



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

Developing Writing Fluency in a Second Language

This handout suggests strategies you can use to develop your fluency in writing.

Use a Good Writing Process

A major problem for developing writing fluency is thinking in another language and translating into English. Another problem is worrying about grammatical correctness while you write. Writing experts tell us that the best way to write is to work through separate stages in the writing process. Grammatical accuracy should not worry you until close to the end of the writing process (see 4b below). Here are steps to an effective writing process:

1. Collect ideas. This may be from doing research or just from brainstorming ideas of your own. There are many strategies you can learn for collecting and developing ideas. If you need help with this, ask your tutor for information on pre-writing strategies. The outcome of this step is a list of ideas, often in no particular order. At this stage, you don't need to worry about grammar.
2. Organize your ideas. Take the ideas you collected in step one and make a plan for your paper. This often will include thesis and/or topic sentences as well as main points you want to cover. You also decide at this stage the order you will use for your points. The outcome of this step is often an outline of some kind. At this stage, you do not need to worry about grammar.
3. Draft your paper. At this point, you want to write down your ideas. You should not worry about grammatical correctness. Your goal should be to put your ideas on paper. If possible, do this without thinking in your native language. If you find that difficult, you should practice the free writing strategy suggested on the next page.
4. Edit your paper.
 - a. The first step in editing is to consider whether you have developed your ideas enough and provided enough evidence. You also should make sure that the connections between ideas are clearly stated (coherence) and that you have not included any information which does not support the points you are trying to make (unity).
 - b. The second step in editing is to correct errors in grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling and word choice. It is at this stage that you should start thinking about the grammar rules you know, consulting

dictionaries and other reference books and asking native speakers about word choice issues. You should watch especially for mistakes you know you often make. For example, many ESL students have problems with verb tense. If you have this problem, you might systematically go through your writing looking for and checking every verb. Your tutor can help you develop strategies for checking for your own particular problem areas.

By following this writing process, you separate the time for thinking about ideas and organization from the time for thinking about correctness. This generally leads to better idea development and more English-sounding word choice and structure. It can help you avoid the translation approach.

Practice Free Writing

If you find it very difficult to write without thinking in your first language and translating, you might want to try free writing to change your habits. Follow these instructions:

Write for 20 minutes without stopping. Do this at least 3 times a week until you are comfortable writing without translating. At first, start with easy topics such as what you did today. As you get more comfortable with the technique, you can try writing on more difficult topics such as what you are learning in your college courses.

When you write, do not stop and do not worry about grammar, spelling or word choice. Just put your ideas on the paper as they come into your head. It doesn't really matter what you write because no one else will ever see it. If you catch yourself thinking in your native language, put a star in that place in your writing and then push yourself to go back to thinking in English and continue writing.

As you continue to practice this, you will find that you slip into thinking in your native language less and less often. You will also find that you write more in the 20-minute period.

When you get so you can keep your thinking in English, begin trying to use this technique when you write your first draft of your papers. You don't need to worry about making mistakes because you can solve those mistakes at the editing stage.

Conclusion

The approaches in this handout can help you to improve your writing fluency. To be successful, you need determination and practice. You also need to be ready to take risks and accept the fact that perfectionism is not always a good thing.