Chapter 20: Assessing Your Own Work

An important yet difficult step in the writing process is to assess your own work. Once you have gone through the grueling process of getting words on paper, the last thing you might feel like doing is returning to your work to see how you can improve it. However, revision and editing are essential to producing quality work prior to your submitting the document.

You might be asking yourself, “Is there a difference between revising and editing?” YES! **Revision** is the process of examining your writing and its substance as a whole to investigate whether pieces are missing or need to be added and whether the organization is optimal to present your information. **Editing** is the process of reading through your work to correct typos, grammar and punctuation mistakes, awkward phrasing, poor word choice, and citation errors. Many of you have edited your written work countless times, but most people do not engage in a robust revision process. You should revise your work before you edit; if your argument is not presented in a logical order, a mechanically flawless product will not achieve your goals of effectively informing or persuading your reader.

Prior to assessing your work, there is one thing that is essential for you to do before you begin. You *must* take time to be physically and temporally removed from your written work. When taking this break, you are clearing out your short-term memory of what you *intended* to write so that when you return to your document you can read more objectively what it is you actually have written. The longer you can give yourself, the better. I recommend students take twenty-four hours away from a complete draft before sitting down to self-assess your work. Ideally, you will also study other subjects, read a book for pleasure, exercise, sleep, or a myriad of other things that replace your most recent memories of your writing with a beneficial veil of haze and blur.

Additionally, plan your time so that you can revise and then edit during several shorter periods rather than one long marathon session. While assessing your work, you want your mind to be fresh rather than frazzled. Planning several assessment sessions also allows you to divide your different revision and editing tasks at natural stopping points. You should plan to do several read-throughs of your paper with a clearly defined goal for each read-through.

Decide how you want to conduct each read-through, including whether you will print out a paper copy to mark up, read it on the screen, or have a screen-reader read the words to you. There are benefits to each method, and certain methods work better for certain types of read-throughs. For most steps, I prefer having a hard copy in hand to annotate in the margins, highlight particular portions, and flip through from one section to the next. Generally, revision steps involve looking at your written document from the paragraph level and up; editing steps involve looking at the words and sentences within the paragraphs. The below list in what order I recommend you complete your assessment steps.

1. **Revision**
   1. Examine your large-scale organization
      1. Identify the main point of the written document and confirm that this main point addresses the topic.
      2. Identify the roadmap you have provided to your reader.
      3. Identify each piece of the analysis or argument.
         1. Mark where each CREAC-block begins and ends.
         2. Within each block, mark each individual section as to whether it is: (C), (R), (E), (A), or (C).
         3. Consider using colors to mark each section so that you can quickly see where sections might need to move.
      4. Identify the conclusion to your analysis or argument.
      5. Identify other portions of the document that are required by the assignment or rules (e.g., Statement of Facts, Question Presented, Table of Contents).
   2. Look at your written document. In looking at your annotations concerning what each part is, can you determine anything is missing that will need to be added? Can you determine anything that detracts from the main point and should be removed? Can you see anything that needs to be rearranged to have a better flow of your analysis or argument? Make a note of what to add, remove, and rearrange.
   3. Go back to your analysis or argument
      1. Confirm that your legal rule uses key legal words from your research.
      2. Identify the number and types of sources you have used
      3. Determine whether you have used mandatory authority where it is required.
      4. Determine whether you have used persuasive authority where it is appropriate and you have properly identified that authority as non-binding.
      5. Determine whether you have sufficient sources in your E to show that you have fully researched this topic. If there are few sources to use in your E, have you clearly stated that for the reader?
      6. Determine whether you have sufficient application of the sources in your E to show how the reader should apply the sources in E to the facts of the current situation, if you are examining a particular set of facts.
      7. To check for analogies and distinctions, circle specific facts from prior cases and circle your comparison words such as “like” and “in contrast to.”
   4. Read the topic sentence of each paragraph and then reread the main point of your document. Confirm the outline that emerges from your topic sentences supports the main point of your document and is complete. Also confirm that it lines up with the roadmap you have provided for the reader. If you notice you have holes or need to rephrase, make a note of that to return to later.
2. **Editing**
   1. Return to the portions you marked as needing to have pieces added, removed, or rearranged. Excise the superfluous material and then patch the holes made by that excision with transition words or sentences. Add sections where needed and integrate the new section with transition words or sentences. Rearrange sections and use transition words and sentences as appropriate to maintain the flow of your writing.
   2. Return to the topic sentences that needed to be clarified and rewrite them to be strong, declarative statements that guide the reader.
   3. Check the formatting of your document against the requirements given.
      1. Confirm that the correct font type and size is used
      2. Check that document meets page limits or word count requirements
      3. Make sure margins and line spacing are correct and consistent
      4. Check that the formatting in the header and footer matches the body formatting, unless the assignment has specified they be different
   4. Read each sentence and confirm that each sentence that should have a citation does have a citation.
   5. Check citations to confirm you have used the proper long or short form citation and that you have included pincites where appropriate. Ensure that each citation is correctly formatted according to the Bluebook or other required citation guide.
   6. Read through the document for correct grammar and punctuation. If either of these areas is a weak point for you, then do one readthrough for each grammar and punctuation.
   7. Read through the document for typos. Using a screen reader for this step can be particularly beneficial because the computer will read the word you have typed and not the word you meant, like “statue” instead of “statute”. You should also change your spell check settings to check on words in all caps so you avoid things like BREIF ANWSER.
   8. Finally, once you think you have everything fixed, read your paper out loud to yourself in a mirror, and read it backwards, starting with the final paragraph and working your way to the initial paragraph. This will allow you to check the sentence structure and word choice of each paragraph.

This assessment checklist is thorough and it might even feel daunting. For smaller written products, like email, you might only use a few of these assessment tips. However, for longer works, you should use as many of these steps as possible to ensure you produce cohesive and coherent written work.

After you have submitted your work, you might be tempted never to look at the document again. The reader will decide how valuable the document was and you will move forward. However, you should consider building in time after a document is returned to you or has been used by its audience to assess your work in light of the feedback that you receive. If it is a graded assignment, read the comments from the professor and then see how you would implement those comments to make changes. Meet with the professor and ask them for further feedback. If your document was used by a judge who then issued an order, look at the order and look at your document to see if there are similarities. Did the judge use your fact presentation or your argument? These can be signs that your writing was particularly informative or persuasive.

By engaging in self-assessment after you have submitted your work, you are seeing what worked, what did not, and what you should consider changing the next time. These steps are critical to self-regulated learning; remember, when you are an attorney, you will not have a professor telling you how to develop as a writer and you will need to be able to drive forward your own learning.

# Books to Consult for Grammar, Punctuation, and Style

Jeff Anderson, Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer’s Workshop (2005).

Deborah Cupples & Margaret Temple-Smith, Grammar, Punctuation & Style: A Quick Guide for lawyers and Other Writers (2013).

Bryan A. Garner, The Winning Brief: 100 Tips for Persuasive Briefing in Trial and Appellate Courts (3d. ed. 2014).

Bryan A. Garner, Legal Writing in Plain English: A Text with Exercises (2d. ed. 2013).

Bryan A. Garner, The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style (3d. ed. 2013).

Ross Guberman, Point Made: How to Write Like the Nation’s Top Advocates (2d. ed. 2014).

Sandra J. Oster, Writing Shorter Legal Documents: Strategies for Faster and Better Editing (2011).

Joseph M. Williams, Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace (7th ed. 2003).

Richard C. Wydick, Plain English for Lawyers (5th ed. 2005).