Advice for Students: 10 Steps Toward Better Writing

Writing well is easily one of the most sought-after and useful skills in the business world. Ironically, it is one of the rarest and most undervalued skills among students, and few professors have the time, resources, or skills to teach writing skills effectively. What follows are a handful of tips and general principles to help you develop your writing skills, which will not only improve your grades (the most worthless indicator of academic progress) but will help develop your ability to think and explain the most difficult topics. Although directed at students, most of this advice applies equally well to *any* sort of writing; in the end, good writing is not limited to one context or another.

1. ***Pace yourself.*** Far too many students start their papers the night before they are due and write straight through until their deadline. Most have even deceived themselves into thinking they write best this way. They don't. Professors give out assignments at the beginning of the semester for a reason: so that you have ample time to plan, research, write, and revise a paper. Taking advantage of that time means that not only will you produce a better paper but you'll do so with less stress and without losing a night of sleep (or partying) the evening of the due date. Block out time at the beginning of the semester — e.g. 2 weeks for research, 2 weeks for writing, 2 weeks to let your draft "sit", and a few days to revise and proofread. During your writing time, **set aside time to write a little bit each day** (500 words is incredibly doable, usually in less than an hour — a short blog post is that long!) and "park downhill" when you're done — that is, end your writing session at a place where you'll be able to easily pick up the thread the next day.

2. ***Plan, then write.*** For some reason, the idea of planning out a paper strikes fear deep into the hearts of most students — it's as if they consider themselves modernist artists of the word, and any attempt to direct the course of their brilliance would sully the pure artistic expression that is their paper. This is, in a word, dumb. There is no successful writer who does not plan his work before he starts writing — and if he says he does, he's lying. Granted, not every writer, or even most, bothers with a traditional formal outline with Roman numerals, capital letters, Arabic numerals, lowercase letters, lowercase Roman numerals, and so on.

   An outline can be a mindmap, a list of points to cover, a statement of purpose, a mental image of your finished paper — even, if you're good, the first paragraph you write. See the introduction to this post? That's an outline: it tells you what I'm going to talk about, how I'm going to talk about it, and what you can expect to find in the rest of the paper. It's not very complete; my *real* outline for this post was scribbled on my bedside notebook and consisted of a headline and a list of the ten points I wanted to cover. Whatever form it takes, an effective outline accomplishes a number of things. It provides a ruler to measure your progress against as you're writing. It acts as a

reminder to make sure you cover your topic as fully as possible. It offers writing prompts when you get stuck. A good outline allows you to jump back and forth, attacking topics as your thinking or your research allows, rather than waiting to see what you write on page six before deciding what you should write about on page seven. Finally, having a plan at hand helps keep you focused on the goals you've set for the paper, leading to better writing than the "making it up as you go along" school of writing to which most students seem to subscribe.

3. ***Start in the middle.*** One of the biggest problems facing writers of all kinds is figuring out how to start. Rather than staring at a blank screen until it's burned into your retinas trying to think of something awe-inspiring and profound to open your paper with, **skip the introduction and jump in at paragraph two.** You can always come back and write another paragraph at the top when you're done — but then again, you might find you don't need to. As it turns out, the first paragraph or so are usually the weakest, as we use them to warm up to our topic rather than to do any useful work.

4. ***Write crappy first drafts.*** Give up the fantasy of writing sterling prose in your first go-around. You aren't Jack Kerouac (and even he wrote some crummy prose) and you aren't writing the Great American Novel (and Kerouac beat you to it, anyway). **Write secure in the knowledge that you can fix your mistakes later.** Don't let the need to look up a fact or to think through a point get in the way of your writerly flow — just put a string of x'es or note to yourself in curly brackets {like this} and move on. **Ignore the rules of grammar and format — just write.** You can fix your mistakes when you proofread. What you write doesn't matter, what you *rewrite* is what matters.

