The writing process

Traditional writing classes viewed writing as a product. The teacher gives an assignment, the students go home, produce a paper, and turn it in. What happens in between was given little attention. Nowadays language teachers recognize the importance of the process of writing – how a writer goes about planning the essay, pre-writing methods, drafting, and multiple stages of revisions (ideally), and finally, a final version.

For you, it would be helpful to introspect on your your own writing process, and then guide those you tutor to do so as an initial exercise, before you two start working on an actual assignment. Describe your writing process from start to finish, including the following:

- How do you go about doing a major writing task, in English or Korean, at school or work?
- How do you get started?
- How do you get comfortable?
- How do you brainstorm ideas and organize them?
- How, how often, and how much you revise your paper?
- How similar or different is your writing process for different kinds of projects?
- How similar or different is your writing process for English versus Korean assignments?
- If you have writer's block, explain how you deal with it, and perhaps what causes it (e.g., perfectionism, lack of ideas, too much information to deal with, or negative voices from your past that you've internalized).

Writer’s block refers to the difficulty that one has in getting started on a writing assignment, e.g., when a person experiences a mental block and cannot focus, cannot get started writing, cannot organize his/her ideas, cannot get past the introduction, or such. Writers can learn to reflect on the possible causes of writer’s block, which is usually due to the reasons in the next section.
Brainstorming and free writing

Writer's block
Writer’s block may be caused by these factors.

Negative voices from the past
These are negative messages, discouragement, harsh treatment, etc. from past teachers, especially language or writing teachers (or other teachers, or parents, or others). These are voices that we internalize, and which cause us tension and anxiety when we try to write. Somewhere in the back of your mind, these voices may be barking at you, sending negative messages about you and your ability to write; or you are afraid that whomever you are writing for will also react similarly. This may require identifying the sources of the “voices” and moving beyond them.

Affective filters
If something else is on your mind (an argument you had with someone, or some other source of emotional stress), this burdens your cognitive processing, attention, cognitive abilities, your ability to make connections among concepts, the ability to engage in systematic or analytical thinking, and the ability to engage your creative processes. You may have to take a break, resolve the conflict, relax, take a walk, talk with someone, or whatever helps you take your mind off things. Maybe the best thing is to compartmentalize – put problems in a different mental compartment and forget about them while you focus on the writing task.

The affective filter may also be due to the mental demands of writing in a second language, especially if you feel a lack of confidence or motivation in your second language.

You may find it helpful to also use visualization techniques – either relaxing by visualizing yourself in a peaceful place, for example, or by visualizing yourself thinking and writing successfully on your writing task.

Perfectionism
The desire to be perfect, or the belief that others expect you to be perfect. This may come from childhood, from how you were raised, or from pressure that parents and/or teachers have put on you in your past studies. This leads people to have unhealthy and unrealistic expectations of themselves. When they need to write, they are burdened by expectations they have about their writing, or by what they think the readers (teachers, supervisors, etc.) may think of them and their writing or language ability. This may require:

1. Over the long term, dealing with the psychological issues or considering how people in your past conditioned you to be a perfectionist;
2. For the shorter term, getting more writing practice or instruction; and
3. For the immediate writing needs, some brainstorming and free-writing techniques, particularly where you simply forget about who you are writing for and any expectations about how well it is written, for your first draft.

**Lack of information; or an overly broad topic**

If you find yourself stuck, you may need to find more information on the topic before you can develop good ideas for the assignment. Conversely, you may be stuck because you’re trying to take on too much – an overly broad topic, or too much general information. In that case, you need to identify a more specific topic, and maybe get more specific information on it, before you can proceed.

**Brainstorming**

Try these, and teach these to your students.

