

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

Diane Hendrix, MIT Writing Coach

1. Dismiss the twin myths about writing, that there are born writers and those who just can't.

Actually, clear, effective writing takes practice and feedback. You may be smart, but that does not make you a good writer. Writing skills need honing, as in any field. Remember, "Engineers who cannot write and speak well wind up working for those who can." Your coach is here to demystify the writing process and help you improve your writing, no matter how well you write when the term begins. We will do that via your TA's feedback, your use of handouts, short one-on-one meetings and peer editing.

2. When you schedule a 20-minute session with me please prepared with some paragraphs and an outline, or a draft to discuss. Bring a question about what needs strengthening, such as organizing your ideas logically, identifying a thesis for an essay (answer a question you find intriguing) or unpacking overly complex, confusing or vague sentences. Each of our meetings can be for either brainstorming or for editing.
3. Our goal in writing is to help you develop a sense of mastery over your writing and expression. Writing is simply a skill, like driving, and there are rules of the road, which become second nature as you practice, giving you confidence.
Talking about your writing and ideas increases the complexity AND clarity of your expression. It is not enough to do it via email.

4. On beginning to write: After reading and thinking,
 - Decide on one question that intrigues you, and that you have some feeling about. What is the answer to that question?
 - That is the nub of your essay, or your thesis – that is, your answer to a research question on a given topic. [Topic >> research question >> thesis or answer to Q.]

- Write notes about 3-4 of your most important points. What evidence supports your observations? What might your peers want to know about this question? [your audience is bright peers unaware of your subject except in a general way.]
 - Now organize your thoughts and evidence, outlining the points you'll make in some logical way -- this will change drastically, if you write a good paper and edit it well.
 - Write a draft, revise it and revise it a couple more times (not just minor edits).
5. While you are writing your first draft, do not start editing, or interrupting yourself. Let the ideas, questions, points flow freely at first. Be kind to yourself. You want to A -- brainstorm first, to get your ideas down, then B -- edit and reorganize sections, then C -- READ ALOUD, polish, correct and D -- read it all again revise and revise. Avoid the standard five-paragraph formula for short essays, or make them intriguing.
 6. Effective writing is about making a sound and persuasive argument. An argument means a) expressing a point of view and understanding of an issue you have studied, b) supporting your point of view with evidence c) which you interpret for your reader clearly and persuasively.

Have pity on your reader. Anticipate points she/he may not understand, taking care to explain clearly. Then include answers to arguments your reader may have with points you make.
 7. Generally, in your opening, you want to tell us what you will tell us and how; then tell us, (the body of your paper), using evidence, examples and arguments; and finally, tell us what you told us, why it's important and what that may lead to (conclusion). Write/revise your OPENING paragraph LAST, since only then will you really know what you've done in your essay.
 8. Once you have your major points, evidence and conclusion nailed down, construct your opening paragraph with a compelling first sentence. Now you are clear what the paper is about and your opening paragraph tells us what your question is, the answer you have decided on, and the reasons you use to support

- your argument. Support your single idea (only one per paragraph, normally) with examples, visuals, brief quotes or references to events or persons mentioned in the content you've studied. Include only details that bear directly on your claim or argument. The engine (power) for this paragraph is your informed conviction and the relevant detail you use to support it. The paragraph should be focused, with no irrelevant details. Two or three vivid or convincing details are better than ten, which can overwhelm. (Less is often more, when explained carefully and clearly.)
9. Once you have written at least one strong paragraph, keep going! Then use the best graphs as a model for the others. Be sure to open new paragraphs for each new idea; paragraphs that go on for a page usually suggest you haven't separated ideas. Develop your paragraphs by comparing and contrasting, applying logical analysis, detailing a process, using chronology, or other methods. Don't forget to use transitions between ideas and to lead to the next paragraph.
 10. For the first assignment, write two pages of paragraphs like the above, double-spaced. [If the oral medium is easier for you for getting your ideas organized, record yourself on tape, then transcribe and rework your ideas.] Reading your topic sentences for each graph should lead a reader through the argument of your paper, regardless of length.
 11. Once you have your ideas and arguments formulated, write a complete draft, then another draft, then read it aloud and ask yourself:
 - Is my central idea interesting (do I have one?), as well as my supporting arguments, taken together?
 - Do I care about the claims that I'm making?
 - Have I stated them clearly, concisely and with vivid detail?
 - Be sure to use active verbs, not passive. Clarify and streamline sentences.No jargon.
 - Are my supporting details on point and as strong as they could be?
 - Have I acknowledged objections? (This strengthens your argument and respects opposing points of view.)

- Are there any words/phrases that can be deleted? (fewer words increase power)
 - Did I run a spelling and grammar check? Are all awkward or unclear phrases gone?
12. Make your style consistent and make it in your own voice. Employ words you comfortably use (not those you read – don't try to impress, just state clear ideas, simply). Avoid abstract nouns when possible. Use concrete nouns and few adjectives, with ACTIVE verbs. [avoid sentences like: “Abstract verbalization is symptomatic of the culture’s denial of its personal agency and responsibility.” – snore.]
 13. Once edited, your ideas should be clearly worded, with illustrative detail to support your observations. They must be tightly constructed with no extra verbiage, awkward phrasing, errors of syntax, spelling, or punctuation.
 14. Before you do a final draft, be sure to let someone vet your paper. Use the PEER EDITING sheet or some of the ideas there. Find someone with whom you might trade favors. If you are doing an oral presentation, do a practice run (after you've rehearsed at the mirror) with a friend. Do not fail to apply this step. Why do we not let someone read our papers or hear our presentations before turning them in? Answers: Time constraints (plan ahead), fear of criticism (that's how we improve), whom to ask and how (simply, with exchange), not enough sleep (do it earlier)...
 15. Finally, REVISE your paper, seriously. Keep the handout on “Revising the Draft” for reference. Examine carefully the improvements E. B. White, a professional writer, made between his third and sixth drafts of a single paragraph. Note his zippy opening line, which captures the reader. Make us want to read your paper and then hear your arguments. Finally, sum up your ideas with an engaging conclusion (and perhaps a nod to what might happen next).

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