

The Writing Center

Explaining a Process

Process papers explain how something is done or how something happens. Instructions for assembling a product, for example, explain a process. Professionals in most disciplines will commonly have to explain a process or know how something works in order to get their work done. Accountants, for example, will explain to new home owners how to set up a money management system. A biology professor might explain to a class how to dissect a frog. A political science student will need to know how a bill passes through Congress. A technology student will need to know how an Excel program works. This resource covers the key features in the art of explaining a process: audience awareness, chronological order, and signal words.

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Audience Awareness

When explaining a process, your audience is your primary consideration. To whom are you explaining the process and why? What do your readers already know about the topic, and how will they use the information? Is your explanation meant to increase their background knowledge? Is it intended to help them make a decision? Or will they be following the steps in the process like instructions to successfully assemble something or accomplish a task?

Considering your readers and their purpose for reading will help you determine the depth and breadth of your writing—how much detail and explanation to include. For example, you would explain the chemical process of a drug differently to a medical professional than you would to a patient who does not have a medical background. Knowing your audience will help you choose the clearest vocabulary, which steps to emphasize, and which terms to define.

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Chronological Order

To explain a process is to narrate events that occur over time, so the logical organization for this type of writing is chronological whereas something happens first and then second and then third, and so forth. As you prepare to write, think about the steps in the process, and then write them in the order they occur or must be done.

In your explanation of each step, begin by clearly stating the step in a topic sentence. Then, provide supporting details that illustrate and explain the step. For example, if you were explaining how to wash a car, the step to “prepare the wash water” would need to include details about what this step entails such as how much water to use, what temperature it should

be, what kind of soap to use, and how much soap to use. Here too, any options in the process would need to be explained, and new terms should be defined.

In addition to “how” the step is done, you will also want to anticipate your readers’ questions about when, where, who, and what is needed to accomplish the step. For instance, readers might want to know where the process should take place, who should do it, or what experience or expertise is required, or when the best time is to complete the process, and very importantly, what is needed. For example, you will want to include any tools that are required: a scalpel for dissecting a frog, a wok for preparing a stir-fry, a ledger book for preparing debit and credit columns, and so on.

At times in a process essay, it may be helpful to address the reader directly to give extra advice. Think about the steps in the process where the reader may require special guidance or suggestions. Anticipate the readers’ need for encouragement or warnings. Give extra hints, tell stories, and share useful examples. Useful tips will do more than save time and frustration; they can make the difference between success and failure in performing a process.

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Signal Words

When writing chronologically, signal words guide the reader from step to step. Signal words might come at the beginning of a paragraph to transition from one step to the next, or they may help join sentences to explain the reason for an action or what result to expect. Table 1 lists some common signal words used in chronologically organized papers that explain a process or how something happens.

Table 1.

Signal Words in Chronological Writing

<i>accordingly</i>	after that	as a result of	because	begins with	consequently
<i>due to</i>	during	finally	first	following	for this reason
<i>how</i>	if . . . then	in order to	is caused by	leads to	next
<i>second</i>	so that	subsequently	then	therefore	third

Be sure to vary your transition words. Counting through too many steps (seventh, eighth...) or beginning every section with “then” may make the writing tedious. Keep your readers engaged with clear, varied, and meaningful word choices.

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