



Embrace Ugly Writing

Practice Separating Composition and Editing

First draft writing often sounds terrible: basic, awkward, unclear, wordy. To avoid that ugly writing, students often edit and write simultaneously, working through each sentence as it is created. Students may also believe this process is efficient, combining steps now to avoid multiple steps later.

And yet composing and editing simultaneously is nearly impossible; these steps simply must be separated in order to be done well.

Writing As A Learning Process

The composition process is a learning process. Ideas develop as they are written; writing is not simply recording ideas that we already know. And if we interrupt our writing to “fix” it, we hijack the thinking process that allows composition to occur.

Avoiding deletion or rewriting during the composition stage leads to stronger, more complete expression. We can help students recognize the need for “ugly” writing – those early stages that feel like verbal garbage or, as [Anne Lamott](#) calls them, “shitty first drafts.”

Remind students that everything can be fixed later – and more easily so – to encourage their experimentation.

Ugly First Drafts Are Necessary!

No single technique works for every writer, but this one is closer to universal than any other. Allowing oneself to compose without “fixing” the work really does help to overcome writer’s block, much of which emerges from feelings of insufficiency. When the writer realizes that her first draft isn’t public and is merely a necessary, ugly step on the way to polished writing, the process can proceed without the paralysis that accompanies self-recrimination.