Workshop: Revising Essays and Research Papers

**Advance Preparation**

Students have been notified that they need to bring a hard copy of their research drafts and a selection of colored writing utensils to the workshop.

**Brief Introduction to the UWC**

Briefly discuss our services and provide relevant logistics: location, hours, etc.

**Working with Student Papers**

Optional: Ask students/write on the board: “What is your biggest concern with regard to revising this research paper?” Write their answers on the board. You can touch upon them throughout the workshop and at the end as well.

Discuss the importance of “Triage” with students; emphasize prioritizing concerns according to the following schema:

* Structure and Content
* Objectives, Claims, Evidence, Introduction & Conclusion
* Transitions
* Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar

Indicate to students that this revision workshop will help them diagram and think critically about their papers according to this schema. This diagramming will facilitate effective revision.

Ask students to take out their clean drafts and to draw a line between:

* The Introduction and Body
* The Body and the Conclusion

The students now have three distinct areas to work on: the Introduction, the Body, and the Conclusion.

**I. Introduction**

Ask students to highlight their thesis statement. This statement will look different according to the discipline and the genre of the paper. It might be the main claim or argument of the paper, a research question, an answer to that research question, etc.

* Ask students, **“Does your thesis statement match the assignment? Are you giving your instructor what they’re asking for?”**
* Discuss the importance of the thesis statement: In whatever form, it is the organizing principle of the rest of the paper. All of the paper’s main claims should work together to support the thesis statement’s argument, or answer the thesis statement’s research question, etc.

Next, ask students to highlight the sentences that 1) give context and background for the paper topic and 2) suggest something about how the topic or thesis is important, interesting, or relevant.

* Discuss the importance of these sentences: They ease the reader into the topic/thesis and they create goodwill and interest by suggesting to the reader why they should keep reading.
* Ask the students, **“Do these sentences put the topic/thesis in context for your audience or audiences?”**

**II. Body**

Ask students to highlight the main claims in their papers. Main claims encapsulate and express the sub-arguments or constituent bits of research that support the paper’s argument or answer its research question. (Given time constraints you may ask the students to focus only on 2-3 paragraphs for practice.)

* Ask students, **“Do your main claims match your thesis? Do they fully support it without going outside of it?”**
* Remind students that if they find claims lying outside the boundaries of their thesis, either the claims or the thesis needs to be revised.
* Discuss the relationship between main claims and body paragraphs. A body paragraph should be devoted to one main claim or to a cluster of very small, very closely related claims. Main claims generally appear in one of two places in a paragraph: at the beginnings of paragraphs (as topic sentences) or at the ends of paragraphs (as the “punch” or main part of the paragraph’s analysis).

Ask students to highlight the evidence in their papers. All claims must be supported by evidence that is contextualized (Who/where does it come from?). Evidence comes in different forms: statistics, empirical data, rich description of what was done and observed, etc.

* Ask students, **“Does your evidence clearly match/support your claims?”**
* Remind students that different kinds of papers require different kinds of evidence. They should make sure their evidence is appropriate for the assignment
* Ask students, **“Is all of your evidence contextualized? Will it be clear to your reader who/where it is coming from?”**

Ask students to highlight the sentences where they perform “analysis.” Writers must always explain how their evidence supports their main claims—they do so through analysis. Paragraphs that do not make contestable claims do not necessarily need analysis: for instance, if a writer needs to spend a paragraph or two objectively reporting on background information or summarizing other sources, those paragraphs probably don’t need analysis.

* Ask students, **“Does your analysis explain how your evidence supports the claim it’s attached to?”**
* Remind students that “evidence is never self-evident”: you must always make it clear to the reader how the evidence actually says what you’re saying it says.
* Explain the importance of analysis: writers perform their thinking and insight through analysis. If your reader just wanted evidence, they would ask for an annotated bibliography. Instead, they’ve asked for an essay or research paper where you get the opportunity to generate unique ideas about a source and/or pull sources together in a unique way to support an argument.

**III. Conclusion**

 Ask students to highlight the sentences in which they recap their main claims. This part of the conclusion should demonstrate how the main claims work together to support the thesis.

* Ask students, **“Does this recap match the main claims and the objectives outlined in your introduction?”**
* Discuss strategies for recapping without repeating: Consider summarizing and synthesizing, rather than simply recapping.

Ask students to highlight the sentences in which they answer the “So what?” question. This part of the conclusion should demonstrate how the paper is important, meaningful, or relevant to its wider context.

* Ask the students, **“Will my conclusion communicate a sense of importance or relevance to my particular audience?”**
* Remind the students that answer to the “So what?” question will look different from discipline to discipline.

**Transitions**

 If you have time, ask students to look at two paragraphs in their papers.

* Ask the students, **“How is the information presented in the first paragraph different from the second?”**
* Ask them, **“Do I include a transition that clues the reader into the shift from the ideas at the end of paragraph 1 and the beginning of paragraph 2?”**
* Remind students that topic sentences enable smooth transitions between paragraphs. Refer them to the UWC "Focusing on Transitions" handout, available at uwc.utexas.edu.

**Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar**

Remind students that checking punctuation, mechanics, and grammar is an important step that should not be rushed! Suggest that they leave some time between writing their research paper and editing it. Present these editing strategies for students to try:

* Read your research paper aloud.
* Don’t just rely on MS Word spell and grammar check to do your work.
* Look for subject-verb number agreement and the use of passive voice.
* Check that in-text and Reference citations match and are correct.

Remind students to check with their TA and instructor regarding any particular issues to look for: active vs. passive voice; wordiness; jargon; simple, direct, active sentences; etc.

**Overall Questions for Revision**

 Leave the students with a list of fundamental questions for revision.

* Do the objectives (or the introduction in general) match the assignment?
* Do the main claims match the objectives?
* Does the evidence match the main claims?
* Does the recap (or the conclusion in general) match the claims and the introduction?

**Finishing Up**

Remind the students one last time about our services. Ask whether anyone has questions about who we are or what we do. Thank everyone and encourage the students to come see us.