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## Evolving perspectives on the process approach to writing: From stage models to cognitive models

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### Abstract

This article offers a critical overview of the process approach to writing, tracing its evolution from early stage models to more recent cognitive models. It highlights the distinction between stage models, which categorize writing into discrete, linear steps, and cognitive models, which emphasize the mental processes and cognitive work that writers engage in while composing. The article examines different versions of both models, exploring how each conceptualizes the writing process and its implications for writing instruction. By analyzing these models, the article provides a deeper understanding of the cognitive struggles and decision-making processes that writers experience throughout their work. Ultimately, this overview offers a nuanced perspective on the strengths and limitations of the process approach to writing, particularly in relation to understanding the internal cognitive challenges writers face.

**Keywords:** Process approach to writing; cognitive models; stage models

### Introduction

In response to the composition problems students encounter and to provide both learners and teachers with tips on the intricacies of writing, several approaches have appeared successively. An approach enjoys popularity and achieves dominance over a period of time. Then, it fades away paving the way for another approach to emerge. One of these major approaches is the process approach. It launched investigations into the writing process itself to find out what stages writers go through and what strategies they use while composing. The composing process stages, the development and the formulation of ideas and the sources ideas emanate from were unaccounted for in the previous approaches (Zamel, 1982) <sup>[21]</sup>. Zamel (1982) <sup>[21]</sup> was one of the early researchers to view writing as a process. This new strand of research views writing as “a non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning” (Zamel, 1983, p. 65) <sup>[22]</sup>. The recursive nature of this skill makes it, then, possible for the writer, at any stage of the writing process, to move forwards or backwards to reconsider and revise what has been written at the level of language and structures. They might even reshuffle the whole plan because as they write, they discover new ideas and new patterns of organization which require them to make necessary adjustments to the overall plan.

At the pedagogical level, the process approach to writing emphasises the heuristic nature of writing. Learners learn how to write through writing (Hyland, 2011) <sup>[10]</sup>. Hence, the teacher’s role is limited to that of the facilitator and guide. They provide learner writers with feedback and scaffold them throughout the whole process. They also raise their meta-cognitive awareness about the different stages of writing (Klimova, 2014) <sup>[11]</sup>. Learners can use “their ability to reflect on the strategies they use to generate and revise material, and how they should attend to feedback on writing” (Hyland, 2011, p. 19) <sup>[10]</sup>. The teacher’s feedback, however, should not be form-focused. The teacher should be mainly concerned with providing feedback that would help learners develop efficient strategies for the different stages of the writing process.

For the sake of clarity, in what follows, the distinction will be made between two trends in the process approach: the stage approaches and the cognitive approaches. The stage approaches, though some of them underscore the recursive nature of writing, view the writing process as clearly delineated into clear-cut stages; however, they provide no

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information about what writers do while writing and the cognitive processes they engage in. The cognitive approaches, on the other hand, tapped on the writer's cognition in a bid to describe the cognitive "wrestling" the writer does while writing.

### The Stage Models

The early views of process writing, tended to dichotomise the writing process into distinct stages. These early models date back to the sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Different scholars have attempted to account for the stages the writing process involves. The prominent models that stand out in the literature are those of Rohman and Wlecke (1964)<sup>[16]</sup> and Donald M. Murray (1968)<sup>[1]</sup>.

#### Rohman and Wlecke (1964)<sup>[16]</sup>: Prewrite, Write and Rewrite

Rohman (1965)<sup>[15]</sup> considered writing as "something which shows continuous change in time like growth in organic nature" (p.106), and this change happens as the writer goes through the *pre-write*, *write* and *re-write* stages. The pre-writing stage refers to everything that happens before the emergence of words on paper. What happens afterwards is referred to as writing or re-writing.

These scholars were mainly concerned with pre-writing because this stage determines the writing process as a whole. It is a discovery stage where thinking occurs, leading to the formulation and development of ideas, as well as the orchestration of plans and designs. They hold that there is a causal connection between thinking and writing processes. Only after thinking can we embark on the task of writing. It follows, then, that to write well, one needs to think thoughtfully in the first place. They also made a clear distinction between discovery processes and remembering ones. Discovery generates ideas while remembering is only an act of recollection.

