TURNING THE FIRST DRAFT OF YOUR SEMINAR PAPER INTO A FINAL DRAFT[1]

You've done the research, you've organized the outline, and you've written all twenty-five pages of your seminar paper. You're ready to hand it in now, right? No! Now you must turn all your hard work into a finished product by rewriting, revising and polishing. These are absolutely critical steps to a strong piece of writing.

The following suggestions are a starting point for your revisions. Like other steps in the writing process, rewriting and revising probably cannot be done all at once. Instead, you should revise in stages so that you can address all of the levels of your paper. In addition to sufficient time, you will want a printer, a Bluebook, and a legal grammar or style guide on hand to help.

The most important aspect of revision is that you develop a routine that works for you. To do this, you first need to honestly assess your strengths and weaknesses as a first draft writer. You will also want to gauge your strengths and weaknesses as a reviser. Based on these assessments, you will want to focus on different things in this guide.

Things to look for as you are revising:

The most efficient way to rewrite, revise, and polish your paper may be to work in stages, starting from the big picture and working your way down. The following pages offer suggestions and techniques for rewriting, revising, and polishing at the level of the **whole paper**, **paragraph**, and **sentence**. You may also want to print out the paper to work with it at each stage -- you will probably find it easier to see the structure at all of these levels on the printed page. You will also want to save many versions of the paper as you go; this allows you to retrieve earlier writing if you get onto the wrong track.

[1] Originally prepared by Lauren Soroka, Maria Enriquez, and Dineen Pashoukos. Subsequently revised by Daniel Webert and Martha Nguyen. Revised again in 2010 by Larry Malm.

I. Whole Paper Level

This is the level where you make sure that the paper tells the reader what you want it to. You need to think about the big picture and do not be afraid to rewrite whole portions if necessary.

Questions to Ask

Audience:

- Who is your audience?
- How much information can your audience understand?
- How much background information does your audience need?

Theme:

- Can you identify your theme within the first two pages?
- Do words that relate to your theme appear often throughout your paper?
- Do the transitions between sections reinforce your theme?
- Are you consistent in your use of language and terms of art to deliver the same message?

Structure:

- Are your headings descriptive?
- Does your paper's structure match the theme of your paper?
- Does your introduction show the reader where the paper is going?

Proportion:

- Does each section and subsection contain the appropriate amount of explanatory text?
- Is the bulk of your paper devoted to analysis, rather than background?
- Have you allocated your space to the various parts of your argument appropriately by devoting more space to complicated or controversial sections and less space to obvious or agreed-upon arguments?

Flow:

- Does each section and subsection follow logically from the preceding section?
- Have you stated all of your assumptions and logical steps, leaving no holes for the reader?
- Have you included transitions between the sections in your paper?

Techniques to Consider

- **Identify your audience and try to read your paper like a reader from that audience.** Think about the characteristics and biases of your intended audience as you read. What do they know? What do they not know? What are they expecting? What conventions will they look for?

- **Outline a paper arguing against your paper.** What would someone taking the opposite position argue? How would your opponent structure his argument? Have you considered these counterarguments and approaches in your paper?
- **Copy the headings out of your paper into a new document.** Check the remaining outline to see if the structure is satisfactory. Compare this outline to your original outline to see if you have deviated from your planned structure. Consider rewriting your headings.
- **Single space your paper.** Then read through it. It can be easier to see the development of the argument if you can see more than one paragraph on each page.
- **Write an abstract for your paper that sums up your entire paper in a few succinct sentences, even if it not required.** Then look at your introduction and your outline to see if they hit all of the main points. This can also help you crystallize your thesis and approach.
- **Talk to someone who is not familiar with the subject about your paper.** Expressing your ideas to a lay audience and fielding questions may sharpen your analysis and help you to realize your assumptions.
- **Talk to someone who is familiar with your subject for an entirely different type of critique.** Your professor may be a good resource here.
- **Do not be afraid to rewrite if necessary.** By this time, you have such a strong command of the subject matter that it may be more efficient to rewrite a paper (or sections of a paper) to fit a new structure, rather than revise your existing paper line by line in order to fit a new structure.
- **If your paper is long, start reading it in the middle.** Often, people start long papers strong, but then lose the argument ten pages in. By starting a critical analysis in the middle or towards the end, you can ensure that your paper is consistent throughout.
- **Try reading sections in a different order.** This can reveal assumptions, weaknesses, and redundancy as well as suggest reorganizations.
- **Do not be afraid to do additional research if necessary.** Your critique may reveal holes in your research or your argument that require additional research. It can be faster and better to just conduct the research, rather than re-route the argument around the problem.
- **Do not be afraid to delete if necessary.** The fact that you uncovered something interesting or have a fascinating point does not mean that it contributes to your argument. If it is less painful initially, move sections to footnotes or appendices and later decide whether the footnote or appendix really belongs.

