

Effective Graduate Writing for the Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching, Middle East Technical University

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Overview

1. Writing Principles
2. Revision Strategies
3. Productivity Approaches

Part 1: Writing Principles

- Using writing to clarify your own thinking
- Committing to extensive revision
- Understanding the needs of your eventual reader

Writing as Thinking

Using writing to clarify your own thinking

*“How do I know what I think
until I see what I say?”*

∞ E.M. Forster

Writing as Iterative

Committing to extensive revision, which requires ...

- that we invest *time*
- that we learn *strategies*
 - ❖ e.g., let time elapse
 - ❖ e.g., read aloud
 - ❖ e.g., work on text out of order
 - ❖ e.g., learn how to work in stages

Writing as Audience-Driven

Understanding the needs of your eventual reader, at both *macro* and *micro* levels

- Macro level: The broad types of writing you will need to produce (genre conventions)
- Micro level: The optimal organization of sentences and paragraphs (writing patterns)

Keep in mind that academic writing in English tends to privilege the needs of the reader.

Three Key Writing Principles

These three principles are summed up in this quote:

“We write the first draft for ourselves; the drafts thereafter increasingly for the reader.”

Joseph M. Williams, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*, Third Edition (Pearson Longman, 2009), p. x

Part 2: Revision Strategies

- Revising *Structure*
- Revising *Sentences*
- Revising *Linkages*
- Building a *Revision Process*

Revising Structure

Key idea: Making sure the overall organization is coherent

Key strategies:

- Crafting well-developed paragraphs
- Creating reverse outlines
- Removing unnecessary material

Crafting Well-Developed Paragraphs

What do I wish everyone knew about paragraphs?

- That they are very important
- That they need a topic sentence
- That they should be internally coherent
- That their length should be determined by the demands of content, not the number of sentences

*We write in sentences,
but readers read in paragraphs.*

Common Paragraph Patterns

Paragraphs commonly involve

- *listed* information, or
- *linked* information, or
- a *combination* of these two patterns

Sample Paragraph

Patients with TB may experience persistent anxiety due to both the diagnosis process and the difficulties of quarantine. To identify an active TB infection, doctors must administer many tests over an extended period of time. Once that testing is complete, patients must again wait for an extended period of time to find out their status. During that waiting period, patients are left with great uncertainty about their future. After the diagnostic phase is complete, patients who are infectious will be quarantined. Since each case is unique, doctors are unable to tell a patient how long it is likely to be before they are no longer infectious. This indeterminate period of quarantine can lead to more emotional distress. The quarantine itself, coupled with the fear of infecting a loved one or family member, can greatly increase anxiety. The practical effects of quarantine—loss of income and social position—may also increase the level of anxiety for patients.

Sample Paragraph

[topic] Patients with TB may experience persistent anxiety due to both [A] the diagnosis process and [B] the difficulties of quarantine [organizing principle]. [A1] To identify an active TB infection, doctors must administer many tests over an extended period of time. [A2] Once that testing is complete, patients must again wait for an extended period of time to find out their status. [A3] During that waiting period, patients are left with great uncertainty about their future [three linked sentences]. After the diagnostic phase is complete, patients who are infectious will be quarantined [transition]. [B1] Since each case is unique, doctors are unable to tell a patient how long it is likely to be before they are no longer infectious. [B2] This indeterminate period of quarantine can lead to more emotional distress. [B3] The quarantine itself, coupled with the fear of infecting a loved one or family member, can greatly increase anxiety. [B4] The practical effects of quarantine—loss of income and social position—may also increase the level of anxiety for patients [four sentences in a list, each connected back to quarantine].

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Creating Reverse Outlines

1. Number each paragraph
2. Identify the topic of each paragraph
 - Note the length of paragraphs and the presence of topic sentences
3. Arrange the topics as an outline
4. Analyze the first outline
5. Rearrange the topics into a new outline (if necessary)
6. Rearrange the paper to reflect this new order
7. Make sure that each paragraph now has a suitable topic sentence and thematic unity

Removing Unnecessary Material

Recognizing what needed to be said but not necessarily read

This isn't about concision but about removing material that isn't helpful for the reader

Revising Sentences

Key idea: Making sure that the sentences themselves are clear and correct

Key strategies:

- Understanding reader-friendly sentences
- Enhancing your grasp of grammar

Understanding Reader-friendly Sentences

Things we know readers appreciate ...