#### Donald M. Murray (1968, 1978)<sup>[12, 13]</sup>: Prevision, Vision and Revision

Murray (1968)<sup>[12]</sup> described writing as a continuous discovery experience the writer embarks on. In this discovery journey, the writer goes through a whole range of stages. At the initial stage, they discover the topic and put themselves in the mindset of the writing task. A viewpoint towards the topic is developed and all the resources are mobilised to gather relevant information necessary for the development of the topic. At this topic discovery stage, the writer has recourse to his senses such as the sense of involvement, curiosity and solutions to name a few. At the second stage, the writer makes a mental representation of the audience. To make writing meaningful, the writer writes with a very specific audience in mind. The writer, afterwards, looks for specific details to support their writing. Facts and ideas are gathered to provide the reader with ample convincing evidence. The writer, now, after gaining a clear understanding of the topic and the audience and gathering the necessary ideas and facts, sets up an outline for their writing. A template for organising ideas is created. Only then does the writer proceed to the next stage: the actual writing stage. As they write, new ideas are discovered and language mistakes (Spelling and grammar) are not attended to. At the post writing stage, the writer reviews the written product critically. Major reconsiderations might take place at this stage at the level of both organisation and

content. Finally, at the rewrite-and-edit stage, the writer refines the product and embellishes it through paying attention to minor aspects of the text.

Murray (1978)<sup>[12]</sup> reviewed his early model of writing and categorized the writing process this time into three main broad stages: prevision, vision and revision. He used the term prevision to refer to everything the writer does prior to the task of writing. Vision refers to the writing of the first draft and revision stands for whatever the writer does afterwards. He 'split' revision into two forms: internal revision and external revision. Internal revision accounts for what the writer does to make sure that their writing really expresses what they want to say. For that end, they check on their content, form, language and voice. External revision is mainly focused on finding out whether or not the expressed messages are clear for readers. Writers step aside and read the product as outsiders to see if it is understandable, coherent and clearly sequenced for the audience. Murray holds that most writers accord due importance to internal revision to the neglect of external revision.

Actually, there have been several other models of the stage approach to writing. These models are discussed in a chronological order so that the reader can trace the evolution that has taken place and gain a better understanding of how each model relates to the previous ones and what novelty it provides.

In her model, Tricia Hedge (1988)<sup>[7]</sup>, using different labels, took the pre-write, write and re-write conception of writing a step further and added some embellishments to it. She laid the focus on the need to identify the audience and the purpose of the composing act because writing is a communicative endeavour that targets a certain reader to achieve certain purposes. She suggests that at the communicating stage, with the help of the teacher, students become aware of the importance of the audience and the intent of writing. These two variables dictate on the writer what style to adopt. Hedge also encompasses both the pre-writing and the writing stages under one label, which is composing. In her model, she added crafting as another stage. At this stage, the writer uses a set of skills to produce coherent and appropriate texts such as the use of appropriate vocabulary, cohesive devices, coherent development of paragraphs and various sentence structures. However, it seems hard if not impossible to draw demarcation lines between this stage and other stages. It is embedded in all stages. The writer has this concern of crafting while writing and while revising as well. It is a thread that runs through all stages. Hedge uses the word 'improving' to refer to the revision stage at which major changes might happen. At this stage, the writer might check, among others, the clarity of the communicated messages, the appropriate use of vocabulary and cohesive devices, rearrangement of paragraphs, and whether or not some important information has been missed.

White & Arndt (1991)<sup>[20]</sup> suggested a model that intersects a lot with that of Hedge (1988)<sup>[7]</sup>. They reiterated the idea that identifying purpose and audience in writing is primordial. At the idea-generating stage, students should be aware of a possible reader other than the teacher and the purpose of the writing act. As an idea-generating technique, they suggest the adoption of brainstorming activity. They hold that this activity triggers the imagination of the student writers and help them produce ideas on a certain topic. It also enables the teacher to generate a rich interaction among

students. At the focusing/structuring and the first draft-writing stages, White and Arndt suggest that students engage first in free writing and loop writing. To help students avoid organisation problems at this stage, the teacher is strongly advised to make an explicit reference to the different patterns of discourse organisation so that they can have a visual plan of the text they are writing. Sample patterns might include problem-solution, cause-effect, claim-counter claim and chronological order organisations. At the revising and redrafting/editing stages, they stress that feedback should not be delayed. It should be immediate while the experience is still vivid in students' minds.

