

The Drafting Process and the Unit 4 Assignment

The following required Reading and Learning Activities will help prepare you for drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading your Unit 4 Assignment, the personal and informal blog post.

Review Your Topic, Purpose and Audience

Before you begin writing your Unit 4 Assignment, review the ideas you posted in the Unit 3 Discussion Board along with the feedback you received from your classmates and instructor. What suggestions have they made and what changes do you need to make to your topic and focus? Consider whether you are writing about an issue in your field of study that you have experience and know something about, whether the topic is limited enough to write a short blog post about, and whether the subject allows for you to write both informally and personally. Consider also what audience you might need to address. If you have no idea whom you are writing to, that can prevent you from knowing the most effective language and appropriate information to include in your paper. Writing to medical professionals about how a particular disorder affects the brain probably would not be appropriate for an informal blog post because it would probably need to be research-based and, considering the topic, is probably too formal for the Assignment. On the other hand, writing about a way that parents can help their children with a particular learning disability to avoid frustration would work for this Assignment, if you have firsthand experience with the issue and can share that experience with your audience.

Drafting Strong Paragraphs

Writers use words to compose sentences that develop ideas. A group of related sentences that develops a particular idea is organized in a unit called a paragraph. Understanding the basic concept of “paragraph” is easy enough, but applying your understanding – that is, writing strong, focused paragraphs – can pose challenges for writers of all levels of accomplishment. The discussion that follows will help you understand effective paragraphing and reinforce good writing habits. Please keep in mind that writing is a process, and to produce good writing, paragraph by paragraph, takes time. Learning to write effective paragraphs will help you communicate your ideas clearly to an audience and help you achieve the purpose of the writing.

The Purpose of a Paragraph

A strong paragraph will have a clear focus, usually at the start and in the form of a topic sentence. A topic sentence is a direct and limited statement that announces exactly what the paragraph will discuss. Using a topic sentence helps readers understand the point of a paragraph and helps writers stay focused too. While not every paragraph needs an explicit topic sentence, every paragraph needs a clear focus, and for many writers using a topic sentence is the best approach.

With the exception of introductory and concluding paragraphs, paragraphs found in the body of an essay, or body paragraphs, work to develop individual points within their respective paragraphs, and they also work to support the larger point of the essay as communicated in the thesis. Body paragraphs will have content that supports the point of

the paragraph as well as language that connects the paragraph to other ideas in the essay, particularly the dominant idea of the thesis, so the content of the essay is unified around a central idea.

The Qualities of an Effective Paragraph

An effective paragraph will have unity, coherence, and development.

- **Unity** means that all of the content in the paragraph belongs; each sentence provides information that relates to the established focus of the paragraph.
- **Coherence** refers to content that is organized in a way that is easy to understand. One sentence logically leads to the next sentence, and the writer has provided transitions and guidewords to make the movement fluid for the reader and the different ideas come together cohesively.
- **Development** speaks to the idea of sustaining the writing and providing enough supporting details, so the point of the paragraph is clearly communicated to an audience. While paragraph length can vary, effective paragraphs contain enough substantive content that readers do not have lingering questions.

An Example Paragraph

Read the sample paragraph carefully and ask the following questions about how it's constructed:

Is the topic sentence clear and limited in focus?

Does the content of the paragraph support the idea expressed in the topic sentence?

Does the paragraph make a point?

Does the paragraph have language that connects it to a larger idea or previous paragraphs?

Is the content unified and easy to follow? Is the idea developed sufficiently for an audience?

While abstinence may be the only sure-fire contraceptive, the effectiveness of this birth control method is questionable. The teen pregnancy rate in the United States had been steadily declining from the late 1940s up until 2004 when there was a dramatic increase (Belanger, 2007). In fact, the United States now has the highest teen pregnancy rate of any industrialized country in the world (Marquis, 2009). Beginning in 2001, school systems only taught the federally funded "Abstinence-only" curriculum, but experts now agree and recommend that parents talk to their teens early and often not only about sex, but about all kinds of risky behavior. Behavioral psychologists report that teens have always experimented with risky behavior and will continue to do so (Belanger, 2007), which raises questions about the effectiveness of abstinence. Indeed, teens need science and fact-based education about safe sex practices in order to take the appropriate precautions when engaging in risky behavior. Abstinence works, but only if teens avoid risky behavior, which the evidence suggests is unlikely.

The topic sentence begins the paragraph and asserts that the effectiveness of abstinence as a birth control method is questionable. Notice how the content that follows all works to support the controlling idea of the topic sentence, providing evidence and commentary that create doubt about the effectiveness of abstinence? The writing is sustained and connects teenage sexual activity with the idea of risky behavior and whether or not abstinence or information will best protect teens. The content of the paragraph is substantive and relates to the idea expressed in the topic sentence and thus the paragraph has a sense of completeness.

Considerations for Writing an Effective Paragraph

Limit the focus to one distinct idea

A paragraph is a group of sentences that work together to develop a single idea. To maintain a tight focus, it is important that you compose an effective topic sentence.

