Writing Matters

Because No One is Perfect

Somewhere along the way in our education, we have learned to believe in the "Myth of the Perfect Writer." The Perfect Writer is that special someone—certainly not anyone I know—who writes 100% correctly, 100% of the time. Because I'm not the Perfect Writer, I often find myself sitting in front of a blank screen waiting for inspiration to hit me. Our students do the same. Knowing that there's no way they can attain perfection, they are frozen by their own (and sometimes our implied) expectations for it. We can free our students from this paralysis by teaching them to use a process, even if it's as simple as showing them the importance of re-reading their material to proofread for errors. This frees them up to write without the weight of expectations, at least in the first draft, because they know that they're going to go back and look at their writing again. This isn't automatic; we need to teach them to use this; after all, many of them still believe the Myth.

Why Teach Students to Use a Writing Process?

Nearly all of us use a writing process of sorts. When you type an email and then take a moment to proofread—that's a writing process. When you write up an assignment and then have a colleague look it over—that's a writing process. We do this because we have learned that we're not perfect writers, that our writing gets better if we look at it a second or third time, and that it's helpful to take a moment and look for those sneaky errors that we routinely commit.

Our students often do not do this. Most of the writing they have done for school has been the "one and done" kind of writing performed on essay exams and tests. It often doesn't occur to them to look back over their writing to check for readability, meaning, grammar and spelling. It is up to us to show them that they can improve their writing by simply looking at it again (the literal meaning of "revise").

You, as the instructor, can determine how much time to devote to the process. Some instructors assign one large research paper per semester and break it down into smaller steps to allow for the process. Often, these instructors are heavily involved in the process—grading outlines, notes, and rough drafts. Other instructors, realizing that we don't all make the same mistakes, spend some time showing their students how to discover their individual patterns of error. Then, it is up to the student to produce a rough draft, revise, correct it, and turn in a polished final draft.

However you choose to go about it, a process is an important part of any class that requires writing. It is frustrating to receive student writing that is riddled with errors, often to the point of obscuring meaning. We labor over comments and corrections, hoping students will read them and "fix themselves" (though studies show that students rarely read or understand comments on final drafts— "The assignment is over, I got my grade, who cares?").

Even if you aren't going to be involved in every step of the process, it is still a solid lesson to teach prior to any important, high-stakes writing assignment. By showing students the steps to improving their writing through revision and editing, we are giving them tools to use not only in our classes but in future classes and in their careers.

The best writing is rewriting. — E.B. White

Writing Matters

One Way of Visualizing the Process

**Prewriting:** Brainstorming, journaling, outlining

Drafting: Get thoughts down on paper; do NOT expect perfection

Revision: Check for readability and meaning. Do your ideas make sense? Are they in a logical order?

Editing: Check spelling, grammar, punctuation. Know your OWN pattern of error.

Proofreading: The final polish: check format, spelling, grammar. Make sure everything printed correctly.

Evaluation: Any feedback you give will hopefully inform student for the next assignment.
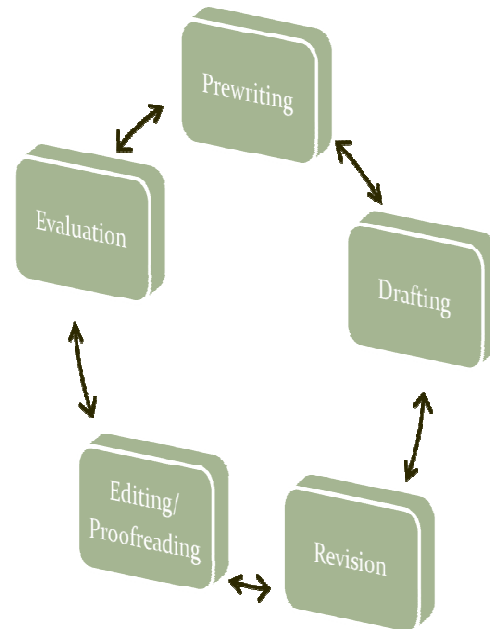
Why teach proofreading?

What is written without effort in general is read without pleasure.

—Samuel Johnson