II. Paragraph Level

Once you are confident that your document is polished at the whole paper level, the next step is to ensure that each paragraph furthers the goals of your paper.

Questions to Ask

Topic Sentences:

- Does each paragraph have a topic sentence that advances your thesis?
- Do the rest of the sentences in the paragraph follow from or lead to the topic sentence?
- Does the paragraph feel cohesive?

Transitions:

- Do you give your reader adequate signals about the direction of your paper through the use of transitions?
  - ♦ Remember that transitions can be used to signal many types of connections--similarity (*additionally, similarly*), contrast (*but, however, on the contrary, yet*), a list (*first, second, third*), time relationship (*meanwhile, afterward, since*), conclusions *(in summary, finally*). For more examples of transitions, see "TRANSITIONS" in Ray & Ramsfield.[*]

Support:

- Are each of the assertions in your paper adequately supported by facts or cited legal authority?
  - ♦ Be aware of GULC's strict policy on plagiarism, which can be found in your student handbook. Even inadvertent plagiarism is punishable, so be sure to cite your sources diligently.

Conciseness:

- Do your paragraphs vary in length?
- Have long paragraphs been broken up into manageable and coherent parts?

Techniques to Consider

- Copy the entire paper into a new document and then delete everything but the paragraph topic sentences. Alternatively, copy and paste the topic sentences into a new document. Check to see if the topic sentences are satisfactory and if they work together effectively.

- Read your paragraphs out loud to yourself.

[*] See Mary Barnard Ray and Jill J. Ramsfield, LEGAL WRITING: GETTING IT RIGHT AND GETTING IT WRITTEN 3d ed. (2000)

- Focus on each paragraph individually. Cut and paste the paragraph into a blank document so you can revise it in isolation. Read the paragraph carefully and do not move on to the next paragraph until you are satisfied.

- Consider rewriting problematic paragraphs entirely, rather than trying to revise your original language.

III. Sentence Level

Once your paragraphs have strong topic sentences and transitions, you can concentrate on the form of the sentences themselves. Before going on to this level, you may take the time to input the changes you made at the previous levels and print out a clean copy.

Questions to Ask

Strong Sentences:

- Do the sentences use language that reminds the reader of your theme or strengthens your analysis?
- Have you used active verbs and avoided unnecessary use of passive voice and nominalizations (the noun form of a verb)?
  - ♦ Look for nouns that could more actively be expressed as verbs.
  - ♦ Reducing nominalizations helps reduce the legalese sound of your writing. **Example:** My *analysis* of the results of the case provides an *explanation* of the court's *failure* to rule with *precision*. Each of the italicized words could be turned into a verb: I *analyzed* the case to *explain* how the court *failed* to give a *precise* ruling.
- Are your subjects and verbs close together?
- Do sentences seem too long?
- Do the sentences vary in length?

Wordiness:

- Have you deleted meaningless or unnecessary words?
  - ♦ Look for "verbal ties," such as *actually, particularly, certain, given,* and *practically*, which add nothing to the meaning of your sentence.
  - ♦ Eliminate wordy indefinite phrases such as *it is important that, the fact that,* and *it is likely that.*
  - ♦ Avoid metatext such as *in my opinion, I think that,* and *with respect to*.

