

Writing and revision: Best practices

Bradley Dilger, *English 108*, Fall 2014 ~ <http://dtext.org/>

Here's a lot of research and experience summarized in two pages:

Writing as a whole

1. Recognize that writers benefit from considering how much of the following to engage for any given writing task:
 - a) **research and pre-writing:** in/formal primary or secondary research, conversations with those involved, determining the relevant elements of rhetorical situation, arranging for reviewers or readers, identifying suitable examples, identifying best practices;
 - b) **drafting:** actually putting ideas to paper, then developing them into some sort of organized document which someone else can review;
 - c) **reviewing:** seeking help, informal or formal, from someone in the target audience or a third party who can be educated about the target audience;
 - d) **revision:** additional research and reading, reorganization, addition or deletion of additional material, rewriting to shift the tone, redesigning to shift the genre;
 - e) **editing and polishing:** sentence- and phrase-level changes in writing designed to improve a text, eliminate mechanical errors, and ensure consistency.
2. When writing tricky sections (e.g. beginnings and endings, summaries): write multiple versions in the same document. Don't erase — copy, paste, modify, and try again.
3. Back up and organize computer files as you go — invest the time in making a strategy for creating folders for individual projects, etc. Back up in multiple places.

Reviewing

4. It is extremely difficult to review or edit your own work — that's why professional writers work with reviewers and editors. Seek help. You will be grateful later.
5. Get reviews from more than one person. You're better off with three reviews that take 20 minutes than one which takes an hour.
6. Don't just hand a document to reviewers and say, "What do you think?" Instead:
 - a) Provide them some idea of the writing task — the actual document which describes the task (an assignment, a request for proposals, an email from a supervisor), a description of your audience as you see it, samples, etc. That will give reviewers the opportunity to help you ensure your take on the rhetorical situation is accurate;
 - b) Make clear you really need their honest and frank feedback — don't let reviewers try to be "nice" to you by telling you your document is better than it is. That won't help.
 - c) Offer to meet with reviewers as needed to ensure you respect their time.

Revising

7. Recognize that revision can be very difficult and can result in the need for more research, seeking out more examples, etc. If your gut tells you this extra work is necessary, do it—don't cut corners.
8. Remember the strong ties between good writing and content knowledge. As necessary, do the research and reading, and get the help, which ensures you know your subject matter.
9. Whenever revising, consider your time spent — and ask for help if you bog down.

10. As you revise, if you bog down at any point, write COME BACK TO THIS and move on. Highlight it if you need to. Then go back to it later (or ask for help with it from someone else).
11. When reorganizing, some writers like to spread out their work to really see what they are doing. Use a giant table, tape things to the wall, use a whiteboard, etc.
12. Use the right tool for the job and for your preferences. If you prefer to use paper, use paper. If you prefer to work on screens, use them. If you prefer both, use both. If you prefer to revise by literally cutting and pasting hard copy, do so.
13. Complete all revisions before you begin editing and polishing— though sometimes you'll need to attend to correctness so reviewers focus on your content, not spelling and the like.

Responding to feedback from a reviewer

14. Don't treat feedback from an instructor or other reviewer as a simple checklist — do this, do that — but work hard to understand it, ensure its accuracy, generalize it, and learn from it on both the short- and long-term:
 - a) read all the feedback before you begin revising;
 - b) read each individual point of feedback carefully and check with the reviewer if you aren't sure what it means;
 - c) if you disagree with any particular item of feedback, check with the reviewer or another reviewer to see if it was a mistake;
 - d) consider if the issue identified applies to other parts of the document.
15. Be systematic about feedback: use checklists to ensure you complete a set of changes and revisions for your entire text. Keep them for long-term use — you might be able to use the same document in other contexts.

Editing

16. For editing, and when seeking to reduce correctness mistakes, paper is often quicker than working on screen — and you can find and mark changes in one color, then check them off as you implement them. This helps prevent seeing mistakes in print, which is no fun.
17. Seeing your work differently can help you be more critical of it:
 - a) Change the font, font sizes, and margins to force paragraphs to reflow;
 - b) Read your writing backwards — read the last sentence first, then the next to last, and so on.
18. As above: when working on sentences or difficult passages, don't rewrite and erase endlessly — copy, paste, modify, and try again.
19. Consult style manuals and other texts designed to help writers — don't think that's cheating or cutting corners. The *Chicago Manual of Style* is over 1,000pp. Nobody can remember all that!

Nuts and bolts for reviewing, revision, and editing

20. To prepare for reviews or to mark up a draft, print double- or even triple-spaced and change the margin on one side to 2.5" to allow extra space for comments. Add line numbers and page numbers (in the header) using those features in your word processor.
21. Save all of your drafts. **All of them.** Change your file name each time you draft. Including dates in file names is smart.
22. Save all of the reviews others write for you. **All of them.** Make sure you mark clearly who wrote each review.