

5 Steps to Completing Your First Draft

Follow these stages of preparation and production to assemble a first draft of written (or spoken) content.

1. Identify Your Purpose

What is the reason for writing the content? Are you objectively presenting information? If so, is it for educational purposes, or for entertainment — or both? Are you writing to help someone make a decision, or encouraging someone to take action?

Identifying your goal for the content will help you shape the piece.

2. Identify Your Readership

Who are your intended readers (and your unintended ones)? What is their level of literacy, and what is their degree of prior knowledge of the topic?

Imagining who your readers are will help you decide what voice and tone to adopt, how formal or informal your language will be — though that factor also depends on your approach (see below) — and how much detail or background information you provide.

3. Identify Your Approach

Should your content be authoritative, or is it the work of someone informally communicating with peers? Are you offering friendly advice, or is your tone cautionary? Are you selling something, or are you skeptical? Should the content be serious, or is some levity appropriate?

Determining your strategy, in combination with identifying your readership, will help you decide how the piece will feel to the reader.

4. Identify Your Ideas

Brainstorm before and during the drafting process, and again when you revise. If appropriate, talk or write to intended readers about what they hope to learn from the content. Imagine that you are an expert on the topic, and pretend that you are being interviewed about it. Write down the questions and your answers to help you structure the content. Alternatively, present a mock speech or lecture on the topic and transcribe your talk.

Draft an executive summary or an abstract of the content, or think about how you would describe it to someone in a few sentences. Or draw a diagram or a map of the content.

Using one or more of these strategies will help you populate your content with the information your readers want or need.

5. Identify Your Structure

Craft a title that clearly summarizes the topic in a few words. Explain the main idea in the first paragraph. Organize the content by one of several schemes: chronology or sequence, relative importance, or differing viewpoints. Use section headings or transitional language to signal new subtopics. Integrate sidebars, graphics, and/or links as appropriate.

Incorporating these building blocks will help you produce a coherent, well-organized piece.