Writing a clear, concise paper can sometimes be a challenge because our own thought patterns are interconnected networks of references that seem to ricochet off each other. As a result, people often struggle to even start a paper because their thoughts are scattered and seldom organized in a clear-cut linear way that lends itself to dashing off a coherent paper. One way to organize thoughts is by creating an outline of major points and supporting evidence. But even with an outline in hand, brain fog can force the most confident writer to pause at how and where to actually begin writing.

The best advice for getting out of this predicament comes from Joseph Williams’ book, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. Specifically, Williams advises using the writing process to clarify your own thinking. Start with the tiniest kernel of an idea and plunge in, even it means skipping your introduction and going straight for the middle of your paper. The point is to get your mental gears moving by starting with the section for which your thoughts are the clearest and well formed; that is, the section you feel most mentally able to tackle first.

Of course, such advice can seem simple until a writer is faced with the task of explaining how complex ideas or issues are connected. For example, you may have spent considerable time reading, discussing, and thinking about the seemingly unconnected issues of childhood obesity and food insecurity without ever thinking about the exact nature of the relationship between these two issues. Ultimately, the demand to construct sentences that describe in precise detail the interactions of these issues can help you to channel and clarify your thoughts as well as enhance your understanding of the issues.

Although your first attempt will likely fail to capture what you really want to say, the effort itself can help to clear away the mental cobwebs and boost your confidence to move forward. Keep in mind that you will likely need to make many revisions to transform your drafts into a successful paper with fully formed ideas and critical analysis. The revision process itself is vital to helping you polish your prose, refine your thoughts, and more precisely, to understand the relationship between factors affecting social outcomes. Even if your first, second, and third drafts are not paper-worthy, your ability to express your thoughts (verbally and written) will be greatly improved from the point at which you started.

In very practical terms, Williams’ advice translates into a simple principle of “Write more.” In other words, instead of mulling over a topic until you know exactly what you want to say and exactly how you want to say it, use writing as a tool to clarify your thinking. However, be prepared to scrap what you started with and begin again from a completely new perspective as your thoughts become clearer and you develop a depth of understanding of the topic and keener insight into its implications. Although it is difficult to hit “delete” when the screen displays hours’ worth of work, remember those efforts were worthwhile if the process enabled you to hone your thoughts, plan an argument, and create a more coherent final product.

To illustrate just how valuable the writing process can be, we strongly encourage you to read the New York Times’ recent 5-part series, “**Invisible Child**” (Elliott, 2013). This unprecedented series—the largest investigative project the newspaper has ever published all at once—centers on the story of 12-year-old Dasani, who is among the more than 22,000 children in New York who are homeless. Dasani and her family, a total of eight children and two parents, live in a homeless shelter in Brooklyn. According to the newspaper’s public editor, the series contains nearly 29,000 words and took 15 months to complete, including researching,
interviewing, writing, and editing. Just imagine how many drafts reporter Andrea Elliott must have gone through to produce this story, which has been widely praised for its depth of reporting and stunning narrative. Consider this one paragraph, in which Elliott powerfully defines for readers the meaning of gentrification:

It derives from the Middle English word “gentrise,” which means “of noble descent.” The word has become shorthand for an urban neighborhood where muggings are down and espresso is roasted — a place that has been “discovered,” as though no one had been living there.

Overall, “Invisible Child” presents a brutally honest, if not breathtaking look at poverty in America today. Elliott’s writing not only points a lens at children in need but also touches on every social justice issue imaginable: homelessness, institutionalized racism, gentrification, health care, addiction, and education.

Yes, the series is long, and Elliott’s simple, direct language magnifies her ability to describe the gut-wrenching details of Dasani’s life, making for uncomfortable reading at times. But we hope you will take the time to read the entire series, not only for its subject matter but for a better understanding of why good writing takes effort.


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