In his model, Hyland (2003) [8] does not differ much from the previous ones, and he puts the stress on the non-linearity of writing because "planning, drafting, revising and editing do not occur in a neat linear sequence. [On the other hand, they]...are recursive, interactive, and potentially simultaneous, and all work can be reviewed, evaluated and revised...the writer can jump backwards or forwards" (Hyland, 2003, p. 11) [8]. Harmer (2004) [4] holds the same line of thought. He conceives of writing as a recursive process that he represents in the form of a wheel, which "clearly shows the many directions that writers can take, either travelling backwards or forwards around the rim or going up and down the wheel's spokes. Only when the final version really is the final version has the process reached its culmination" (p.6).

These stage models, despite the valuable insights they provide into the process of writing, were criticized for overlooking the complex cognitive processes that writers engage in while writing. Writers constantly make mental decisions, such as organizing their thoughts, solving problems, evaluating the clarity of their ideas, and adjusting their approach to meet their audience's needs. They engage in metacognition, adjust their strategies based on what's working or not, and refine their arguments as new insights emerge. Failure to capture this ongoing mental effort, such

as reworking ideas, mid-drafting or revising content based on deeper reflection, paved the way for the emergence of a new version of the process approach that tapped into the cognition of individual writers.

**Cognitive Models**

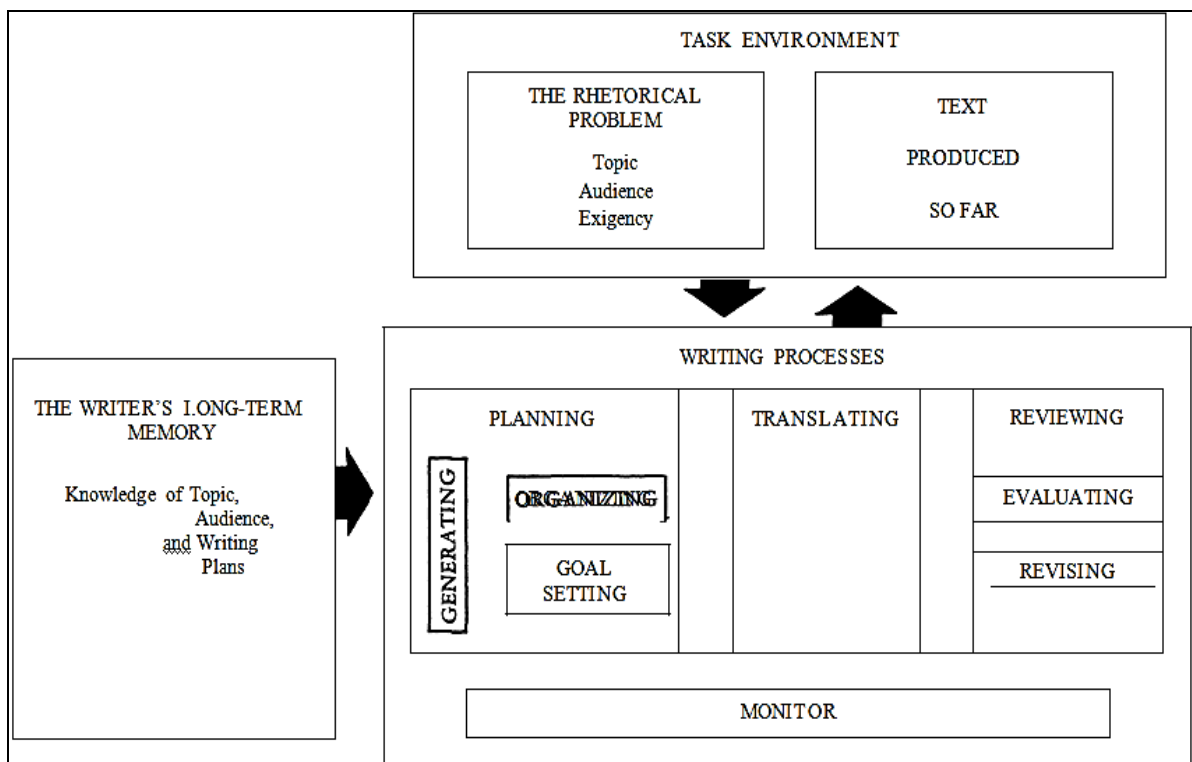
The position within the process writing framework is cognitive in essence. The cognitive processes writers use while composing became the focus of study for researchers. This view considers writing as a problem solving activity (Hyland, 2009) [9]. An influential cognitive model was suggested by Flower and Hayes in 1981 [2].