An effective topic sentence establishes a subject, asserts a controlling idea, and suggests a limited scope of development. In the example, “This class is full of aspiring writers,” what is the subject? Clearly, the subject is class. So what statement does the sentence make about its subject? The sentence asserts that the class is full of aspiring writers. This part of the topic sentence is your controlling idea – it is what gets developed in the paragraph. Is the scope of the controlling idea limited enough for a single paragraph? Yes, since the controlling idea is limited to a particular class and a specific characteristic of that class, it seems reasonable to develop that idea in a single paragraph. Develop paragraphs with your audience and point in mind A paragraph has no set length requirement. A paragraph can range from one sentence (even one word!) to half a page or more. What you need to be concerned with is developing your ideas thoroughly and specifically so that your audience fully understands what you are trying to say. When the point is sufficiently developed, end the paragraph. In this way, some paragraphs may require less development and other paragraphs more depending on the point and the purpose of the writing (to persuade, for example, may require more development than a paper that informs). As a way to understand the idea of developing your thoughts fully, think about this:

Imagine it is late July in New Orleans. If I were to state that it is snowing outside, would you believe me? Probably not. After all, it is July in New Orleans, and the likelihood of snow is nil. But even beyond this fact, a statement with no proof, no development, is just an assertion. And an assertion is incomplete in the sense that it lacks sustained development. But what if after I said it’s snowing out (remember, it’s July in New Orleans!), I said, “I can see my next door neighbor, Mr. Hibble, a slight man in his 70s, out in his driveway right now, shoveling. He’s wearing a light yellow hat and tan gloves. And here comes the snow plow – will you listen to that clatter!” if I said all of that, you would be convinced, right? How could you not be? The key to the success of this content is that the writer has established his credibility as an authority on the subject by using concrete information that supports the claim that it is snowing in New Orleans in July. Readers see an elderly man wearing a yellow hat and tan gloves, shoveling snow in his driveway as the plow truck clangs along the street. Without such specific information, the writer’s credibility would be in question and readers would be less convinced by the claim. While the above example is an exaggeration, the point should

be clear: You need to take your time and develop your points so that they make sense to someone else, an audience. You need to sustain the writing and expand upon the controlling idea expressed in the topic sentence; depending on your purpose, you will need to use examples, details, facts, quotes, statistics, and testimony to give meaning to your ideas.

Revision and Editing Strategies

There is a common misconception, and not just among writing students, that only bad writers have to revise and edit their work. To the contrary, virtually all writing that ends up in print, as well as “A” papers of all stripes, need both revision and editing—sometimes several rounds of each. Many of the best writers in the world are obsessive revisers. Please see the sidebar on the right to learn more.

Ah, so revision and editing are not one in the same? In fact, they are quite different, but equally important, parts of the writing process.

Revision

Revision is best thought of literally, as re-vision, seeing again. This implies looking at a text from a new perspective, which means re-thinking even its most fundamental precepts. This might involve reconsidering your position on a controversial topic, re-evaluating the quality of the evidence used to support your claims, or re-defining your audience and or purpose.

Editing

Editing is a little bit like cleaning up the kitchen after cooking a big meal. Your essay’s “cleanliness” includes smooth transitions between paragraphs, logical organization of your thoughts and presentation of information, overall clarity and sense, and proper citation format. And let’s not forget good grammar, punctuation, and spelling!

If revision and editing are so different, why are they included together in this resource? Because they are inextricably connected. Think about this: The head and the tail of a cat are different parts of the cat, but both are parts of the same cat. This holds true for revision and editing as parts of the writing process. A text must be both revised and edited well in order to be successful. If an essay, for example, is revised extensively, but not edited, problems such as grammar errors that make the essay’s meaning difficult to comprehend will stand in the way of its success.

The reverse is also true. Consider the poor writer who tirelessly edits an essay whose ideas are not fully formed. The result is a very polished text — perfect grammar, logical organization, no spelling errors — that no one can comprehend, despite its orderliness, because its basic meaning is unclear, undeveloped, or unsubstantiated.

OK, now that we’ve defined the terms that are basic to this conversation, how do we go about actually revising and editing?

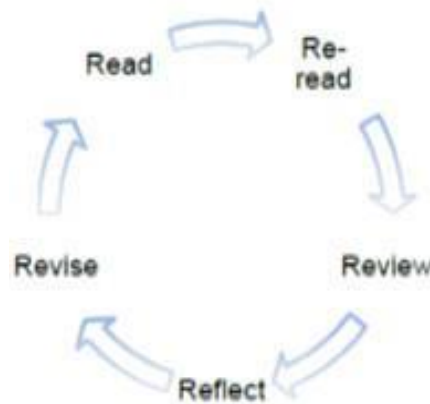
Right off the bat, decide which comes first. It doesn’t make sense to edit a passage that hasn’t been revised, as it will be subject to scrutiny at every level during the revision process. So, revise first! This will save you from having to edit the same passage multiple times.

