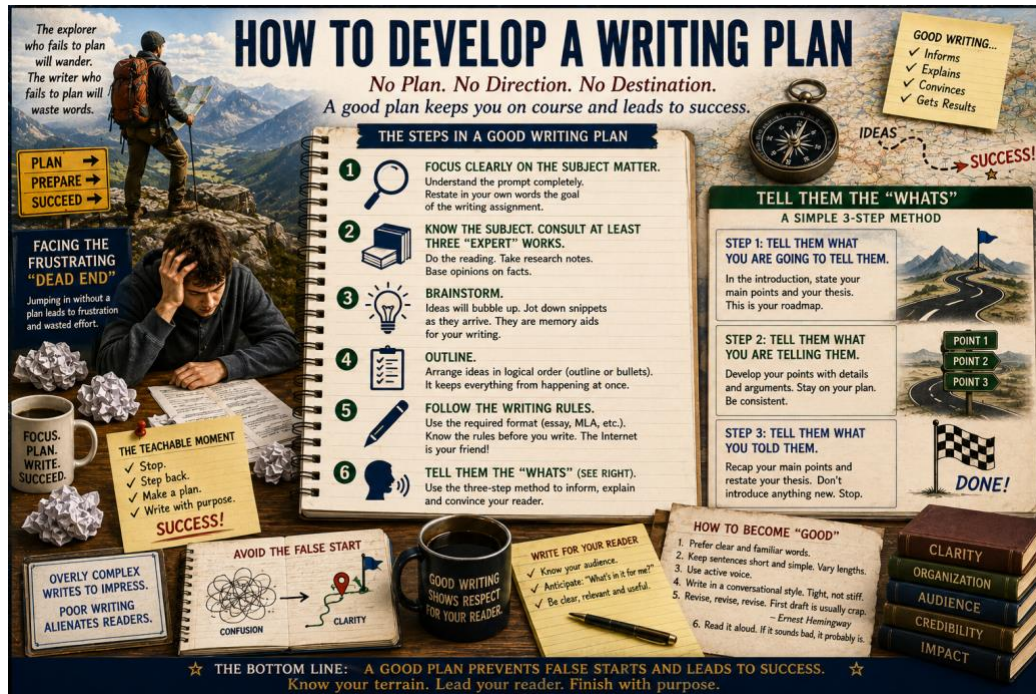


# How to Develop a Writing Plan

## By Curtis Jerry Smothers



Beginning a writing project without a clear plan is like starting a trip through unknown territory with no knowledge of the terrain. Both efforts (exploring and writing) frequently end up with the wasted effort of the "false start."

The explorer who fails to plan might muddle through, but the writer without a plan usually ends up in one of two places: either with a muddled, meandering piece or product or otherwise at a frustrating dead end.

### Facing the frustrating "dead end"

As a writing tutor for younger students, I most often encounter the "dead end" dilemma. Students, in their eagerness to complete a writing project, will jump right in, figuring if only they can get the introduction paragraph out of the way, the rest will follow.

Typically, the student will present me with a half-formed concept without a plan or thesis. Many become disappointed and impatient when I tell them that they are off to a false start and need to forget what they wrote and come up with a plan.

It is at this point where many students either experience a "teachable moment," or they have so much invested in their original bad product that they seek another tutor. Those who stay with me and agree to follow a writing plan are usually successful.

### **The steps in a good writing plan**

Here is the pattern I follow when helping a student plan a writing project:

#### *1. Focus clearly on the subject matter.*

Understand completely what the writing prompt or assignment is asking for. At this point, I ask young writers to restate in their own words what the goal of the writing assignment is.

#### *2. Know the subject. Consult at least three "expert" works.*

Do the reading before beginning to write and take some research notes. If the writing assignment requires an opinion, make sure the opinion is based on factual information.

#### *3. Brainstorm.*

As the understanding of the project and the factual information become clear, ideas will begin to bubble up and percolate. It is tempting at this point to begin writing. My advice is to write snippets and jot them on paper as they arrive. These snippets serve as memory aids when the serious writing begins.

#### *4. Outline.*

Arrange your brainstorming ideas into some sort of logical order (a numbered outline, or bullet list). The outline does not need to be formal. Its purpose is like that old adage about time: It keeps everything from happening at once. At this point you will have your research notes and your brainstorming snippets, both of which will satisfy that urge to get something on paper.

#### *5. Follow the writing rules.*

At this point in the writing process, students are usually referred to the formal essay or research paper paradigms. I always advise the student to surrender to the process and do not struggle. Whether it is a five-paragraph essay or a full-length MLA-formatted

research paper, steps 1 through 4 work well and must be superimposed on the discipline required to produce the final product.

Note: The Internet is a wonderful resource for formal guidance in the foregoing, and I always advise the student not to begin the project without being totally familiar with those disciplines.

#### *6. Tell them the “whats”*

For the not-so-formal writing projects (essays, articles, short stories) that fall in the category of expository writing (that is, for the purpose of conveying information), a simple three-step method seems to work well, especially in overcoming the false start or writer's block:

#### **Step 1: Tell them what you are going to tell them.**

Do this in the introductory paragraph and focus on two or three main points and a thesis that your whole writing piece will hang onto. I always use this step to help the student writer who is stuck. Writers who cannot complete this step need to go back to the research and brainstorming phase.

#### **Step 2: Tell them what you are telling them.**

Stick to the plan in step 1 and add details and arguments to support your thesis. Some writers can begin this step first by writing the middle paragraphs of the piece and then go back and write the introduction. On the other hand, perhaps as the middle is developed better and the writer might want to revise the introduction. Whatever the method or process, the important thing is consistency.

#### **Step 3: Tell them what you told them.**

I like to think of the closing paragraph as the final chance to convince the reader that you kept the promise in step 1 to tell them what were going to tell them and to support your thesis. It is also important to remember that your closing paragraph should not introduce anything new--and does not have to end with ruffles and flourishes. Simply recap briefly what you presented. When you are finished, just stop.

#### **The bottom line**

So in the end, any writing project is only as good as the plan the writer develops to get it started and completed without the frustration and time-wasting false start. The arctic explorer or mountain climber would not set out with knowledge of the terrain and a plan. Good writers also know the terrain on their subject matter and where they want to lead the reader. The writer navigates that terrain by means of a plan.