**Flower and John Hayes' Model (1981) [2]**

This cognitive model appeared in response to the stage models. Actually, these models depict and describe the process that the written product goes through from the beginning to the end and by no means account for the cognitive processes writers use. Flower & Hayes (1981) [2] highlight the limitations of the stage models as follows:

the problem with stage descriptions of writing is that they model the growth of the written product, not the inner processes of the person producing it. In a stage model, the major units of analysis are stages of completion and these stages are organised in a linear sequence or structure. (p.367)

As an alternative, Flower and Hayes (1981) [2] suggest a model that identifies in detail the processes and sub-processes writers use while writing and explain how these elements interact with each other throughout the whole process of composing. To trace what writers do while writing, they used the protocol analysis instead of introspective analysis because it helps get a clear record of how writers think while writing. They found out that the writing act consists of three components as it is shown in Figure 1 below: the task environment, the writer's long term memory and the writing processes.



**Fig 1:** The Cognitive Process Model of Composing (Flower and Hayes, 1981. p.370) [2]

The task environment is divided into the rhetorical problem and the growing text. The rhetorical problem represents the writing assignment in its totality, which includes the topic, the audience and teacher and student roles. As the writer composes, the written text, the text in progress, emerges and asserts itself as an important variable in the task environment and starts to exercise its influence on the writer. It also enters an arena of competition with the writer's long term memory and their plan as it "makes large demands on the writer's time and attention during composing" (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 371) [2].

The long term memory, as Flower & Hayes (1981) [2] define it, refers to "a storehouse of knowledge about the topic and audience, as well as knowledge of writing plans and problem representations" (p. 371). But the problem writers encounter is how they can retrieve things stored in the long term memory. For this to happen, the right cues should be used. Such cues will help writers to activate the right schemata that would provide them with useful knowledge and information. But this information the writer retrieves needs some adjustment and adaptation before it can meet the demands of the rhetorical problem.

Concerning the writing processes, the model, as shown above, delineates three processes: planning, translating and reviewing. Planning includes three sub processes: generating ideas, organizing and setting goals. Through the process of generating ideas, the writer retrieves the adequate information and ideas from the long-term memory. But, if the recalled information is unstructured, the writer subjects it to the process of organizing. They organize ideas into subordinate and superordinate ones and outline the pattern within which ideas will be presented. Another major sub-process that falls within the scope of planning is goal setting. These goals are generated by the writer as they proceed throughout the task of composing. At each stage of the writing process, the writer sets goals for the action they are going to take. Once the action is taken and the objective is achieved, the writer enters into another 'move' where they decide on novel actions and their corresponding goals.

The two other processes in this model are translating, which Flower & Hayes (1981) [2] define as "the process of putting ideas into visible language" (p. 371), and reviewing. This latter is divided into evaluating and revising. Another important element is the monitor. It allows writers to consciously monitor both the writing process and the progress made so far. They keep them under systematic surveillance. For instance, the monitor helps the writer decide on the length of the time devoted to generating ideas before moving to translating. Such a choice is influenced by the writing habits and styles of the writer and the goals they have set for the writing task.

Flower & Hayes (1981) [2] assert that these writing processes are not writing stages to be followed in a linear way. They are rather thinking processes that writers use throughout the whole process of writing. Planning, for instance, might seem as a starting point. Once we depart from it, there is no way of turning back. But actually it is not. It is a thinking process that writers use throughout the whole process of writing. They also hold that these processes are "hierarchically organised" (p. 375). They are embedded within one another. Each process subsumes other processes. They are tools that writers use and are by no means linear. Flower & Hayes (1981, p. 376) [2] hold that:

Writing processes may be viewed as the writer's tool kit. In

using the tools, the writer is not constrained to use them in a fixed order or in stages. And using any tool may create the need to use another. Generating ideas may require evaluation, as may writing sentences. And evaluation may force the writer to think up new ideas.

These processes are goal-driven. At every stage of the writing process, writers set goals that guide the process. These goals can be either process based or content based. The process based goals are mainly the directives writers keep murmuring to themselves on how to go about the process of writing. Content based goals are the decisions the writers take on what ideas and information to share with the reader. These goals are created "in two key ways: by generating goals and supporting sub-goals which embody a purpose; and, at times, by changing or regenerating their own top-level goals in light of what they have learnt in writing" (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 381) [2].

