

Mastering the Essay Lesson 11 – Revision

Readings

- **"How to Write with Style"** (Kurt Vonnegut)
- **The Elements of Style** (William Strunk) *Please at least skim the "Elementary Rules of Usage," even if you think you are grammatically proficient. Do read the "Elementary Principles of Composition" thoroughly and thoughtfully as well as the final chapters.*
- **Revision Checklist 1** (Writing Centre at UNC Chapel Hill)
- **Revision Checklist 2** (Centre for Writing, University of Minnesota)

Some quotes from famous writers on rewriting:

- "I'm all for the scissors. I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil." ~Truman Capote
- "I would write a book or a short story, at least three times—once to understand it, the second time to improve the prose, and a third to compel it to say what it still must say." – Dorothy Parker
- "Read over your compositions and, when you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out." ~Samuel Johnson
- "Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying." ~John Updike
- "More than a half, maybe as much as two-thirds of my life as a writer is rewriting. I wouldn't say I have a talent that's special. It strikes me that I have an unusual kind of stamina." ~John Irving
- "There is a difference between a book of two hundred pages from the very beginning, and a book of two hundred pages which is the result of an original eight hundred pages. The six hundred are there. Only you don't see them". ~Elie Wiesel

Revising your essays

- This week you have a chance to actually put into practice all the feedback you've got in your tutorials! You will choose one essay from the term to revise. What is the difference between revision and proofreading? In proofreading, you are primarily looking for "the little things"--grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. When you revise, you're digging around for the soul of your essay. Revision can be total—the final version of a paper might not even have a single sentence of the original! Or it might be very similar with minute care taken with phrasing, transitions, etc.
- **Outlining when revising:** Outlining, if you remember, is thinking! It is every bit as important when you are revising a paper as when you are writing it. If you remember back to that early lesson, we recommended that you re-outline before you revise because the finish paper rarely conforms to the original outline—much of the time, that is a good thing. You have learned more in the writing and have come to understand your own

project better. Now, before you revise, make an outline of the actual essay you wrote and examine it with fresh eyes: Are you missing logical steps? Are there any repetitions that need to be cut? Any huge steps that need to be broken up into several paragraphs in one section? Do you need to add transitions? Revise your outline before you rewrite.

Remember that if you don't have anything important to say, it does not matter how nicely you say it.

- **Remind yourself of your audience and purpose:** Is your essay written to suit your audience and purpose? If not, how might it need to be changed?
- **After you re-outline, re-read your paper with an eye to style:** Is your intro interesting or boring? Is your conclusion fresh? Do you use interesting words? Do you use vivid images and anecdotes appropriate to your topic?
- **Rewriting your paper:** It may sound more time consuming, but it is almost always faster and more effective to completely rewrite your paper in a new document. Print out your original version, mark it up, and type your new paper. Trying to fix your old paper in the same document almost always results in a strange and unappealing Frankenstein.

Assignment

This week you will choose one of the previous essays from this semester to revise fully. You will need to submit the **original version** alongside your **revised version**. Please submit both in one document (copy and past the original version *after* your revised version). You will be graded more stringently this week in all categories—the standards are higher when you've been given time to revise!

Starting after next class, the students will begin a three-week special project writing a persuasive essay of 1,000 words on a topic of their choice. Let the students know about the nature of the assignment so they can start thinking about it now. They may choose to write a research, argumentative, compare and contrast, or cause and effect essay (no expository or personal essays – they must take a determinate side). Whatever type they choose, there should be some manner of research component to the work. They must determine the subject themselves, though they may talk it over with the instructor, and determine the best essay type and formatting style for their pieces. The instructor walks with the student through the process, giving feedback and guidance along the way, but truly allowing the student to make the work his own. Encourage students to brainstorm and do research to get ideas ahead of time. The first week, they'll turn in an essay proposal (next week will include information on how to write one). The following week they'll turn in an outline and the draft so far. At the end of the third week, they'll turn in the completed essay.