The Revision Process

Believe it or not, revising can actually be fun. You've already chosen your topic, defined its scope, conveyed your thesis, presented your information or position, supported your claims with evidence (which might have required a great deal of research), addressed potential counter-arguments, and arrived at a satisfying conclusion. Whew! That's a lot of work, starting from scratch, getting over the terror of the blank page, and committing your thoughts to paper. You've already done the hard work! Now sit back, kick up your feet, hard copy of your paper in hand, and breathe. It's time to read, re-read, review, reflect, and revise.

One tried and true method of revision is the post-draft outline. It helps you identify potential organizational problems within your draft. Its steps are quite simple:

Figure 1. *The revision process is recursive, which means that writers will go through several stages of the process at different times.*



Read Your Paper Aloud

This sounds so simple, it's silly. Well, simple it is, but silly it's not! Reading your essay aloud is perhaps the single-most effective way to revise it. It's an especially effective method for those writers who fear they don't have good command of basic writing principles because all you have to do is listen to hear what the sentences sound like. This encourages you to revise the sentence as you would speak it, and since most of us speak well, even if we have writing problems, it's a way of addressing problems that we wouldn't otherwise likely identify or know how to correct.

Now the twist: Read your paper backwards, starting with the last sentence first, then the next-to-last, etc. This seemingly odd suggestion is a useful one because reading your essay backwards dissociates each sentence from the larger meaning of the text, enabling you to focus just on the sentence and whether or not it makes sense on its own. Because the basic unit of each paragraph is the sentence, you want to make sure that each sentence you write is capable of standing on its own in terms of meaning and clarity. If you discover a sentence that doesn't make sense on its own, in isolation from its context, then chances are it won't make sense in the context of your paragraph (and, hence, your paper) either.

After you've made changes to sentences that need revision, read your paper aloud again, this time straight through from top to bottom. Listen to the sentences as if you were listening to music. Does anything sound clunky? Monotonous? Redundant? This will give you a chance not only to revise individual words, but also to revise for sound. This is a very good way to improve sentence variety. For example, if you have three sentences in a row that are roughly the same length (which sounds monotonous when you read them aloud), try combining two of them to make one longer sentence. The result is two sentences of different lengths, which will make for a more pleasant reading experience for your audience.

The Editing Process

Now that you've revised your work, you have a collection of ideas you're proud of, in a form that seems logical. What could possibly be left to do? Oh, yes, the aforementioned "clean-up."

Don't let your best ideas become obscured by sloppy writing. Editing is the last act you will perform on your essay before you submit it for evaluation. Take your time, and don't underestimate the importance of this part of the process! Leave at least one whole work session (an hour or two at least, depending on the length of your essay).

Running spell-check and grammar-check does not constitute editing. You can do these things, but be aware that there are likely a number of spelling, punctuation and grammar errors that the automated programs will not catch.

Fragments

In Unit 3 you learned how to identify and correct fragments in your writing. It can be helpful to review this information since fragments are a common error in writing.

Fragments are incomplete sentences. They cannot stand on their own. Here are some examples:

While he was sleeping.
Anthony put the book.

As you were reading these, you probably thought, "While he was sleeping WHAT?" and "Anthony put the book WHERE?" These examples are incomplete sentences because they do not finish their thoughts.

In the case of the first incomplete sentence, which is the most common fragment type, our fragment is a dependent clause. This means it needs another clause, an independent clause (otherwise known as a complete sentence), to depend on. You will usually find the independent clause next to your fragment, so all you need to do is join them:

Incorrect: While he was sleeping. His mother called.
Correct: While he was sleeping, his mother called.

In the case of the second incomplete sentence, we are just missing a few words. These types of fragments usually result from something being revised and not proofread.

Incorrect: Anthony put the book.

Correct: Anthony put the book down.

Correct: Anthony put the book on the bookshelf.

Correct: Anthony put the book under the sofa where no one else could find it.

Avoid Clichés

Writers often resort to clichés as a kind of short-cut to meaning, especially if they think the reader will “get” the intended meaning. For example, “It’s raining cats and dogs” is a popular cliché in American culture. It means that it is raining a lot, or has been raining for a long time. As delightful as this image is, it doesn’t belong in a scholarly essay. Try instead to communicate your meaning directly; don’t assume that your reader knows the cultural slang.

Take a look at a short list of common clichés below:

Cold as ice	Let sleeping dogs lie
Come hell or high water	Life is like a bowl full of cherries
Crocodile tears	Little did I know
Curiosity killed the cat	Moment of truth
Cut to the chase	More than one way to skin a cat
Down and out	No spring chicken
Few and far between	On my last nerve
Fit as a fiddle	Over a barrel
Give 110 percent	Pearls of wisdom
Home is where the heart is	Push the envelope
Honesty is the best policy	Quiet as a mouse
I had the time of my life	Raise the bar

Completing the Unit 4 Assignment

You are now ready to review the ideas you posted to the Unit 3 Discussion Board and begin developing your Unit 4 Assignment. Be sure to carefully review the Assignment instructions as well as the rubric your instructor will be using to evaluate your work. Next, apply the strategies you have just read about to develop your Assignment.