NINE REVISION STRATEGIES

So now you've written a draft, and for most of us this means it's the night before the paper is due. Or maybe it's the hour before. In any case, it's time to revise, which means clicking the spelling and grammar check on Word, and maybe the thesaurus, too, just to dress your writing up some. That's what revision is, right? Think again.

Revision means re-seeing. It means looking at what you've written with fresh eyes. It's a time to read critically, not with the pride of ownership or parenthood, but with the eye and ear and mind of the most demanding audience you can imagine. You have to make sure the piece moves logically from point to point, that you've articulated and completed your mission, that the details you've chosen support your mission, that you've written clear, strong sentences, in a language and style that will connect with your audience.

That's a lot to do, and it's hard work, which is why many writers think "all writing is rewriting." We aren't sure considering all the work that happens before we can even write something worth revising. But revising is an important part of the process, one that can reveal mistakes or missteps at earlier stages, and so send you back for more information, or a clearer mission, or a tighter plan.

This is important to remember: it's okay to go backward in the process if you need to. Sometimes the most effective way forward is to take a step back. Revising can also push you forward, to find better verbs, or ways to trim the fat, or even to discover the perfect title. Revising is fun and frustrating (and can go on forever, if it weren't for deadlines - thank God for deadlines!). Fortunately there are a lot of tools available to help you revise. Here are a few.

- Make sure you give yourself enough time for revision. It helps if you can put the draft away for a day or two, or even an hour or two. If you give yourself a chance to step away from your writing, you'll see it with more objective and critical eyes when you come back to it.

- Read the draft aloud (especially with someone else in the room) or have someone read it aloud to you. You'll be amazed at what you hear or don't hear.

- Answer the three best questions ever:

    o What surprised me?

    o What have I learned?

    o What do I need to work on or do next?

- Answer some or all of these questions:

    o What does the piece say, what is its mission or purpose – in one sentence?

    o Why does my reader need to hear this?

    o How does the beginning capture the reader?

    o What are five questions my reader will ask?

    o Have I answered them?

    o What does the voice sound like and what does it communicate to your reader?

    o How does the end give the reader a sense of completion?

- Have you said the most important things in the clearest, simplest, shortest way possible?

- Make sure you have moved up and down the ladder of abstraction, zooming in on concrete details, then pulling back to explain what those details mean.

- Have you succumbed to the Curse of Knowledge, assuming that your readers know what you do and therefore not providing necessary examples or explanations?

- Beware long paragraphs. The longer the paragraph, the more likely you are to lose focus. More often than not, no paragraph need be longer than five sentences.

- Whenever you think you are done, cut by 10%, 15%, even 20%.

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