Understanding the Writing Process

LESSON SUMMARY
In order to proofread, revise, and edit you need to understand the writing process—from prewriting to drafting, editing, revising, and writing a final draft. This lesson discusses the writing steps and then gives you strategies to help you write the best possible final draft.

The writing process has only just begun when you write the last word of your first draft. It is in the process of revising and editing that the draft takes shape and becomes a crafted piece of writing. Writing is an art, and like any good artist, a good writer continues to work on a piece until it has the desired impact.

Prewriting/Brainstorming

First, it is important to figure out what you know about a topic. Since many ideas come to mind when you begin to think about a topic, take time to write them down. First thoughts are easily forgotten if they are not committed to paper. You can do this with a prewriting technique such as brainstorming, clustering, mapping, or listing. You can use graphic organizers like charts, story maps, diagrams, or a cluster like the example on the next page.

Prewriting can take place in all sorts of inconvenient locations, and you may only have a napkin, a piece of scrap paper, or an envelope on which to write. Just don’t think a napkin with scribbles on it is the final draft. You still have much work to do.
**Drafting**

The next step is turning those thoughts into a first draft. Those of you who skip the prewriting step and jump right into a first draft will find that the editing stage takes more time than it should. You may even find that you have changed your mind from the beginning to the end of a piece, or that the first paragraph is spent getting ready to say something. That’s fine, but be prepared to reorganize your entire draft.

Writing with a plan makes the entire writing process easier. Imagine you are a famous writer of mystery novels. If you don’t know *whodunit*, how can you write the chapters that lead up to the part where the detective reveals the culprit? It is the same with your writing. Without an organizational plan, the paper you write may not take the right shape and may not say all you intended to say.

**Revising As You Go**

Most writers revise as they write. That’s why pencils with erasers were invented. If you are a writer who uses pen and paper, feel free to fill your first drafts with arrows and crossed-out words. You may continue a sentence down the margin or on the back of the page, or use asterisks to remind you of where you want to go back and add an idea or edit a sentence.

If you use a computer to compose, use symbols to remind you of changes that need to be made. Put a questionable sentence in **boldface** or a different color so you can remember to return to it later. A short string of unusual marks like `#@$%!` will also catch your eye and remind you to return to a trouble spot. Typing them may even relieve some of the tension you’re feeling as you struggle with your draft. Just remember that if you’re planning to show your draft to someone, like a teacher or coworker, you may want to clean it up a little first.

Computers also make it easier to make changes as you go, but remember that a computer’s
grammer check or spell check is not foolproof. Computers do not understand the subtle nuances of our living language. A well-trained proofreader or editor can.

Proofreading

Proofreading is simply careful reading. As you review every word, sentence, and paragraph, you will find errors. When you locate them, you can use proofreading symbols to shorten the amount of time you spend editing. It is an excellent idea to become familiar with these symbols. At the bottom of this page are a few examples of the most common ones, but be sure to check Appendix A for a complete list.

Of course, in order to find errors, you must know what they are. Read on to discover the culprits that can sabotage a good piece of writing.

Capitalization and Punctuation

Capitalization and punctuation are like auto mechanics for your writing. They tune up your sentences and make them start, stop, and run smoothly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
<th>MEANING OF SYMBOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☃️</td>
<td>Stevenson High school</td>
<td>Capitalize a lower-case letter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/</td>
<td>the second string</td>
<td>Make a capital letter lower-case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>^</td>
<td>Go right at the light.</td>
<td>Insert a missing word, letter, or punctuation mark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❀</td>
<td>I had an idea</td>
<td>Delete a word, letter, or punctuation mark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∩</td>
<td>receive</td>
<td>Change the order of the letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◦</td>
<td>... to the end</td>
<td>Add a period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>🇷</td>
<td>... apples, oranges, and</td>
<td>Add a comma.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example

the Russian Ballet travel’s. all over the world, Performing to amazed Audiences. in each new city;

This sentence jerks along like an old car driven by someone who doesn’t know how to use the brakes.

Edited Example

The Russian Ballet travels all over the world, performing to amazed audiences in each new city.

Every sentence begins with a capital letter. That’s the easy part. Many other words are capitalized, too, however, and those rules can be harder to remember. Lesson 12 reviews all the rules of capitalization for you.

While every sentence begins with a capital letter, every sentence ends with some sort of punctuation. The proper use of end marks like periods, exclamation points, and question marks (Lesson 13) and other punctuation like commas, colons, semicolons, apostrophes, and quotation marks (Lessons 14–17) will help your reader make sense of your words. Punctuation is often the difference between a complete sentence and a sentence fragment or run-on (Lesson 2). Other punctuation marks like hyphens, dashes, and ellipses (Lesson 18)
give flare to your writing and should be used for function as well as style.

**Spelling**

Correct spelling gives your work credibility. Not only will your reader know that you are educated, but also that you are careful about your work. You should have a dictionary handy to confirm that you have correctly spelled all unfamiliar words, especially if they are key words in the piece. In the workplace, a memo with a repeatedly misspelled word can be embarrassing. An essay with a misspelled word in the title, or a word that is spelled incorrectly throughout the piece, can affect your final grade. Avoid embarrassing situations like these by checking your spelling.