Hayes (2000) [5] revised this model and added important changes to it. This new version is made up of two main components: the task environment and the individual. The task environment subsumes the social environment (the audience and collaborators) and the physical environment (the text produces so far and the composing medium). Multiple sub-components fall within the scope of the individual: (a) Motivation/ affect (goals, predispositions, beliefs/ attitudes and cost/benefits estimates), (b) the working memory (phonological, spatial, visual and semantic), (c) the long term memory (task schemas, topic knowledge, audience knowledge, linguistic knowledge and genre knowledge), and (d) the cognitive processes (text interpretation, reflection and text production). Hayes (2000, p. 5) [5] highlights the major differences between this new model and the old one as follows:

There are four major differences between the old model and the new: first, is the emphasis on the central role of working memory in writing. Second, the model includes visual-spatial as well as linguistic interpretations...Third, a significant place is reserved for motivation and affect in the framework...Finally, the cognitive process section of the model has undergone a major reorganization. Revision has been replaced by text interpretation, planning has been subsumed under the more general category; reflection; translation has been subsumed under a more general text production process.

This new model seems to be more elaborate than the old one as it provides more subtle details about the cognitive processes writers engage in while writing. It also provides a comprehensive picture of the variables that interfere in the process of writing. Subsequently, big strides have been made away from the stage-process views that failed to account for the inner thinking processes writers engage in.

This model, however, did not escape criticism. It was criticized for its use of think-aloud protocols as the main data-collecting tool. Some of the processes cannot be described orally as they occur at the unconscious level. The writer is not consciously aware of these processes and, hence, their description will provide a patchy picture about their cognitive processes. Another defective aspect of the model is that writers, in the study, are required to do two tasks simultaneously. They carry out the cognitive chore and describe it, which will pressurize the short-term memory because of "a crowding of the cognitive workbench" (Afflerbach & Johnson, 1984, p. 311, cited in Hyland, 2009, p. 23) [9].

Another problem with Hayes & Flower (1981) <sup>[2]</sup> and Hayes' (2000) <sup>[5]</sup> model is its inability to clearly account for the individual differences among writers. It seems that this theory applies to all writers irrespective of their age, their writing experiences, their L1 and the types and purposes of writing. Actually, this is not the case. For instance, novice writers presumably do not use the same processes as the experienced ones (Zamel, 1983) <sup>[22]</sup>. That is, writing is developmental and the use of the processes is flexible as it differs from one writer to another (Sharp, 2016) <sup>[18]</sup>. They vary with respect to the writing tasks they are involved in, their personal traits, their writing experiences and the cognitive strategies and styles they use. This deficiency is what the next model tried to account for.

### **Bereiter and Scardamalia's Model**

A more elaborated and complementary model was suggested by Bereiter and Scardamalia in 1987 <sup>[17]</sup>. The model is two-fold. It consists of knowledge telling and knowledge transforming to account for the differences between novice writers and expert ones. Put simply, beginner and advanced writers do not process their writing alike. While composing, novice writers tend to simply tell and recite knowledge they already know. They mobilize all the resources and retrieve from their memory pieces of knowledge that correspond to the assignment (knowledge telling). Besides, they neither plan so often nor revise extensively. They are mainly and primarily concerned with generating content (Hyland, 2009) <sup>[9]</sup>. Expert writers, on the other hand, prior to writing, analyze the rhetorical problem and set goals. They also care about issues related to audience, organization, style and form. This model, knowledge transforming, "involves actively reworking thoughts so that in the process not only text, but also ideas, may be changed" (Hyland, 2009, p. 24) <sup>[9]</sup>. Hayes (2011) <sup>[6]</sup> phrases the differences between these two models as follows:

With the knowledge-telling strategy..., the writer is assigned or chooses a topic and a genre and then probes memory to create a series of statements about that topic. As the name suggests, this strategy is focused on presenting the writer's knowledge about the topic and not at all on shaping or adjusting that knowledge to the reader's or the writer's needs. In contrast, writers using the knowledge-transforming strategy engage in a problem solving process in which they try to shape their knowledge to meet their reader's and/or their own needs. (p. 367)

This explanation seems plausible enough because it provides two different models of composing, knowledge telling and knowledge transforming, to show how differently novice and expert writers write. Yet, no evidence is presented about how the transition is made from the first model to the second one. We also do not know whether or not this model is the same for all learners. A common weakness of this model and the previous one is their inability to account for factors such as age and language learning experience because such factors might influence the way we write.

Hayes (2011) <sup>[6]</sup> elaborated on the knowledge telling model and provided three variants that characterise the writing of young learners and novice writers.

