Strategies for Effective Revising

Improvement makes straight roads, but the crooked roads without improvement are roads of genius.

-Blake: Proverbs of Hell

In writing, the first draft is usually the hardest stage, requiring the most toil and tears. In writing the first draft, as Blake suggests, writers express much of their genius. However, all good writers know that first drafts are usually “crooked” (that is, pretty bad) and must be made straight with improvement. Revision—literally “re-seeing”—is a vital part of the writing process, and for excellence revision is an absolute necessity. The strategies below will help you get distance, so that you can see your early drafts with new eyes.

• First (and foremost in importance) get help from others--for example, tutors at the SSU Writing Center. The best kind of new perspective for a writer comes from a caring, impartial colleague who has your best interests in mind. Come to the tutor (or your friend or TA or whomever) ready to describe the assignment as clearly as you can and to discuss your primary concerns with your draft as specifically as possible.

• Get literal distance whenever and however possible: leave the paper alone for a few days; get a good night’s rest; go for a run; reread the assignment sheet; talk to your professor. When you come back to the paper, you’ll find that your vision of the paper will inevitably be new.

• Write to yourself in a “nonacademic” voice, perhaps in a journal, prompting yourself with starters like, “My first draft taught me a lot. I see now that my argument is really about...”; or “The strengths and weaknesses of my first draft I Iare...”; or “What I wanted to say in the first place was....” Writing itself is a powerful mode of learning and distancing, so use that power strategically.

• Write a “descriptive” or “backwards” outline of your first draft: that is, write an outline of the paper you’ve already written, looking through it paragraph by paragraph to find the key points and to articulate how you’re proving them (or failing to do so). This technique is great for catching all those larger problems, like internal contradictions or big gaps in logic or evidence.

• Put your paper on the wall—literally. For each paragraph or major point, write an index card in big, bold colors, then stick them to the wall. Play with new arrangements and make new cards when you think of new paragraphs that need to be written. This is a great technique for visual and kinesthetic learners.

• Have somebody read your paper to you, or tape yourself reading the paper and listen to the tape. This is a great technique for auditory learners.
• Look again at the literature, readings, or data you’re discussing. Is it really saying to you now what you thought it was saying?

• Finally, begin typing your new draft with a blank computer screen. Even if all you do is type big chunks of what you’ve already written, you’ll find yourself thinking about the paper with fresh insight. And you’ll also catch a lot of errors.