Even if you know all the spelling rules by heart, you will come across exceptions to the rules. Words that come from other languages (bourgeois, psyche), have silent letters (dumb, knack), or are technical terms (cryogenics, chimerical) can present problems. In addition, the spelling can change when the word is made plural (puppies, octopi). Homonyms like *bear*/*bare* or *course*/*coarse* can be easily confused, as can words that have unusual vowel combinations (beauty, archaeology). When in doubt, check it out by consulting a dictionary.

**Spell Check Programs**

If you use a computer, most word processing programs contain a spell check and a dictionary, so use them. Just be aware that spell check doesn't always provide the right answer, so double-check your choices. If your spell check gives three suggestions, you will have to consult a dictionary for the right one.

**Example**

He read *thru* the entire paper looking for a story on the protest march.

Spell check suggests replacing “thru” with “through,” “threw,” or “thorough.” The dictionary will tell you that the correct spelling is “through.”

Choosing a suggested spelling from spell check that is incorrect in the context of your sentence can affect an entire piece. As teachers and employers become more familiar with spell check programs, they learn to recognize when a writer has relied on spell check. For example, homonyms such as *pane* and *pain* and commonly confused words, such as *where*, *wear*, and *were* (Lesson 19) present a problem for spell check, just as they do for many writers. Ultimately, there is no substitute for a dictionary and a set of trained eyes and ears.

**Grammar**

Unfortunately, there is no “grammar dictionary,” but there are thousands of reliable grammar handbooks. In order to communicate in standard written English, you have to pay attention to the rules. You need to understand the parts of speech when you write, and you have to combine them properly.

**Example**

The dance team felt that they had performed bad.

“Bad” in this form is an adjective, and adjectives modify nouns. The word “bad” must be replaced by an adverb to modify the verb *had performed*. To turn *bad* into an adverb, you must add the ending *-ly*. 
Edited Example
The dance team felt that they had performed badly.

One of the best ways to check for grammatical errors is to read your writing aloud. When you read silently, your eyes make automatic corrections, or may skip over mistakes. Your ears aren’t as easily fooled, however, and will catch many of your mistakes. If you are in a situation where you can’t read aloud, try whispering or mouthing the words as you read. If something doesn’t sound right, check the grammar.

Grammar Check

Computers that use grammar check programs cannot find every error. Grammar check will highlight any sentence that has a potential error, and you should examine it. The program is helpful for correcting some basic grammatical issues, but it also functions in other ways. Many grammar check programs flag sentences in the passive voice (Lesson 8), which is a style choice. While the passive voice is not wrong, it can lead to some very flat and sometimes confusing writing. It may be a good idea to change some of the passive verbs to active ones.

Many programs also highlight sentence fragments and sentences that are over 50 words long (Lesson 2). Sentence fragments are never correct grammatically, although they may be used intentionally in certain informal situations.

It is important to remember that not only do grammar check programs sometimes point out sentences that are correct, but they also do not always catch sentences that are incorrect.

Example
I have one pairs of pants.

Edited Example
I have one pair of pants.

There is no substitute for understanding the rules governing grammar and careful proofreading.

Editing

Once you are finished proofreading, you will probably need to cut words out of your piece in some places and add more material in other places. Repetitive words or phrases and awkward or wordy sentences (Lesson 3) can be edited. If you begin to write without an organizational plan, you may have to cut some good-sized chunks from your writing because they wander from the main idea. You may also need to expand ideas that you did not explain fully in your first draft. Editing is about streamlining your piece. Good writing is clear, concise, and to the point.

Revision

Reading your writing a few times allows you to work on different aspects of your piece. Some revision takes place as you write, and some takes place after you have read the whole piece and are able to see if it works. Most writers revise more than once, and many writers proofread and edit each draft.

If your draft has errors that make it difficult to understand, you should start by proofreading. Print out your paper, mark it with proofreading symbols, and make any necessary corrections in grammar or mechanics. Proofreading and editing can help make your meaning clear, and clarity makes your piece easier to understand.
If your draft is cohesive, you can concentrate more on the big picture. Are your paragraphs in the right order? Do they make sense and work together? Are your transitions smooth and your conclusions strong? Have you avoided sounding wishy-washy or too aggressive? Is the voice too passive? Some writers prefer to think about these issues during the first reading. Others proofread, edit, and rearrange while they read the draft. It doesn’t matter which approach you use, but plan to read each draft at least twice. Read it once focusing on the big picture, and once focusing on the smaller details of the piece.

Real revision is the process of transforming a piece; the results of your revisions may not look much like your first draft at all. Even if you start with an organizational plan, it is possible that you will decide that the piece needs to be reorganized only after you have written an entire draft. If the piece is research-based, discovering new information can require a completely new treatment of the subject. If your piece is supposed to be persuasive, maybe you will discover it is not persuasive enough.

Thinking of your writing as a work in progress is the ideal approach. Writing and revising several drafts takes time, however, and time is a luxury many writers do not have. Perhaps you have a pressing due date or an important meeting. You can still improve your writing in a short period of time.

