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As Long as it Takes

Helping students embrace the writing process.

By Mark Fitzgerald

There are many ways to produce writing that is competent and professional. Most writers would agree that it doesn't happen on the first try. Yet some days are better than others. And the more we write, the more we improve our craft. But, without a doubt, it takes practice, patience and persistence. It usually takes me several drafts to figure out what I want to say and how I want to say it. And then at least another draft to make it clear and concise for my audience.

Had I not written so swiftly and freely in the first draft, I would have never found the energy or turning point of my article. Had I not tested a good number of competing sentences and ideas, I would have never arrived at where I did. And what about the old lady reading it on the bus? If not for her, I would have never thought to go back and recast the hook.

How can we help our students understand the value and benefits of a writing process that embraces drafting, rewriting and revising? And how can they demonstrate their learning of this process? These questions were at the heart of a writing workshop I recently facilitated. We began by discussing what the drafting, rewriting and revising stages might look like in each of our classes.

Someone suggested a basic, in-class exercise (such as composing a cover letter or memo) might be a good way to introduce writing as a process to students and encourage them to practice using each of these stages. This could be a three-part exercise that asks students to produce a first draft of an introductory paragraph, a second version that is rewritten for clarity and coherence, and third version that is revised and tailored for a specific audience. An exercise like this wouldn't have to take that long and could spark a meaningful class discussion on the value and benefits of each stage.

A longer assignment might be to ask students to craft a personal essay. They could write this as part of an application to graduate school, an internship, or prospective job. In this scenario, the workshop group found it helpful to discuss the goals of each stage.

In the drafting stage, we agreed that it was useful to write a first draft as a first draft. Or, as Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird* puts it, to write it as a “child’s draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later.” One of the goals for this stage might be for students to brainstorm for a personal story (perhaps one that reveals how they overcame a difficult challenge), and then try to connect it with who they are and how this opportunity makes sense as a next step.

In rewriting the personal essay, some of the goals might be to organize the pieces and determine the structure; to improve the quality and cohesion of the writing; to rework paragraphs and sentences for clarity and variety; and to integrate pathos and logos. Another goal might be to determine what will be needed to support the essay, or where incorporating primary and secondary research might help. In this stage, the hope is that students will come to understand that what is left out is just as important as what is included.

In *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser, points out that “rewriting is the essence of writing well: it’s where the game is won or lost.... The newly hatched sentence almost always has something wrong with it. It’s not clear. It’s not logical. It’s verbose. It’s klunky. It’s pretentious. It’s boring. It’s full of clutter. It’s full of clichés. It lacks rhythm. It can be read in several different ways. It doesn’t lead out of the previous sentence. It doesn’t... The point is that clear writing is the result of a lot of tinkering.”

For the third draft, the revising stage, we discussed the importance of encouraging students to reread their work for audience concerns (such as style, selection and movement), and the value of substantive feedback through peer review. Revision goals for the personal essay might be to look closely at the opening and closing paragraphs from a primary audience’s point of view and make appropriate adjustments; to consider usage and simplicity; to eliminate clutter and redundancy; and to fine tune and rework syntax for tone and effect.

At the end of the workshop, we also considered what George Saunders once said about this stage: “I try to base my revision on a re-reading of what I’ve done so far, imitating, so far as it’s possible, a first-time reader. That is, I try not to bring too many ideas about what the story is doing, etc, etc. Just SEE what it’s doing. In other words, read along with

a red pen, reacting in real-time as I go along, deleting, adding, etc. When the energy drops, then I know that's where I have to really start digging in, i.e., turn away from the hardcopy and go to the computer. Repeat as necessary?" As long as it takes.