



CSU Learning Skills: *your link to success*

Academic writing

Revising your draft paper

"Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying."
—John Updike

Writing an academic paper, such as an essay, is not simply a matter of sitting down for half a day and writing as much as you can remember about a topic or issue that you've spent a couple hours reading about. Academic writing is all about a *process* that involves writing, thinking and learning – not just turning out a finished product.

In writing the rough draft you are basically writing for yourself, as you get down many of your basic ideas and try and sort out what you really want to say. Remember that in writing something important, it is not usual for writers to produce an adequate piece of text in one go. Achieving a polished text is accomplished through a process of multiple revisions (or re-writings) and maybe even re-vision – that is, 'seeing' your topic in a new light, or from a different angle.

Good writing is... rewriting

The real secret of good writing is rewriting and more rewriting, which is another way of saying that we never write something important after just one attempt. This does not, however, involve students in the time-consuming task of rewriting a complete first draft a number of times in order to be successful. What it *does* mean is that revision and rewriting are to be on-going aspects within the writing cycle and should not be seen as things to do only when the rough draft has been completed.

Donald Murray suggests three kinds of reading as we struggle toward meaning: reading for focus, form and voice.

Reading for focus means reading for the one meaning that is struggling to express itself in our text. Murray suggests we quickly read a draft, trying to see it the way a reader will. The aim at this stage is to make the words as clear as possible, to avoid rabbit trails and stick to the point, to say enough but not too much. Next he suggests reading the draft more slowly, a bite at a time, looking for "chunks of meaning." As we read for form, we ask ourselves if the introduction, illustrations, examples, arguments and conclusion do the job or are simply ornamentation, included because we think we ought to include them, and not because we need them to make the writing clear.

Finally we should read paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, line by line, word by word. At this stage it often helps to read a draft aloud to see if it sounds like one person speaking. Reading aloud also helps us find the places where our writing starts to slip away. If we stumble over a word or phrase, if we find ourselves out of breath, or lose our place, then our writing still needs work. This is also the time to focus on grammar and spelling, recognizing that grammar and spelling errors confuse our meaning and weaken our expression. In writing for voice, we put the finishing touches to our work, striving to make it "simple, clear, graceful, accurate and fair".

From: Bill Stifler, 1998, 'Learning to Write Well', <http://users.cdc.net/~stifler/cstcc/writwell.html>

As you write and revise, it is advisable that you regularly do the following things:

- Check the logical flow of your ideas and arguments;
- Rethink/rearrange ideas, sentences, and paragraphs;
- Check for unity and coherence;
- Shorten or remove unnecessary words, sentences, and paragraphs;
- Rephrase and re-organise sentences to clarify ideas;
- Check paragraphs for topic sentence and summary/bridging sentence; and
- Ensure paragraphs fully develop one idea; ie., that paragraphs are longer than 2-3 sentences; and
- Check for correct acknowledgment of ideas to avoid plagiarism.

(Adapted from: "The Process of Writing" 2003).

Consider your reader

The first draft of your academic paper is where you begin to clarify ideas for yourself and to build your structure; at this point you are the audience, and your essay is basically writer-based. Once you have completed a reasonable initial draft of your assignment, then you need to begin to revise with the reader in mind, checking that you have communicated your 'message' in a way that is clear, consistent and coherent. In other words, that you've produced a paper that will be both readable and meaningful to your reader. Revision means, literally, to re-see. This, of course, implies that you need to re-examine and re-work your message in order to provide the reader with as clear a meaning as possible.

The best thing is for you to put your completed draft aside for a day or two. This will give yourself time to reflect on the ideas you have put down on paper. When you come back to review your draft, take the place of the reader – role play in other words – and read through the essay *aloud*. Reading aloud forces you to listen to the words and helps you to check the flow of ideas and meaning, instead of reading silently to ourselves where we often automatically place in missing words and meanings since we already carry them in our head. Keep the reader uppermost in your mind as you read and redraft. There may be gaps in your supportive details or arguments; such breaks have to be dealt with. There will, more than likely, be a number of places where you have left out the needed bridging phrases or signposting that provide the essential cues for a reader-friendly text.

The main question to ask during this stage is, *Can someone else beside me read and make sense of this work?* To test if you have clearly expressed an idea or point to your reader, use the acronym WIRMI: What I Really Mean Is...

When you identify a paragraph that you're uncertain about in terms of clearness or precision, then take a separate sheet of paper and write 'what I really mean is...' at the top. Then, go on to write about the idea or issue in the simplest terms possible – as if, perhaps, you were explaining it to a child. Once you've expressed your idea, you then go back and reword it for style and tone appropriate to academic writing.

Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what you are really trying to say. To achieve an effective essay, which is essentially an exercise in communication, you will find that you'll decide to change a sentence or a paragraph, or even change the order of paragraphs in order to achieve a better sense of meaning for the reader. The importance of revision, with the reader of the text in view, cannot be overstated. After students have spent a good measure of time researching, taking notes and then writing their essay, they are often loathe to do anything more to it. The feeling is: 'I've spent so much time, thought and effort in this assignment, that it's simply got to be right. I'm handing it in as it is.' Others might even have 'fallen in love' with what they've produced, and so do not see any real need to make changes. But both attitudes fail to take into consideration that first drafts are just that—*first* attempts at constructing a well-presented academic text that communicates meaningfully to intended readers.

Guiding questions to ask yourself

When revising your draft paper, it will be useful to ask yourself the following questions. How you answer the questions will guide your revision process.

1. Have I answered the question as completely as possible?
 - What is my main argument or assertion?
 - Did I construct a clear argument or take a position on the topic? Do I state this position in my introduction?
 - Did I prepare the reader for what is to follow?
2. Is my essay structured clearly?
 - Does it have a clear introduction, a body and a definite conclusion?
 - Is it logical? Does it flow sensibly?
 - Are the major points connected? Have I explained the relationships between them clearly?
 - Are my major points and ideas relevant to the topic? Do they contribute to answering the question?
3. Are my paragraphs clearly connected and coherent?
 - Do they flow smoothly and logically from point to point?
 - Does each point and/or paragraph state its case clearly and completely? Do I need more information, details or evidence?
 - Are the direct quotes and examples relevant? Do they support the ideas and answer? Are facts and opinions supported by examples or explanations where necessary?
4. Is my writing appropriate?
 - Are my ideas clear and explicit?
 - Is my language clear and direct?
 - Have I kept the reader, which is the marker, in mind? Have I said all I need to say so they will understand? Do I presume that they will "know what I mean"? If yes, then I need to further elaborate.
5. Is my referencing accurate?
 - Have I referenced all the ideas, words and information sources I have used?
 - Is my referencing style consistent and correctly formatted?
 - Can the reader distinguish between my ideas and words and those of my cited sources?
 - Are quotes accurate and properly introduced?
 - Have I avoided plagiarism?
6. Do I too many words?
 - Check to see that only relevant information is included
 - Is there unnecessary repetition?
 - Have I been too 'wordy'? Can I be clearer or more concise?
7. Do I too few words?
 - Have I fully answered the question(s) or task(s).
 - Should I include more information or discussion? Do I need to read/research more?
 - Are my arguments/ideas supported by enough evidence and referenced information?

Presenting my work

Within an academic learning environment it is expected that the final version of your essay will be competently presented. It will be expected therefore that, at the surface level, you have used the correct spelling, punctuation, grammar and in-text referencing for quotations or paraphrases, with an accompanying References list at the end of the assignment.

Some students mistakenly think that presentation of an assignment refers to fancy headings, clever shading and elaborate fonts. It isn't - and the extra time spent won't result in extra marks - in some cases quite the opposite. Professionally presented, clear, easy to read text is the key. Refer to your Subject Outline for specific instructions. If you are still unclear post a message on your subject forum or ask your marker. It is likely that other students may have the same questions or perhaps the question has already been answered on your forum.

In the absence of any specific directions, the following points are a *general* guide for presenting assignments.

- Assignments should be typed using a word processor
- Use 1 ½ or double spacing. (Some lecturers may ask for spacing.)
- Use 2.5 cm margins both sides or a 5 cm left margin. Markers need space to be able to include their comments.
- Use 12pt Times New Roman font
- Include a separate title page with your name, student number, subject code and assignment question
- Number your pages
- Use a header or footer with your name and student number on each page and finally
- Always keep a copy of your assignments.

Information on [assignment submission through EASTS](#) is found on our companion website [Online Learning @CSU](#).

References

Clanchy, J. & Ballard, B. (1997). *Essay writing for students*. Sth Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman.

McLaren, S. (2001). *Essay writing made easy* (2nd ed.). Glebe, NSW: Pascal Press.

The process of writing. (2003). Retrieved November 2, 2004, from
http://www.rio.maricopa.edu/distance_learning/tutorials/study/writing.shtml

Additional Web resources

Check this series for some useful information about editing:

Copy Editing in Three and a Half Easy Steps

by Sally Bacchetta

http://www.sallybacchetta.com/Column_archive/column_0206.htm

Put Your Writing On A Diet: Strategies For Leaner Communication

by Sally Bacchetta

http://www.sallybacchetta.com/Column_archive/column_0306.htm

Choose Your Words Carefully

by Sally Bacchetta

http://www.sallybacchetta.com/Column_archive/column_0406.htm

Proofreading Your Writing

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/561/01>

The Process of Writing

http://www.riosalado.edu/distance_learning/tutorials/study/writing.shtml