### **The Flexible Focus Model**

Writers who adopt this model produce texts with "chain-like

structures" (Hayes, 2011, p. 372) <sup>[6]</sup>. The writer first makes comments on the writing topic, but as they proceed, these comments become the foci of subsequent writing (I like reading because it is important for the mind. I like reading stories in English. English is an international language because). In this example, the initial focus of the writer was reading, which is the writing topic. Then, they shifted to talk about "English", which was a comment in the previous sentence, but they turned it into a writing topic in the next sentence. Texts produced this way tend to lack theme unity and focus because writers "start with the assigned topic, but subsequent main clauses may change topic when the writer's attention is captured by the comment in the previous main clause" (Hayes, 2011, p. 372) <sup>[6]</sup>.

### **Fixed Topic Model**

Unlike the previous model, in the fixed topic model, the writing topic remains unchanged throughout the writing act from the beginning to the end. The writer's main concern is to provide as much information as possible about the writing topic and write in a filter-like way to check if the ideas relate to the topic or not. If an idea is adequate, the writer embraces it and writes it down. If it seems irrelevant, however, they reject or suppress it. The writer is afraid they might be steered away from the main writing topic. They bring the writing act to a halt only when they are satisfied that enough details and information have been provided.

### **Topic Elaboration Model**

Hayes (2011) <sup>[6]</sup> claims that writers possess a stack of topics. They elaborate the main topic, but at a certain time they decide to switch to a subtopic. Once they think that enough has been said about the subtopic, they push it down the stack and move to another subtopic or go back to the main topic. To ensure that the main topic is still alive and present, the writer goes back to it after expatiating on the subtopics. The categorisation of these models seems relevant and plausible at the level of theory. But, in practical terms, it is hard to identify what model the writer adopts in a piece of writing. Hayes (2011) <sup>[6]</sup> alludes to this problem when he admits that "the relation between the three categories and the texts they could produce was intrinsically unclear" (p. 376).

### **Evaluation and Criticism**

Process writing, with all its variations, made it possible for us to trace the different stages writers go through before they finalize their written products (Nunan, 1989) <sup>[14]</sup>. It is communication driven as it encourages students to be primarily concerned with the meaning and how to get it across. It also gives us an insight into the cognitive processes writers utilize while writing. This approach, however, was not satisfactory at least from the point of view of some critics. It was blamed for putting too much weight on the writer as an "unsociable isolated being" and turning a blind eye to the social dimensions or aspects of writing. Writing is the dutiful task of individual writers who need to "identify and appropriately address the particular task, situation, discourse community, and sociocultural setting in which they are involved" (Silva, 1990) <sup>[19]</sup>. It also downplays the importance of grammar and structure. An inaccurate use of language is an indicator that the linguistic competence of the learner is still defective, which will be more of a hindrance than a help in communication. Actually, accuracy and fluency are two complementary

aspects of the learner's competence and, hence, they should be accorded equated importance. Another aspect for which the process approach was criticized was the fact that it is time demanding, especially with large classes, and burdensome for teachers. They need to do lots of grading. It might even be thwarting and discouraging for students who are unused to writing. For instance, students might conceive of revision as a sign that they are not doing well.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of the process approach to writing, from early stage models to more sophisticated cognitive models, provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in the act of writing. Stage models, with their linear and discrete steps, have traditionally offered a clear framework for understanding writing as a series of manageable tasks. However, these models often oversimplify the process, failing to capture the recursive, non-linear nature of writing that cognitive models emphasize. Cognitive models, in contrast, delve deeper into the mental processes and decision-making strategies that writers engage with throughout the composition process, offering a more dynamic and realistic depiction of writing as an intellectual and creative endeavor.

By examining the strengths and limitations of both approaches, this article highlights the importance of recognizing the cognitive struggles and strategies that writers encounter. These insights not only deepen our understanding of the writing process itself but also have important implications for writing instruction. Educators who understand the cognitive demands placed on writers can design more effective, tailored approaches to teaching that go beyond the mere mechanical steps of writing and focus on fostering the mental flexibility and problem-solving skills necessary for successful composition.

Ultimately, this nuanced perspective calls for a more integrated approach to writing instruction—one that considers both the structured progression of writing tasks and the cognitive work involved. By balancing the strengths of both stage and cognitive models, teachers can better support writers in overcoming the internal challenges they face and help them develop stronger, more adaptable writing skills. As the field continues to explore the cognitive dimensions of writing, it is clear that a deeper understanding of these processes will lead to more effective pedagogical strategies and, ultimately, more proficient writers.

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