- Subjects and verbs close together, early in sentences
- Subjects that reflect the topic of the sentence
- Verbs that reflect the action of the sentence
- Familiar content being provided before novel information: *Orienting-informing pattern*

This slow reallocation is due to the high cost of job switching and migration. The Hukou registration system added to the migration costs. This system, which operated from 1958 until the late 1980s, was designed to restrict labour migration.

Revision: This slow reallocation is due to the high cost of job switching and migration. **These migration costs (*orienting*)** were exacerbated by **the Hukou registration system (*informing*)**. This system, which operated from 1958 until the late 1980s, was designed to restrict labour migration.

Used with permission from a student writing sample

Enhancing Your Grasp of Grammar

What are *your* grammatical challenges? What mistakes do you *consistently* make?

Revising Linkages

Key idea: Making sure that your text flows

Key strategies:

- Assessing paragraph cohesion
- Assessing overall cohesion

Assessing Paragraph Cohesion

- Check that you have topic sentences
- Establish that each subsequent sentence contributes to that topic
- Assess the textual linkages
 - ❖ Are you using the *orienting-informing pattern*?
 - ❖ Especially *this + summary word*?

Assessing Overall Cohesion

As a final check, construct a *topic sentence paragraph*

- Take all your topic sentences and turn them into a mock paragraph
- If each paragraph has a topic sentence and is well constructed, a topic sentence paragraph will give you a final assurance that the whole piece of writing makes sense.

Revision as a Process

We all need to build a *revision process* that will allow us to work through a draft in stages, concentrating on a different issue each time.

Sample Revision Process

1. Revising the structure
Is everything where it should be?
2. Revising the sentences
Are they clear and concise?
Are they correct?
3. Revising the linkages
Do the paragraphs work internally?
Do the paragraphs connect effectively?
+ Proofreading

Part 3: Productivity Approaches

Graduate students often experience unprecedented productivity challenges:

- Increased demands on your time
- Greater autonomy over your workflow
- Cognitive overload

And where do these challenges tend to manifest themselves most noticeably?

In your writing

Writing Challenges

- **Competing Demands:** Writing often lacks the clear deadlines that other tasks have
- **Deferred Gratification:** Writing doesn't usually give you immediate rewards
- **Isolation:** Writing generally requires a degree of solitude that may be unwelcome
- **Self-doubt:** Writing requires that you make your thoughts public, which can increase your insecurities
- **Missing Expertise:** Writing may not have been explicitly taught

Strategies

Competing Demands:	<i>Prioritization</i>
Deferred Gratification:	<i>Goal Setting</i>
Isolation:	<i>Writing Community</i>
Self-doubt:	<i>Writing Awareness</i>
Missing Expertise:	<i>Writing Support</i>

Prioritization

What does it mean to make writing a priority?

Writing 'every' day

- To avoid decision fatigue

Making appointments with your writing

- To make it harder to let it go when something 'comes up'

Writing at your best time of day

- To resist the most dangerous form of procrastination: *work*

Writing for shorter blocks of time

- To fit writing into a busy schedule

Defining writing more broadly

- To allow you to stay with writing even when it's hard

Goal Setting

How can you set goals that you can accomplish?

Setting interim goals

- To avoid *regularly* failing to meet the ultimate goal
- To avoid *ultimately* failing to meet the ultimate goal

What do you need to do every working day until you meet that goal? Month by month, week by week, day by day ...

Breaking those goals down into component parts

- To establish a concrete list of tasks for each writing block
- Less *continue working on this chapter* and more *write three paragraphs on X*

Writing Community

What would your ideal writing community look like?

Thinking about writing as communal

- ✓ Writing has to be done *by you alone* but not *by you alone*
- ✓ Writing is the preeminent shared activity of graduate students, even if it is often hidden

Understanding different types of writing community

- ✓ Disciplinary vs accountability
- ✓ Supportive vs coercive

Experimenting with what you need in order to write

- ✓ Quiet? Noise? Variety? Uninterrupted time? Lots of breaks?

Writing Awareness

How well do you understand the challenges of academic writing?

What is academic writing like for other people?

- Hazards of comparing *outsides* (final drafts) with *insides* (early drafts)

Are you a perfectionist?

- Hazards of waiting to write
- Hazards of never feeling done

Do you ever feel like an imposter?

- Hazards of seeing writing as dangerous exposure rather than beneficial engagement

Writing Support

Where are you getting pedagogical support for your development as an academic writer?

Possible areas for development:

- Organizing your thoughts to prepare for writing
- Revising your own writing
- Understanding different genres of academic writing
- Learning about using voice as an academic writer

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