**The Writing Process**

by Mr. Brian Connell

Let's pretend that this is the assignment: Write a critical, thesis driven essay about Poe’s work(s).

**Process**
I. Pre-writing

a. No decent, respectable essay is simply created out of thin air. The writing that you do prior to the actual composing of the essay will greatly increase the worth of the finished product. The thought that you put into writing before you write will prevent your essay from being a rambling stream of consciousness for the teacher/professor/reader to sift through. In other words, this is your time to ramble and explore your stream of consciousness, and it’s your job to sift through that and find “the point.”

b. Some people call this phase “brainstorming” and some call it “free-writing.” I find these terms a little annoying—one conjures images of a bunch of corporate types developing an ad campaign, while the other suggests that writing is some kind of peaceful, feel-goody process. I don’t see this part of the exercise of writing critically as either of these, but rather a purging of sorts. You should begin writing on the page and purge yourself of all thoughts (no matter how great or small) regarding the subject at hand. In this case, the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe. Like “free-writing,” this pre-writing is not about “right” or “wrong”; rather, it’s about flushing out all possible ideas for what might be worthy of a focus for your essay.

c. Start with what is interesting or confusing to you. And then ask questions. Then answer questions. Then ask questions. Then answer questions. The best way to flush out your ideas is to keep asking and answering questions about the subject. Begin with “What do I find interesting about these stories?” You might have a few answers to this. Pick a road and go down it. Here’s an example of some pre-writing from an essay on The Lord of the Rings:

The Moria chapter is really cool. Why is it cool? Because I like how they have to go into this deep and dark place in order to get to the next place in their journey. And what does it say that they are forced into this awful place? Well, it suggests that sometimes the hero(es) doesn't plan on certain things--some things are forced upon him/them, but they have to go through them anyway. And then what happens when they’re in this dark place? Well, for one, they lose Gandalf—their guide, their savior. This is really bad. And again something they didn’t plan on. By the end of Moria, the company is without their leader, they’re kind of at their lowest point. But this forces them to make changes, and it allows new leaders to rise. Without Gandalf the power struggle between Boromir and Aragorn can take place, and it’s this power struggle that ultimately inspires Frodo to separate from the company. Perhaps Gandalf knew this when he descended (even deeper and darker) with the Balrog. Now that’s kind of interesting—the company goes into the deep, dark mines of Moria, but Gandalf goes deeper and darker still when he fights the Balrog. Hmmmm…maybe there’s something to going into dark places…maybe going into dark places is necessary, in fact, to the developing strength of the company and of individuals.

You see how this goes? You see how the more questions you ask, and the more answers you offer to these questions, the more interesting points start to arise? This is your task. And this is why writing a good essay takes time and consideration. Thinking becomes its own action here. And it requires energy. That is to say that developing smart thoughts isn’t easy, so don’t expect it to be.

d. After you’ve written for a while, go back and look at what you have. Much of what you’ve written may not be that interesting—that’s ok—many times you have to say a lot of nothing in order to get to the good stuff (this is worth it, because the alternative is just writing the essay and forcing your reader or teacher to read a whole lot of nothing). When you find the good stuff, highlight it or circle it. And then bring it down to a new line on the page and start asking specific questions about that—flush that out. [Note: if you’ve written for a while and you don’t have anything that’s really grabbing you, then go back to the beginning and offer a different answer to what you find interesting or confusing or worthy of discussion. Choose a different road to go down.]

II. Developing a Thesis

a. Your thesis statement represents the focal point of your essay.
b. A good thesis statement:
i. Expresses a clear position on the subject
ii. Reflects complex thought
iii. Is specific

c. All of your pre-writing serves the purpose of arriving at your thesis. As you flush out all of your ideas and opinions about the subject, you ask questions, and then give answers, and then ask questions about the answers. And the more questions you ask, the more specific your discussion starts to become, until suddenly your answers start to resemble some pretty intelligent thoughts and conclusions about the subject. When you get to this point, you’re very close to pinning down your thesis.

d. Wording your thesis:
i. Your statement should be one sentence long.
ii. Your statement should include observation as well as analysis For example:

The fact that William Wilson’s virtuous double cannot speak above a whisper suggests that goodness, in Poe’s world, is weaker than evil.

In this statement the writer has observed something about the text—that the “good twin” can only speak in a whisper. This is a good observation, but it is not a complete thesis. A good thesis statement makes some sort of argument, claim, or analysis of the observation. So what about this fact of the character’s whisper? What does it suggest or imply about the characters or about the world, perhaps? This writer has decided to discuss the impact of the observation on the nature of good and evil in Poe’s worldview.
iii. Avoid the verb “to be” in your thesis statement. It creates wordy situations. For example:

Duality is a major theme in “William Wilson” that is shown through the use of a good and evil twin.

Look at those “is’s”—they’re such weak little words and they require so many other words just to make them work. Instead, let’s try this:

The presence of a good and evil twin in “William Wilson” represents the theme of duality.

This is much better. It gives the sentence a stronger, more direct feel. This is called being concise. And being concise should be your goal in critical writing. But there’s more—now that you’ve taken the clutter out of that statement, there’s room for more good stuff. Taking the verb “to be” out of a sentence is like weeding a garden—you remove the stuff you don’t need, and then there’s room for better stuff to grow. So let’s do this:

The presence of a good and evil twin in “William Wilson” represents the dual nature of man, and suggests a fine line between virtuous and criminal behavior.

Whoa—did you see how that lame thesis statement from above just became kind of awesome?

e. Crafting a thesis statement that works is vital to the rest of your essay. So don’t even try to move on until you have a strong thesis statement.