

Conducting a Think-Aloud Protocol

One of the primary elements for your analysis in Writing Project One is the Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP) that you will be conducting regarding your writing process. For Tuesday's class, you should conduct a TAP while writing a 300-word history of yourself as a writer. For this task, the focus is on your TAP rather than on your writing history itself.

Make sure that you record your TAP using an audio or video recording device. Possible tools you can use to record are your cell phone, a microphone on your computer, a digital/tape recorder, a camcorder, screencapture software such as Jing (available through techsmith.com for free), etc. For class on Tuesday, you must bring the recorded TAP, headphones to listen to the TAP, and any other equipment necessary to analyze your findings. In other words, you will be analyzing your TAP in class, so come prepared.

What is a TAP?

A TAP is a data-gathering technique used “to capture a detailed record of what a person is thinking while performing a certain task.”¹ The key feature of the TAP is that subjects must speak out loud what they are thinking and wondering from moment to moment. This technique is used in a variety of fields for many different purposes. For example, an advertiser might use a TAP to have a better idea of what consumers think about their commercials; a web-designer might use a TAP to learn whether users can successfully navigate a newly-made website; or a writing scholar might use a TAP to examine how some people deal with writer's block. In all of these examples, researchers are trying to see into the minds of their subjects and gather information that is otherwise very difficult to observe. In short, TAPs offer researchers the chance to see more deeply into how people think and thus make arguments based on their findings.

Why Am I Doing a TAP?

The goal of Writing Project One is for you analyze your writing process and to arrive at new insights about yourself as a writer. Thus far, you have investigated commonly held misconceptions of writing and begun to question how these misconceptions have shaped your own views about writing. As you continue to build toward a draft of Writing Project One, you must conduct even more extensive research into your writing practices. According to Linda Flower and John Hayes—two highly regarded writing scholars—one of the best ways to learn about a writer “is to study a writer in action.” The TAP protocol allows you to do just that—observe yourself in action. In some ways, this assignment is similar to a baseball player who watches video footage of his swing to better understand his stance, his position in relation to homeplate, and his movements before, during, and after hitting the ball. Like the baseball player, you are trying to observe intricate details in your writing process that are hard to see under normal circumstances. The data you gather during this assignment will be, in part, the subject of your paper for Writing Project One.

Another reason why you are conducting a TAP is to learn about how scholars study writing. Many of these scholars—often called compositionists—devote their time and energy studying writers

¹ Flower, Linda, and John R. Hayes. “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1981, pp. 365-387.

“in the act” to learn more about how certain groups of people compose and how writing might be better taught in schools. Like professional compositionists, you are conducting in-depth research into the practices and thinking processes of a writer—you! And since *you* are the focus of your own research, you can use insights drawn from this study in future writing for this class and beyond.

Brief Writing History

In order to conduct a TAP, you must perform some sort of task. Your task is to compose a “brief writing history” in which you look back at some important experiences in your writing life. Shoot for around 300 words for this piece. While this writing assignment can help push you toward a draft of Writing Project One, the focus is on the TAP, not on the writing history *per se*.

Detailed TAP Directions²

1. When beginning to write your writing history, make sure to begin documenting your thoughts aloud (and record them!).
2. As you proceed to complete the assignment, make a chronological audio or video log in which you record notes on your processes, procedures, and decision making throughout the development of the assignment. You can use these notes when writing your first draft of WP1 to compose a retrospective meta-analysis (thinking about your own thinking) of your writing and revision processes.
3. Refer to the following questions and prompts repeatedly and systematically throughout the process of completing the writing assignment and your analysis of its evolution:
 - a. What is your assigned topic and what are your purposes for writing?
 - b. Whom do you envision your audience? Explain. How does this affect your choices?
 - c. How did you get started? Describe specific procedures.
 - d. Characterize the process involved in producing a preliminary draft. Note the time, place, and length of time required to generate a draft. Describe brainstorming, planning, reading, and other processes involved. Record instances in which you made progress, took backward steps, abandoned your original plans, and so on. Always consider why you made these decisions.
 - e. Describe what you were pleased and displeased with upon completion of your preliminary draft.
 - f. Note your thoughts about your audience as you completed your preliminary draft and began revising it. Did your perceptions of the audience change? Why?
 - g. Characterize the process entailed in composing your second version. To what extent did it resemble the first draft? What changes did you make? Why?

Perform a candid assessment of your effectiveness in addressing the assignment itself. To what extent did you accomplish the instructor’s stated goals? How might you have altered your process? Describe your satisfaction with the final product.

² Adapted from Ferris, Diane R., and John S. Hedgcock. *Teaching ESL Composition: Purpose, Process, and Practice*. Routledge, 2005.