

Planning to Write

Once you have gathered a good bit of information and focused your thinking, you should take some time to write a mission statement and plan your draft. These might be two of the most important tools in the writer's toolbox, and they help you get in the habit of taking time before you write, both to imagine what you are about to create and to make a plan for its creation.

A mission statement helps you understand what you are hoping to say, why you want to say it, and how you will try to say it. Of course you may discover as you write that your mission evolves. That's okay. The act of writing should move your thinking. But the act of articulating your mission, and then keeping it on the table beside you as you write, will help you stay focused and make all sorts of decisions as you write.

A mission statement also helps you with planning your draft. Once you know what you are hoping to accomplish, it pays to spend a bit of time thinking about how you plan to accomplish it. This includes thinking about how you want to sound, what information you have to include, and in what order you should present it.

Of course you might need to modify your plan later, but having a plan not only feels good, it helps free you from the grip of writer's block. If you get stuck on one part of the plan, you can set it aside for a while and move to work on another part. If you have an idea of how the parts will fit together, you can work on them in any order. You can always go back later to smooth out the joints and apply the glue to make them seamless and strong.

Below are eight questions that will help you write a mission statement and plan your draft. Answer each as completely as you can. The more specific you can be, the more helpful this activity is.

Writing Your Mission

1. What is my topic? What idea or event or person or thing do I want to write about?
2. What is my idea? What am I hoping to say about this topic? What is my attitude toward it, my response to it, my thinking about it? Why do I care about it?
3. Who is my audience? If I were to name one person who most needs to hear what I have to say about this topic, who is that one person? Who most needs the gift I want to give?
4. Why is that person my audience? Why exactly does that person need this gift?

Planning Your Draft

1. How should I sound to this person? What voice or approach will most help my audience receive my gift? Should I be preachy, intimate, casual, academic, humorous, etc.?
2. What information must I include? What stories or examples or details or analysis will most help me communicate what I want to say, give the gift I want to give?
3. Where and how will I start? What will follow? Where and how will I end?
4. Which tools in the writer's toolbox do I want to make sure I practice as I write this piece?

Organizing the Whole

Once you've answered these questions, you're ready to create an outline of your project. It can be helpful to think of writing a paper like you think about a long road trip. It's helpful to know where you will begin, where you want to end up, and what you want to see or do or visit along the way. Take some time to imagine the path or itinerary of what you are about to write. Write your destination and purpose – your mission statement – on the top of a page and then think about what should come first, second, third, etc.

There are a lot of ways to do this. Choose the tool that helps you see the structure – the beginning, middle, and end – most clearly.

1. Name the big parts. Put them in order. Fill them with good information. One way to do this is to think of your piece as having five parts or boxes (five is a good number, one that makes sense for most writing, and seems to have some cognitive significance; however, use the number of boxes that make sense to you). Once you name the five boxes, put them in an order that makes sense and fill them with information, you'll have a pretty good plan. Remember that the more specifically you name each box, the more clear and coherent your plan will be.
2. Write a formal outline.
3. Make a map or schematic of your mission. Identify where you are, and where you want to go. Plan what steps you will take to get from here to there. Sometimes looking at information graphically helps you see relationships between ideas. One of the characters in David James Duncan's novel *The Brothers K* offers similar advice: "If the subject's too big or weird to think through, draw a map. Make the parts of the subject into rivers and mountain ranges and deserts and towns. If it's still too big, add a whole 'nother province. That's what I do with my papers and it works."
4. Anticipate your reader's most important questions. Or go back and think about the most important questions that you had. Put those questions in an order that makes sense.
5. Use the traditional template for an argument to plan your essay. Here are the five boxes in this template. Fill them up with relevant, concrete information.
 - o Introduce the topic and explain what you intend to write about. This is a place to state your thesis or to introduce the authentic question that you will explore in the writing.
 - o Report, fairly and accurately, what other people have said about this topic.
 - o Explain what you think about the topic and why.
 - o Respond to what others have said by stating your own position.
 - o Use evidence to show why you think as you do
6. Allow prospective naysayers to speak and then respond to them. Report, fairly and accurately, how and why some people might object to your position. Respond to those objections calmly and rationally
7. Tell readers why this matters to them. In other words, why do you care? Why should they?

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