

Introduction – Is Great Writing Magic?

In this Guide, we will provide you with a wealth of ideas about how to write effectively. Before we speak to the particulars, however, let us offer a few thoughts about the writing process generally.

Beginning writers sometimes assume that great writing is a magical gift bestowed on the lucky few. The assumption is dangerous, and wrong. It is dangerous because it implies that great writing “just happens.” Those who subscribe to the writing-as-magic theory often assume that they are destined to live out their college and business careers as average writers – since their own sentences do not flow from the mind to the page in perfect form.

It turns out, however, that great writing is not magic. Great writing is hard work. That is both bad news for those who expect their first drafts to be perfect, since they assuredly will not be. And it is bad news for those who would prefer to have an excuse for not writing well.

For the rest of us, however, the news is good – quite good. If we are willing to work hard, we can produce strong written work. And with perseverance, we can achieve excellence. Every piece of writing that you create in your years at TCNJ and beyond can be improved with time and care.

Suppose that you are asked to write a paper that presents a provocative new thesis supported by original arguments. You begin with the seedling of an idea, and as you write, you experiment and play with ideas until you arrive at a thesis that is original, interesting and important. Next, you develop some powerful arguments to support your thesis. Now stop and look at what you have done. Is it ready to hand in? Although you have the makings of something profound and original, consider what remains to be done. You have not focused on the organization of the paper, the flow of the argument, the clarity of the sentences, the precision of the language, the economy of the prose or any of the other writing suggestions that you will read about in this Guide.

Stephen King, the bestselling suspense writer, suggests that writing should be divided into two distinct phases – the creation and revision phases. So why not separate the tasks? The first involves what you have already done – creation. Your first draft is the product of mind on fire with ideas. While you create, you cannot worry about the rules of grammar, the precision of your language, the organization of the paper or any of the other suggestions we offer in this Guide. Your first goal is to create. And, as we all know, it is difficult to create while someone is criticizing your creation.

Phase two is the time to critique your creation. It is the time to turn your creation into a work that is organized, clear, concise, precise and direct. Ask yourself whether your arguments hold up and fit together. Look for order in your materials – find the organic basis by which they all hang together. Admit that while your ideas are creative and important, at this early stage only you can understand them. Rephrase them over and over until they are crystal clear to your imagined reader. Study each sentence, and strike the colloquial phrases, the vague language, the

redundancies and sloppy word choices that erode the power and precision of your writing. Work the paper over and over, draft after draft – clarifying, tightening improving. In time, you may discover that there is an art to revising – an art honed through hours of revising practice. You may find that the *fourth* rather than the first draft exhibits the organization, polish, clarity and control that approaches great writing.

Your paper flows and the ideas are clear and direct. The reader is taken by the power of your ideas, and the ease and grace of your sentences. To her, it all seems effortless – a kind of magic.

Perhaps *that* was the very magic that fooled you not so long ago. Great writing only *looks* like magic. Real writers know whence it really comes – draft, after draft, after draft.