- Have you deleted redundancies that readers can infer?
  - ♦ Look for repetitive phrases such as *full and complete*, *each and every*, and *first and foremost*.
  - ♦ Be aware, however, that these redundancies can sometimes be terms of art (such as in statutes or contracts) and cannot be deleted.

- Redundant modifiers, such as *anticipate in advance, completely finish,* and *past history* can be reduced to just *anticipate, finish,* and *history*. Such changes reduce wordiness without affecting meaning.

- Have you turned phrases into words?
  - For example, *due to the fact that* turns into *because, despite the fact that* turns into *although*, and *in the event that* turns into *if.* Making such changes tightens up your writing and makes it more accessible to the reader.

Grammar:

- Have you recognized your own grammatical weaknesses and corrected them?
  - Look for subject-verb agreement, dangling modifiers, and subject-pronoun agreement.
  - Pay attention to your use of commas and semi-colons.

Spelling:

- Have you run spell check of your paper on your computer?
- Have you read the document for missing words?
- Have you double-checked for homonyms, incorrect possessiveness, or other words that can pass the spell check program and still be incorrect?
  - Some problem word pairs include *there/their, your/you're, its/it's.*
  - Be on the lookout for words with flipped or missing letters such as *were/where, trail/trial, form/from, and statue/statute*.
- Have you checked for capitalization of proper nouns?

Bluebooking:

- Have you included the necessary parts of each citation?
- Have you avoided excessive quotations and used verbatim quotes only when necessary?
- Have you used the correct signals?
- Is the spacing for federal reporters accurate?
- Are your internal cross-references correct?

Techniques to Consider

- **Leave lots of time for these steps**, especially if you write sloppy first drafts. It can take longer than you expect to polish a paper.
- **Run spell-check often.** You may introduce little errors as your revise.
- **Read the paper backwards so that you consider each sentence in isolation.** Try doing this out loud.
- **Look for patterns of mistake.** Get to know yourself as a writer so that you can spot colloquialisms or misspellings that you tend to repeat.
- **Do the cite-checking as an entirely separate step.** Within that step, consider doing each element of the citation separately (e.g. check all the signals and parentheticals in the paper, then all the citations themselves).

- **Print a clean copy as often as needed.** Spotting details is easier for most people when using hard copy.
- **Use software functions to search for passive voice, frequent misspellings, or other issues that you tend to repeat.** E.g. in Microsoft Word, "Ctl+f" searches for "was", "is", "were", "are", and "to be" will help you identify instances of the passive voice that need revision; if you tend to use a transition word like "therefore" or "moreover" too often, a "Ctl+f" search can help you spot the places where you have used the word.
- **Use outside help if it is permitted.** The fresh eyes of a friend, roommate, or classmate can often spot these types of errors.

Think about the process, develop a plan that works for you, and make it routine.

This checklist is intended to help you focus on both the big picture and the minute details of your seminar paper. Following these or similar steps will help ensure that the paper you turn in is a finished product, and that your reader can concentrate on the substance of your ideas. Over time, you will want to develop your own checklist tailored to your own writing quirks. Once you have developed your checklist, stick with it in every paper you write. As you become more familiar with your own routine, you will become more efficient. Whether you use this checklist or modify it for your own use, you must put significant time into rewriting, revising, and polishing in order to turn in a high quality product. Similarly, you must put effort into assessing your strengths and weaknesses and developing routines in order to develop as an effective and efficient writer over the long term.

Additional Readings

For more information concerning the revising and polishing process, refer to any of the following books:

Elizabeth Fajans & Mary R. Falk, Scholarly Writing for Law Students: Seminar Papers, Law Review Notes and Law Review Competition Papers (2d ed. 2000).

Mary Bernard Ray & Jill J. Ramsfield, Legal Writing: Getting It Right and Getting It Written (3d ed. 2000).

William R. Strunk & E.B. White, The Elements of Style (4th ed. 2000).

Joseph M. Williams, Style: Ten Lessons In Clarity and Grace (5th ed. 1997).

The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation (Colombia L. Rev., Harvard L. Rev., Pennsylvania L. Rev. & Yale L. J., eds., 17th ed. 2000).