**Free writing**

Forget about apathy, self-criticism, resentment, anxiety about deadlines, fear of failure, your expectations of yourself, others’ expectations of you, or other forms of resistance. Just put something on paper (or the computer screen) in raw form. Then you can go back later to revise it and put it in presentable form. First,

- Write whatever comes to mind, no matter how raw or incomplete the ideas or sentences are.
- Pay no attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation, neatness, or style. Nobody else needs to read what you produce here. The correctness and quality of what you write do not matter; the act of writing does.
- Don’t worry about complete sentences or making sense to other readers.
- Deliberately forget about who you are writing for – audience, potential readers, their expectations, and even your own expectations for nice, polished writing.
- Give yourself a time limit. Write for one or ten or twenty minutes, and then stop.
- Keep your hand moving until the time is up. Do not pause to stare into space or to read what you’ve written. Write quickly but not in a hurry.
- If you get off the topic or run out of ideas, keep writing anyway. If necessary, write nonsense or whatever comes into your head, or simply scribble: anything to keep the hand moving.
- If you feel bored or uncomfortable as you’re writing, ask yourself what’s bothering you—and write about that. Sometimes your creative energy is like water in a kinked hose, and before thoughts can flow on the topic at hand, you have to straighten the hose by attending to whatever is preoccupying you.
- When the time is up, look over what you’ve written, and mark passages that contain ideas or phrases that might be worth keeping or elaborating on in a subsequent free-writing session.
- Don’t worry about making ideas, connections between ideas, and logical flow clear at first. But you should do that later when you revise it.

After you have something on paper or on the screen, then revise it later:
• Revise it later by first making ideas, connections, and logical flow clear to yourself on paper, then by making them clear enough to potential readers.
• Revise logical flow, grammar and wording in several stages with the audience in mind.

Talking
Try talking to a friend about the writing task – brainstorming together can be productive and less stressful. You can also try talking to yourself or a family pet to brainstorm, as long as friends and family members don’t conclude that you’re in need of counseling or other “help”.

Concept maps
Known as mental maps, concept maps, semantic maps (though this properly refers to something else in computer science and related fields) or such. Just put down words and phrases on paper, draw connections between them, and fill in connections with descriptions of the relationships between ideas. For example:

1 These examples are from: http://cmap.ihmc.us/Publications/ResearchPapers/TheoryCmaps/TheoryUnderlyingConceptMaps.htm.
Other methods of graphically brainstorming: a simple flow chart, a Venn diagram, and a tree diagram.  

From http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v8n2/birbili.html.

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2 From http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v8n2/birbili.html.
Outlining

Outlining can be good for generating ideas, as well as for organizing ideas after brainstorming. This allows you to arrange things according to relationships and degree of importance, with less important items under larger, more important concepts or categories that they are related to.

An outline is an important step, whether in actual practice one outlines mentally, or sketches an outline on paper, in a text document, or in one's slides. One should organize an outline around 3-5 main points, and each main point with 3-5 subpoints, and so on. An essay or presentation will be more coherent and easy to follow if the student follows the “3-5” principle. This is because human working memory can best keep in mind 3-5 items, so it will be easier for readers or listeners to follow the flow of an essay or presentation. An outline looks like so, though the lettering and numbering style is up to the student.

| Introduction
| Main point #1
| Main point #2
| Main point #3
| Main point #4
| Conclusion |

Which can be further elaborated...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>C. Main point #3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Main point #1</td>
<td>1. Subpoint 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Subpoint 1</td>
<td>2. Subpoint 2</td>
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<td>2. Subpoint 2</td>
<td>3. Subpoint 3</td>
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<td>3. Subpoint 3</td>
<td>3. Subpoint 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Main point #2</td>
<td>D. Main point #4</td>
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<td>1. Subpoint 1</td>
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<td>3. Subpoint 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Subpoint 4</td>
<td>E. Conclusion</td>
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<td>5. Subpoint 5</td>
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</tbody>
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I. Ways of tricking my writing teacher in writing my essay (when I don’t have much to write)
   A. format tricks
      1. extra large line spacing
      2. large fonts
      3. large margins
   B. content tricks
      1. teacher won’t read whole essay
         a. copy and paste same paragraphs over and over
         b. repeat same ideas over and over with synonyms
      2. teacher likely to read whole essay
         a. say nice things about the teacher in the essay
         b. include money (as gift expression of your appreciation) with essay when handing it in

To take advantage of this, the student should make these main points explicit in the introduction. In an essay, after the thesis statement, the main points to follow can be summarized, and in a presentation, an overview of the topic and main supporting points can be provided in an introduction.

• Essay thesis statement: The current college entrance exam is linguistically invalid and needs to be replaced, because X, Y, and Z. [ = summary of main points]
• Presentation introduction: I will argue that the current college entrance exam is linguistically invalid and needs to be replaced. This is because [1] X..., [2] Y..., and [3] Z... [ = summary of main points]