

The Process (Process Analysis) Essay

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WHAT IS PROCESS? Process, process analysis or instruction writing demonstrates how something functions or shows readers how to accomplish a task in a step-by-step fashion.

EXPLAINING HOW SOMETHING WORKS Many of your college textbooks contain both types of process writing. A biology book, for example, will discuss how the liver functions as a process. An economics book might explain inflation as a process, showing how one event leads to another. The progressive nature of a disease is often described as a process, as is the way a nuclear reactor generates energy. Any complex process -- the creation of the solar system or a choreography routine -- is easiest to understand when broken down into separate steps. The operation of an anti-drug community effort can be explained as a process, as shown in the following sample essay about CAP raids:

CAP Raids

Drugs have always been a problem on the Northside. But in the last three years, the number of drug houses has proliferated. Vandalism, arson, burglaries, and drive-by shootings have increased, destroying the tranquillity of a once quiet middle-class neighborhood. To stem the tide of criminal activity the Northside Community Organization (NCO) and the police department launched Citizens Against Pushers or CAP.

CAP operates very simply. If community members observe suspicious activity on their blocks, such as a large influx of strangers entering a house or the odor of chemicals used in drug production, they call 555-7500. Realizing that people often feel reluctant to talk to police, CAP calls are answered by community volunteers who record and assemble essential information.

When several people independently report suspicious activity, the volunteers alert the police. In many instances, they are able to supply descriptions and license plate numbers. Officers on routine patrol are asked to provide greater surveillance of suspected drug houses. If they confirm the community report, undercover officers are summoned. Posing as passersby, police officers in street clothes will attempt to buy drugs. Often officers in other vehicles will video-tape drug transactions for evidence. In many cases, the undercover officer will haggle about prices or discuss other illegal activities such as stolen credit cards to gain as much information as possible. Officers try to see as much as possible, checking for weapons, high security doors, or the presence of children.

If the officer makes a drug purchase, he or she will take the sample to the police station or a mobile police lab for testing. If the substance tests positive, the police will obtain a search warrant and raid the house as soon as possible.

Because drug houses have lookouts, the police raiders rarely use police vehicles. Lookouts can quickly spot a plain-looking Dodge as unmarked car. Instead of racing to the scene, officers in civilian clothes slowly take up positions posing as deliverymen, young couples talking outside a tavern, or a street repair crew. The largest raid occurred last October when half a dozen officers swept in on a heavily fortified crack house. Two officers arrived in a tow truck and blocked the street as they pretended to service a

disabled car. A minute later four officers in a painter's truck pulled into the driveway of a neighboring house. Using ladders from the truck, they were able to scale the drug house and enter the second floor while the tow truck operators battered through the front door. Seven people were arrested. Six kilograms of cocaine and two hundred thousand dollars were seized. CAP is bringing hope to one of the city's bleakest neighborhoods.

GIVING DIRECTIONS The other type of process writing directs readers to perform a series of tasks leading to a completed project or procedure. Written directions instructing you how to register for classes, operate a computer program, change a tire, or bake a cake are all examples of instructional process writing. It is often helpful to use numbered steps, bold type, underlining, and other visual aids to make your document easier to use, as in this set of directions:

Applying for a PA Grant

Pacific Arts (PA) is a century old foundation, formed by the Bergman family to benefit California writers, musicians, and artists. Any California resident over eighteen is allowed to apply. Applications are accepted from January to May. The board of directors reviews applications, conducts interviews, and analyzes work samples from June to September. Grants are announced in early October.

If you are interested in applying, follow these steps: 1 Obtain a grant application by writing to Pacific Arts Foundation, 5 Montgomery Street, San Francisco, CA 94105. 2 Fill out the application and attach proof of California residence such as a photocopy of a driver's license or state ID. 3 Attach a work sample which can consist of a 20,000 word document, a videotape, or ten photographs. Applicants may apply only once every five years, so make sure you select your best work.

ELECTING TOPICS FOR PROCESS ESSAYS If your instructor does not assign a topic, you might consider one of the following items. Select a topic, then explore its possibilities using one or more prewriting strategies:

Explaining How Something Works • How a bank processes a mortgage application • The way your employer hires and trains staff • The way police and fire departments respond to 911 calls • How digital television operates • A biological, chemical, or psychological process you learned in another course • The way a former employer handled employee or customer complaints • How a specific diet lowers a person's weight, body fat, or salt level • The process of a medical disorder • How a local branch of government operates • The way your college assigns housing, funds teams, or helps graduates find jobs • The way players are drafted or selected in the NFL, NBA, or another other sport • The way infants or small children develop physically or emotionally • How your church, employer, or campus organization conducts meetings or elects officers

Giving Directions How to cook in a wok • How to apply for a student loan • How to

use credit cards carefully • A step by step program to lose weight, improve memory, or overcome depression • The best way to purchase a new or used car • How to select a lawyer • How to respond in a specific emergency such as confronting a heart attack victim or a choking child • Step by step instructions to caring for a pet, child, musical or technical instrument • How to protect a computer against viruses • Tips to enhance personal safety against muggers • The best way to respond to sexual harassment • Precautions to prevent food poisoning • Methods of upgrading a computer system • Best way of investing money for short or long term goals

GETTING STARTED

Developing a topic for process writing can be challenging. Avoid writing about simplistic topics such as changing a tire or making a sandwich. College instructors expect even a set of directions to demonstrate intellectual rigor.

