

NACADA Module Transcript

Writing 3 – The Invention Stage: Suspending Your Inner Critic

By

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INTRODUCTION

I'm Rhonda Dean Kyncl; I'm the Associate Dean for Students at the University of Oklahoma where I oversee academic advising and student engagement. I also have a Master's degree and a PhD from OU in Composition, Rhetoric, and Literacy. Most of my academic life has been focused on writing; I taught First-Year Composition on our campus for the entirety of my degree from Fall 2000 until Spring 2009. I returned to the classroom after I became Associate Dean and have taught composition classes online and in traditional settings. I've also recently taught our writing for the medical professions course as well.

I'm serving as NACADA's Coordinator of Writing Support. You may have seen one of our earlier webinars where I've discussed how our virtual writing groups work and the importance of giving and receiving feedback in a virtual writing group. Today, I'd like to spend a little time talking about engaging the writing PROCESS.

In fact, one of the most important things to remember about writing is that it is a **PROCESS**. Writing tends to be shrouded in a "myth of genius." We sometimes think that great writers or our favorite authors just sit down in front of the computer or at a desk with a blank sheet of paper and the chapters and books and essays flow in perfect form from the tip of their

pens or their keyboards. In reality, this is RARELY (if ever) the case. Writing is always a process of beginning, drafting, revising, proofreading, drafting, revising, and proofreading some more.

The Roman philosopher Cicero divided rhetoric into “five canons or tenets.” Rhetoric is simply the communicating of a message whether in speaking or in writing. So both writing and speaking may be divided into these five canons:

- Invention
- Arrangement
- Style
- Memory, and
- Delivery.

Today, I want to focus on that first canon of invention.

INVENTION

The first thing you should know about invention is that when you are beginning the writing process, you are at a stage that is different from every other stage of the process. At this stage, this early stage in the writing process, you work differently than you will later in the process. During the invention stage, you have the license and the freedom to be creative, to think big. There are no rules here...no rules.

I’m going to pause right here and making a generalization about academic advisers: we are rule-followers. We like rules. Some of us LOVE rules. But the invention stage is bigger than rules. The quickest way to short-circuit the invention stage of the writing process, is to hold yourself to all the rules you know about writing. Specifically, GRAMMAR. If you are so focused on writing CORRECT sentences, you will be hard-pressed to write ANY sentences. If you cannot

silence your inner critic who whispers in your ear, “That’s not right;” “That sentence is no good;” “That’s sounds dumb;” you’ll never get anywhere. You have to be able to suspend that criticism and that editing voice, because the invention stage is not where editing happens...it’s where creativity and imagination happen. It’s the stage where all ideas are welcome and where you should be free to explore.

So how do we do this? How do we suspend the inner critic, suspend the inner editor and grammarian, and allow ourselves the space and the freedom to pour our words and ideas onto paper? Let me give you a few ideas...

One of the things we practice in the writing classroom is what we call the **FREE WRITE**. A free write is just what it sounds like: you give yourself a certain amount of time to just record every single thing you can imagine about your topic. It is stream-of-consciousness writing. You take a piece of paper, or open a blank document on your computer, and you give yourself a certain amount of time: 5 minutes, 10 minutes, something like that. And in that period of time you attempt to record everything you can imagine or think of about your topic or idea. Just pour it on to the paper. And REMEMBER: there is no judgment in a free write. You aren’t trying to write “good sentences.” You aren’t trying to write grammatically correct sentences. You aren’t trying to write a well-formed paragraph. You have permission in a free write to break all the rules. The **ONLY** goal is to get your ideas onto the paper.

Another practice that may help you during the invention stage is to **record what you’re thinking**. Nearly all of us have this capability now with our smart phones. Just open the voice recorder and talk about your idea. A good long walk may help this practice work even better. Often, physical activity really energizes your thinking. So you might try taking a walk around

your neighborhood or around your campus and talking about your ideas into your recorder. You might try pretending that you're explaining your idea to a friend or a colleague. Or even better, try explaining it to someone who knows nothing about it. Begin with what you know and just talk it out.

After both of these practices, free writing and recording your thoughts, go back and read what you wrote or listen to what you said, and you will begin to see the threads of your idea, the main points of your topic, the main concepts or issues that you may want to explore. And as you see those patterns and threads, you can begin to write more about them. Buy a journal, even just a cheap little notebook, where you can keep your notes and ideas.

As you begin to see the ideas and patterns emerge, you may want to start a concept map, where you record your ideas, circle them, and then begin to draw connections between them. If you're a more linear or hierarchical thinker, you may begin to see a flow chart or an outline emerge from this invention work. Begin to experiment with the order and the flow of the information, how ideas may be connected.

The important thing is NOT to short-circuit this process. Don't cut this process off too soon. Give yourself the permission to keep thinking about these ideas.

A final practice that could really inspire your invention stage is to take your idea to a group of colleagues, either in a group setting, or to individuals. If you are a member of one of our virtual writing groups, you can bring your main idea to that group. Share with them what you've been thinking about and ask them for their feedback. Let your colleagues tell you what they think about when they reflect on that idea. Let them share with you the questions the

topic raises in their minds. Let them tell you what they know about that topic and what they've read or heard about it.

If you're not a member of a writing group, consider talking with two or three of your colleagues about the topic. Have a cup of coffee with another adviser and share your idea. Listen to their comments and ask them for their feedback. Sometimes your own responses to their questions can help you clarify the ideas in your own mind. Be sure to jot down your notes about those interactions in your journal or notebook.

Once you find a strong topic, and you're feeling good about proceeding, after garnering feedback from your writing group or your colleagues, then you're ready to begin the invention of the paper itself. And here you've got good precedent for how to proceed. Ancient rhetoricians used what they called the "konoï topoi" or "commonplaces" that served as the basic categories of the relationships between things or between ideas. So for example, once you've got your main idea, you could begin writing about that idea by:

- Defining it,
- Looking at its whole and its parts,
- Comparing it to something else, discussing its similarities and differences,
- Exploring relationships like cause and effect,
- Identifying circumstances,
- Reading up on authoritative testimonies or witnesses (such as articles on the topic).

These are common ways of examining or analyzing an idea, and you can begin your first draft of a paper or a study by choosing one of the commonplaces that you feel is most conducive to your topic and your ideas.

The invention stage of the writing process is a place that is different from every other stage. In the process of writing, you want to give yourself permission in the opening stage to break the rules: to write and write and think and play. You want to be your most creative and your most relaxed at this point. Don't try to sit down with a blank sheet of paper and write a 20-page study by beginning with the introductory paragraph. Begin with an open mind and explore the idea, imagine connections, pour your thoughts out onto paper or talk your ideas out into a recorder. Be open with your writing group, your friends, and your colleagues about your idea, and listen to their good feedback. And then, as you begin your first draft, experiment with the commonplaces, with different ways, different angles, of looking at your idea. Define it, compare and contrast it, explore it.

Creatively exploring the invention stage will ensure that you begin your writing project from a place of strength, a place that allows you to pursue a good idea in a way that is unique and imaginative.

You can develop your skills as a thinker and as a writer, and your voice is important for the field. Look for more information and resources on our NACADA Writer Support webpage.

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