



The Writing Process

Essential Strategy: Teach the Thinking Phase

Students often embark on writing assignments without enough background knowledge to produce more than a cursory summary of basic information. The four Cs are an easy-to-remember strategy for the *thinking phase* of writing. They are to collect sources, comprehend arguments and points of view, critically think, and craft a response.

Collect Sources

Most students require some assistance in gathering reliable sources to write an essay. An introduction to the school library's resources (books, periodicals, and databases) and useful Internet sites is invaluable.

We must also carefully consider the learning objectives of a writing assignment. For instance, if the objective is for students to write a critical essay about a topic, we should consider providing the sources, thus shifting their time and mental energy from searching for sources to absorbing and thinking about them. If, on the other hand, the objective is to teach students to locate and sift through information about a topic to select only the best resources, we might consider assigning an annotated bibliography instead of (or prior to) a full essay.

Comprehend Points of View

To comprehend an author's explicit or implied argument, students need to know how to read different sources. Every discipline has its own conventions of discourse. For instance, most monographs begin with a substantial section that situates the author's work within that community's ongoing conversation. As a summary of multiple arguments, this section can confuse students who are trying to identify the author's argument, which usually follows. The author then supports his or her point with evidence and concludes with commentary about the significance of the argument. Frequently, scholarly essays end with a call for more discussion or research. Explaining this structure helps students comprehend what they read and provides a model for their own writing.

Students also need to learn that different sources reveal their points and biases differently. This is particularly important with primary source material and nonexpository forms of opinion. For example, strategies for understanding a nineteenth-century editorial cartoon about the Civil War differ from those for comprehending the personal writings of a soldier or a transcribed interview from that time.

Craft a Response

Once students understand others' points of view, we can ask them for their reactions. Writing their critically evaluative comments as a follow-up to each summary is good preparation for the writing process. Once students have read, thought, and written enough about a topic to believe they can contribute to the discussion, they can craft their own point of view. That can become a working thesis.

Critically Think

Students need to learn how to summarize others' arguments concisely and to think critically about the evidence presented. Writing a summary of each source students plan to use for an essay is helpful. The summary should identify the argument, subarguments, and key supporting evidence. This analytical process gets students thinking critically so they can respond effectively. It ensures that students are reading and comprehending their sources, not simply lifting quotes out of context. It also helps students hone the essential skill of distinguishing between important and extraneous information.