One strategy for revising is to create an outline from your draft. This may sound like you are working backward because usually the outline precedes the draft, but even if you originally worked from an outline, this second outline can be helpful. Read your writing and summarize each paragraph with a word or short phrase. Write this summary in the margin of your draft. When you have done this for the entire piece, list the summary words or phrases on a separate sheet. If you originally worked from an outline, how do the list and outline compare? If you did not work from an outline, can you see places where re-ordering paragraphs might help? You may want to move three or four paragraphs and see if this improves the piece.

“Cut and paste” editing like this is easy to do on a computer. In a word processing program, you can highlight, cut, and paste sentences and whole paragraphs. If you are uneasy or afraid you may destroy your draft, you may want to choose “select all” and copy your work into a new blank document just so your original draft is safe and accessible. Now, you can experiment a little with moving and changing your text.

If you are working with a handwritten draft, making a photocopy is a good way to revise without destroying the original. Remember to double-space or skip lines on the first draft to give yourself room to revise. To move paragraphs, simply number them and read them in your new order. If you are working from a copy, take out your scissors and literally cut the paragraphs into pieces. Instead of using glue or paste, use tape, or thumbtack the pieces to a bulletin board. That way you can continue to move the pieces around until they are in an order that works best for you. No matter how you approach revising, it is a valuable part of the writing process. Don’t be afraid to rearrange whole paragraphs and fine-tune your tone, voice, and style (Lesson 7) as you revise.

**Tone**

The tone of the piece is the way in which the writer conveys his or her attitude or purpose. The tone is the “sound” of your writing, and the words you choose affect the way your writing sounds. If you use qualifying words (Lesson 3) like “I believe” and “to a certain extent,” your piece has a less confident tone. If you use imperative words like “must” and “absolutely,” your piece sounds assertive. Just like the tone of your speaking voice, your tone when you
write can be angry, joyful, commanding, or indifferent. If you are writing about a topic in which you are emotionally invested, the tone of your first draft may be too strong. Be sure to consider your audience and purpose and adjust the tone through revision.

For example, if you bought a CD player and it broke the next day, you would probably be upset. If the salesperson refused to refund your money, you would definitely be upset. A first draft of a letter to the store manager might help you sort out your complaint, but if your purpose is to receive a refund, your first draft might be too angry and accusatory. It is a business letter, after all. A second draft, in which you keep your audience (the store manager) and your purpose (to get a refund) in mind, should clearly state the situation and the service you expect to receive.

► Slang

The words you choose make a big difference. If your piece of writing is an assignment for school, it should use language that is appropriate for an educational setting. If it is for work, it should use language that is professional. The secret is to know your audience. Slang is not appropriate in an academic piece, but it can give a creative short story a more realistic tone.

Slang is language that is specific to a group of people. When we think of slang, we usually think of young people, but every generation has its slang. Have you heard the terms “23 Skidoo” or “Top Drawer” or “The Cat’s Pajamas?” These words are American slang from the 1920s—the ones that your grandfather may have used when he was young. If these old-fashioned phrases were used in your favorite magazine, you probably would not understand them. On the other hand, Grandpa is probably not going to read the magazine that discusses “New Jack’s gettin’ real.” Slang has a use, but it tends to alienate people who do not understand it.

Colloquialisms and dialect are inappropriate for certain types of writing as well. The stock market predictions that you write for your brokerage firm should not declare, “I am so not gonna recommend blue chip stocks to every Tom, Dick, and Harry.” It should say, “Blue chip stocks are not recommended for everyone.” In an academic or work-related piece, it is safest to write in proper English in order to appeal to the largest audience.

► Voice

Voice can be active or passive, depending on your choice of verbs (see Lesson 8). Most pieces work better using the active voice. Like a well-made action movie, an active voice grabs the audience’s attention. The subject of the sentence becomes a “hero” who performs courageous feats and death-defying acts with action verbs like flying, running, and capturing.

The passive voice has a purpose, also. It is used to express a state of being. Where would we be without the passive verb “to be?” The appropriate verb in a sentence could very well be am, are, or have been. The passive voice should also be used when the writer doesn’t know or doesn’t want to state who performed the action.

Example

The purse was stolen.

In this case, no one knows who stole the purse, so the active voice would not work.
Style

Style is the particular way in which you express yourself in writing. It is the craft of your writing, and is the product of careful revision. It is the combination of voice, tone, and word choice, in which all the parts of writing—language, rhythm, even grammar—come together to make your writing unique.

Style should be your goal when you revise. Find changes that will make each sentence an important part of the whole. Tinker with your words until your language becomes accurate and clear. As in fashion, one little “accessory” can be the difference between an average outfit and a real eye-catcher. Style is always recognizable, and good style will make others take note of what you have to say.

Summary

Following the advice in this book will help you learn to proofread, edit, and revise your writing. As a writer, you should remember to keep important tools handy. A dictionary, a grammar handbook, and a thesaurus are essential. Remember: Write often, proofread carefully, edit judiciously, and revise until you are satisfied.