

The Stages of Writing

I teach learners these four stages of writing in order to break down the writing process into more manageable chunks, each requiring specific skills. I want them to be aware of what stage they are in at any moment so they can concentrate on each skill in its turn.

When I sit down to help a learner, I ask what stage they are in, and I gear my assistance to that stage. A learner in the **thinking stage** needs a wide-ranging conversation about the topic and what they want to include in their piece. A learner in the **writing stage** may need a few words of encouragement or a question about the topic to keep the flow of words running. A learner in the **editing stage** needs some questions about what will make the writing clearer or more engaging to the reader. A learner in the **proofreading stage** has already worked on getting ideas honed and organized and is just looking for small errors in spelling and punctuation. Learners in the proofreading stage will not be open to adding new sections or reorganizing the whole piece. They are FINISHED!

Think

Some people like to think through what they want to say before they start to write. They may find an outline or a mind map useful to organize their thinking. When they write their first draft, it is likely to be fairly well organized and not to require much change.

Other people like to write first, so as to get down on paper whatever is in their minds. They often find an initial 5-minute free write helpful. They get a very rough draft down on paper, look at it carefully, and then do their thinking about what they will write, where they will expand, where they will cut, and how they will organize their points. Sometimes they take a fresh sheet of paper to write their “real” first draft.

Write

Letting go of worries about mistakes, and just letting the words flow is the secret to getting a first draft down on paper. No matter how bad that first draft is, it gives learners something to work on in the editing stage.

Some people like to do a timed writing for a first draft. Set a timer for five or ten minutes, put your pen on the paper and keep it moving until the bell goes off. Keep writing, even if all you write is: “I can’t think of anything to write.” Eventually something more interesting will come into your mind, and you are on your way.



Edit

For many literacy learners, editing will be a new concept. For others, editing and proofreading may be lumped into one category called “Checking it over before you hand it in.”

Yet for many writers, both professional and nonprofessional, editing is the stage they spend the most time in, and the stage they like the best. The hard work of getting the first draft down on paper is done, and now they can spend their time and energy in making small and large changes to make the work accomplish what they set out to do.

This is the stage where learners can concentrate on organization, and the idea of dividing the work into paragraphs to help the reader follow comes into play.

I often use a writing prompt that introduces learners to organizing their work into paragraphs. I show a video and ask them to write two paragraphs using the question: “What did you see?” in the first paragraph and “What did you think and feel?” in the second. In the writing group I take a couple of good examples and point out the elegance and the ease of understanding that comes from organizing in this way.

Working with the medals in the advanced writing group of the Never-Fail Writing Method encourages learners to do more editing before they hand their work in. You can give them another reason for editing by publishing a collection of learners’ writing to give away at some special occasion or by helping learners make a collection of their own writing (e.g., a collection of separate writings about important people in their lives that can be copied and given to each of the people featured). See [“Writing Opportunities That Involve Editing and Polishing for Real Occasions”](#), for more on this.

Proofread

Like editing, proofreading is a term and a process that many literacy learners have not heard before, and most are not used to doing it. Proofreading is the final check to find small errors before the work is copied for the writing group or for a wider audience.

When they find a reason to edit their work for publication or for giving away to people outside the writing group, it calls for extra careful proofreading. **Everyone writing for publication has someone who helps with proofreading and finds the errors they missed. Learners deserve the same treatment.**



Errors in End Punctuation

When I look at a learner's work that has some period errors, but is mainly correct, I ask myself, "Does the learner understand where to put end punctuation?" If yes, then the issue is proofreading. The learner doesn't know how to proofread or is not in the habit of doing it.

If I am working one-to-one with a learner who has 80% of their end punctuation correct, I know the problem is proofreading. In that case, I point out all the paragraphs where the punctuation is perfect, and I ask them to make the other paragraphs also correct, by reading out loud to check their work. If they can't find a missing period, I point to the line where it should go, and ask them to read the sentence again to find it. If they have put in an extra period, I read the paragraph aloud, paying no attention to the extra period, but making a clear pause and intake of breath at the correct periods. Then I ask them to find the period I didn't need to stop at because the words made sense without it.

