

From Chaos to Coherence: Two Ways of Moving from Disorganized Low Stakes Writing to an Organized High Stakes Essay

Peter Elbow. (Adapted from *Teaching Writing Teaching Media*, 2008 from Media Education Foundation in Northampton Mass.)

Some people won't use freewriting and low stakes exploratory for serious high stakes essays because they get too discouraged by all the chaos. They look at their pile of carelessly written passages of thoughts and feelings in random order and say, "I can never turn these into a well organized essay."

Here are two different methods for dealing with the generative chaos that freewriting often produces. The first one (using collage form) is quicker and easier; the second one (using the skeleton process) is more thorough and conceptually powerful.

(1) Using The Collage Form to Move from Chaos towards Coherence

This is a fairly quick and painless process. It will help reassure you that there is actually good stuff in all this chaos by helping you see the core bits and clearing away all the distracting mess. It will also take you a big step *towards* coherence. And if you can settle for a collage rather than an essay, you can easily create an elegant and pleasing final product that most readers find effective.

Start by looking through your sprawling pile of exploratory passages and simply mark the ones that feel most central and important. Just put these passages into a file and put spaces or asterisks between them (or cut them out with scissors). Read through them thoughtfully and decide whether the next step is to make an essay or a collage.

For an essay you'll now need to work out your thinking completely and create a connected, linear sequence of reasoning. Your clump of important passages doesn't give you that, but it can take you there. That is, if you read through them, there's a good chance that you will now see clearly what you want for your main idea--and sense a useable sequence or organization. If the essay is at all complex, you'll need to create a genuine outline at this point. (See below for suggestions on how to create a more effective kind of outline by using germ sentences rather than single words or phrases.)

A collage is simpler and quicker. You need to decide on an interesting pleasing sequence for these pieces. Then do minor cleaning up of all the individual bits or "blips" in your collage. You might find that one of your passages summarizes your main idea clearly and precisely; if not, you can write one now. But it's perfectly appropriate for a collage merely to suggest or imply your main idea without stating it. Collages usually have a more intuitive or imaginative sequence of bits than in a regular essay--they usually take readers through a more imaginative and nonlinear journey. (Check out a different handout about how to make a collage.)

(2) Using the Skeleton Process for Building a Coherent, Well Organized Essay from Disorganized Exploratory Writing

I learned this process on myself and found that it's helpful for others too. It harnesses a productive interaction between chaos and order. Putting it metaphorically, we start by looking for stray bones lying around on the ground, and then we gradually build them into a strong coherent skeleton. Putting it more literally, this process helps us create a certain kind of outline that works well for writing a good essay.

(1) *Find important passages.* Read slowly through the pieces of rough writing that pertain to the topic you are writing about. It's fine to take them in whatever random order you find them. Look for passages that feel important and simply mark them with a line alongside. They may be long or short passages. Many will feel important because they contain a *thought* or *idea* or *point* (big or small); but some will not be ideas or reasons but rather *examples* or *stories* that feel important.

(2) *Create bones.* For each important passage, create a tiny germ sentence summary--as brief and pithy as possible. Perhaps this passage will contain more than one idea or point--especially if the passage is longer. Summarize them all. If the important passage is not telling a thought but rather an *example* or illustrative story, summarize it too. But try to say what they are "about." For example, don't just say "The ad for Coca-cola"; say, "The coke implied good health." And your "summary" may have to spell out a point or idea that's not really clear in your rough writing--or perhaps only implied.

The main thing is that if a passage of rough fast writing *feels* important in some way for the topic you are writing about, force it to yield a germ sentence. You are creating the bones for a skeleton.

Make sure that you summarize them in *sentences*--not just in single words or phrases. Don't just write "salaries"; write "womens' salaries were lower." If you write nothing but "salaries," you can't see the logic of your thinking. The verb is crucial to help your thinking. Single words or short phrases are static and merely *point* to an implied concept or idea. But a little sentence *says* something and has conceptual or semantic energy that helps you gets you from one idea to the next. Most of all, sentences help you decide what order to put your ideas into. It's more work to create these little germ sentences, but the struggle helps us work out our thinking. They don't have to be long sentences; the shorter the better. Even if this particular "point" is nothing but an example or illustration, the sentence still helps, for example, "secretary salaries are specially low."

There's no need to repeat the same idea or example if you come across it again--which often happens in freewriting.

This process will produce a long list of germ sentences. They'll be in a random order. Fine. For you've not yet tried to decide which is the main idea and which ones are supporting, and which are unimportant or even useless for this essay.

(3) *Figure out a main idea.* Now look through this long list of sentences or bones--in their messy random order. First mark or underline the ones that feel important or central. Then look through these marked ones and figure out your main idea. Maybe this process has made it obvious to you already.

But maybe you still can't figure out what your main idea is. That happens to me a lot. Maybe all that exploratory writing and thinking have been taking you on a journey to an idea that you've never had--and you *still* haven't quite had it. Maybe there's a kind of felt but *absent* main idea that's been pulling you or driving you in your exploratory writing--something that could hold all this interesting material together. But it isn't there yet. That's a good sign; you are on your way to an interesting new piece of thinking.

But now you have to figure it out, this main idea, and try to write it in a crude short germ sentence. But if it won't come easily--and this sometimes happens--that is, if you can feel the need for it but can't yet *say* it--then freewrite a bit more out of this feeling so you can work your way to it. (Notice, by the way, that if you had made an outline *before* doing the exploratory writing, you never would have come up with this interesting new idea you're now figuring out.)

(4) *Build the skeleton.* Figure out the right organization or sequence--that is, work out the "story of your thinking." This means creating an outline of sentences.

Teachers often advise students to begin by making an outline, but that's almost never worked for me. I can never make a useful outline till *after* I've done a lot of exploratory writing. And outlines don't become useful for me till I learn to build them out of *sentences*. A single word or phrase just *points* at a thought. A sentence forces you to *say* the thought.

So now that you've been able to state your main point, you can go through your disorganized list of germ sentences and pick the important ones and decide what order they should go in. Because you forced yourself to write your points in the form of *sentences*, you can now figure out how to arrange those sentences into an especially useful kind of *outline*--an outline made of sentences that will tell a kind of *story of thinking* that feels coherent and sensible.

It's helpful to realize that you are not trying to find the single perfect piece of geometric logic. The goal is a good *story of thinking* where each point *follows* the previous one naturally and where the whole sequence has a felt shape--like a good story. Most good essays are more like stories of thinking than pieces of pure logic. There are lots of ways to tell a story well. Good stories (and essays) sometimes start at the beginning, sometimes at the end, sometimes in the middle.

As you arrange your sentences to tell a good story of thinking, you may find that there are some gaps--some ideas or points that are missing if you want to make the story of thinking hang together and be believable. If so, you'll have to write these missing sentences now. Often you need more examples and illustrations.

Concluding observation. I've been describing how to use the skeleton process early in the writing process to create a draft. But it can also be used late in the process to *revise* a draft essay that you've worked hard on and can't quite seem to get clear--or that somehow doesn't work with readers. In short, it's a method for clarifying thinking. Using it this way, it is, in effect, a form of self-response to a draft. It's also helpful when writing a collaborative essay when you both have a lot of ideas and are trying to figure out how they go together.