid writer's block, expert writers lower expectations. They do not try to make first drafts perfect as they go.

5. Reformulation or revision. Having gone once through the territory, expert writers take another look at the problem and think it through again. Many writers report dismantling their first drafts and starting afresh; some writers do not discover their true thesis at the conclusion of their first draft. At this point, writers often make new outlines; they begin considering audience; they clarify their rhetorical purpose; they try to make the essay work for readers. Several drafts are often necessary as writer-based prose is gradually converted to reader-based prose.

6. Editing. At this point, craftsmanship takes over from initial creativity. Writers worry about unity, coherence, paragraphing, sentence structure. Finally, writers begin to polish by correcting spelling and punctuation. Often, the recursive nature of the process is again felt as a writer, working on sentence structure, discovers new meanings or new intentions that require the rethinking of minor or even major parts of the essay.

This description of the writing process emphasizes the fact that expert academic writers are driven by their engagement with questions or problems and by their need to see their writing as a contribution to an ongoing conversation.

John Bean, *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. 30-31.