CONSIDER YOUR EXPERIENCES AND KNOWLEDGE Think of jobs you have had, places you have lived, sports you have played, or decisions you have made. If you worked in a restaurant, you can explain how restaurants buy food, dispose of waste, manage costs, design menus, or train employees. If you lived in New York City or on a farm, you explain a local issue or problem. Give directions for using the subway or caring for horses. If you have played soccer, you can explain how the game is scored or give tips for improving a specific skill. If you recently bought a car, selected a daycare center for your child, or purchased insurance you can provide tips based on your research and insights.

NARROW YOUR TOPIC TO MAKE IT MANAGEABLE Process essays must be detailed to be effective. A two to four page paper cannot provide sufficient detail about retirement planning. You may have to choose a specific investment -- mutual funds, 401K plans, or bonds. You can give directions for the Heimlich maneuver but not CPR which has to be taught in an approved class.

ESTABLISH A CLEAR GOAL A process paper does not simply describe or discuss an issue -- it has a specific goal. It will either teach readers about a specific subject or direct them to complete a task.

DEVELOP A TIMELINE Most processes occur over time. Writing a timeline can help outline steps in the process:

--Clearly identify a beginning and ending of the process. Some processes such as programming a VCR have obvious starting and ending points. But if you give directions on how to counsel a friend with a drug or alcohol problem, you would have to clearly define when this advice is needed.

--Break the process into logical steps. Do not emphasize minor points by isolating them in separate steps or minimize important ones by merging them with too many others.

--Make sure your essay will be self-contained. Readers should be given complete instructions. You may refer to other sources for additional information, but readers should be able to rely on the main document.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING PROCESS WRITING

CLEARLY IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE Determine the extent of your readers' background knowledge, interests, or misconceptions. Define any new or commonly

misunderstood terms.

TELL READERS WHAT NOT TO DO Give negative instructions. Tell readers what not to do, especially if you know people tend to skip difficult steps, take shortcuts, or substitute cheaper materials.

CLEARLY LIST SAFETY INSTRUCTIONS AND HAZARDS Do not assume that everyone understands the dangers involved using chemicals or working with power tools. In giving instructions to employees and customers, you assume a legal liability.

NUMBER STEPS AND USE VISUAL AIDS Directions written in numbered steps are easier to follow than conventional paragraphs. Consider including graphs, charts, diagrams, and other visual aids.

USE PEER REVIEW TO CHECK YOUR PAPER Because it is easy to overlook steps, it is important to have other people read your paper. Ask friends or fellow students if they understand the process or could follow the directions.

USE TRANSITION WORDS TO LEAD READERS THROUGH YOUR ESSAY Process essays are generally organized according to time: that is, they begin with the first step in the process and proceed in time until the last step in the process. It's natural, then, that transition words indicate that one step has been completed and a new one will begin. Transitional words are often set off by commas. Some common transitional words used in process essays are listed below:

After a few hours,
Afterwards,
At last
At the same time,
Before
Before this,
Currently,
During
Eventually,
Finally,
First, Second, Third,
First of all,
Formerly
Immediately before,

Immediately following,
Initially,
In the end,
In the future,
In the meantime,
In the meanwhile,
Last, Last but not least, Lastly,
Later,
Meanwhile,
Next, Soon after,
Previously,
Simultaneously,
Subsequently,
Then,

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN WRITING A PROCESS ESSAY

A process paper either tells the reader how to do something or describes how something is done. As you write your process essay, consider the following:

- What process are you trying to explain? Why is it important?
- Who or what does the process affect?
- Are there different ways of doing the process? If so, what are they?
- Who are the readers? What knowledge do they need to understand this process?
- What skills/equipment are needed for this?
- How long does the process take? Is the outcome always the same?
- How many steps are there in the process?
- Why is each step important?
- What difficulties are involved in each step? How can they be overcome?

- Do any cautions need to be given?
- Does the process have definitions that need to be clarified?
- Are there other processes that are similar and could help illustrate the process that you are writing about?
- If needed, tell what should not be done or why something should be done.
- Process papers are often written in the second person (you)...

PROCESS CHECKLIST

BEFORE SUBMITTING YOUR PAPER, REVIEW THESE POINTS.

- 1. Does the paper have a limited topic? Do you try to explain too much?**
- 2. Do you define key terms or provide readers with needed background information?**
- 3. Do you alert readers to potential problems or possible changes they might mistake for errors?**
- 4. Is the paper easy to read?**
- 5. Are directions presented clearly? Do you use numbered points or graphs? Remember, readers may be working while referring to the document. Does it communicate at a glance?**
- 6. Are potential hazards clearly explained?**
- 7. Have you checked the document using peer review?**

From [The Sundance Reader, Third Edition, Web Site](#) by Mark Connelly.

“USE TRANSITION WORDS TO LEAD READERS THROUGH YOUR ESSAY” and **“WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN WRITING A PROCESS ESSAY”** sections from <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acad/write/process.html>