5. ***Don't plagiarize.*** Plagiarism is much more than lifting papers off the Internet — it's copying phrases from Wikipedia or another site without including a reference and enclosing the statement in quotes, it's summarizing someone else's argument or using their data without noting the source, it's including *anything* in your paper that is not your own original thought and not including a pointer to where it comes from. **Avoid ever using another person's work in a way that even suggests it is your own.**
Be sparing in your use of other people's work, even properly cited. A paper that is essentially a string of quotes and paraphrases with a minimum of your on words is not going to be a good paper, even though each quote and paraphrase is followed by a perfectly formed reference.

6. ***Use directions wisely.*** Make sure your paper meets the requirements spelled out in the assignment. The number one question most students ask is "how long does it have to be?" The real answer, no matter what the instructions say, is that **every paper needs to be exactly as long as it needs to be to make its point.** However, almost every topic can be stretched to fill out a book, or condensed down to a one-page summary; by including a page-count, your professor is giving you a target not for the number of words but for the level of detail you should include.

Contrary to popular opinion, writing shorter papers well is much harder than writing longer papers. If your professor asks you to write 8 – 10 pages, it's not because she doesn't think you can write more than ten pages on your topic; more likely, it's because she doesn't think you can write *less than eight*.

7. *Avoid Wikipedia.* I admit, I am a big fan of Wikipedia. It is generally well-researched, authoritative, and solidly written. But I cringe when students cite Wikipedia in their papers, especially when they use the worst possible introductory strategy: "According to Wikipedia, [subject of paper] is [quote from Wikipedia]." **Wikipedia — and any other general-purpose encyclopedia — is really not a suitable source for college-level work.** It's there as a place to look up facts quickly, to gain a cursory understanding of a topic, not to present detailed examinations of academic subjects. Wikipedia is where you should *start* your research, but the understanding that forms the core of a good academic paper (or nearly any other kind of paper) should be much deeper and richer than Wikipedia offers. But don't take my word for it: Jimmy Wales, one of Wikipedia's founders, has very openly discouraged students from using his creation as a source.

8. *Focus on communicating your purpose.*Revise your paper at least once, focusing on how well each line directs your readers towards the understanding you've set out to instill in them. Every sentence should direct your reader towards your conclusion. Ask yourself, "Does this sentence add to my argument or just take up space? Does it follow from the sentence before, and lead into the following sentence? Is the topic of each paragraph clear? Does each sentence in the paragraph contribute to a deeper understanding of the paragraph's topic?" Revising your paper is where the magic happens — when you're done with your first draft, your understanding of your subject will be much greater than it was when you started writing; use that deeper knowledge to clarify and enrich your writing. **Revision should take about the same time as writing** — say 15 – 30 minutes a page.

9. *Proofread.* Proofreading is a separate thing entirely from revision, and should be the last thing you do before declaring a paper "finished". This is where you'll want to pay attention to your grammar — make sure every sentence has a subject and a verb, and that they agree with each other. Fix up all the spelling errors, especially the ones that spell-checking misses (like "there" and "their"). Certainly run your word processor's spell-checker, but that's the beginning, not the end, of proofreading. One good trick is to **proofread your paper backwards** — look at the last word, then the second-to-last word, then the third-to-last word, and so on. This forces your brain to look at each word out of its original context, which means that your memory of what you *wanted*to write won't get in the way of seeing what you actually *did* write.

10. *Conclude something.* Don't confuse a "conclusion" with a "summary". The last paragraph or two should be the culmination of your argument, not a rehash of it. Explain the findings of your research, propose an explanation for the data presented, point out avenues for future research, or point out the significance of

the facts you've laid out in your paper. **The conclusion should be a strong resolution to the paper**, not a weak recapitulation tacked on to pad out the page count.

The best way to improve your writing is to write, as much as you can. The tips above will help give you direction and point out areas where you are likely to find weaknesses that undermine your written work. What tricks have *you* come up with to make the process of writing more productive and less painful?