

English 131 Portfolio: Strategies for Revision

engl 131 / sec. A3 / spring quarter 2005-06 / chang

Higher-Order Issues

Main Claim/Argument: Do I know exactly what my main claim is for the whole paper? Is it worthwhile, compelling, juicy: arguable (not reporting, opinion, or narrative) and appropriately complex? **Does it meet the requirements of the assignment?** Does every section of ideas reflect advanced knowledge of the thesis (instead of the thesis only coming out later in the body)? Is my **exigence** clear?

Critical thinking and Analysis: Are the ideas I use to develop the thesis perceptive and valid? Are the main points of the body the strongest ones I *could use* to prove the thesis? In the end, have I proven my thesis to a skeptical audience? Does the writing pass the “So What?” test?

Development of Content:

Elaboration—Are there enough topics in the whole paper to fully develop my analysis? Are there enough sentences in each paragraph to fully develop that topic so that the idea is explored in depth?

Chain of Reasoning (coherent flow of strong ideas)—Does the path of my reasoning, the paragraphs that follow each other, make logical sense? Do the paragraphs build on each other and move the essay forward rather than repeat the same ideas over? (Rehashing the same material is often a sign that the writer is trying to understand her or his own meaning.) Do I state how the paragraph topics connect to the thesis? This is a crucial use of a warrant.

Evidence: Do I use valid academic evidence (authority of researched texts, spelled-out warrants, logical explanations, examples, facts, personal stories only as pertinent examples, qualified claims rather than absolutes)? Have I avoided wild claims/unsupported generalizations? Does the evidence conform to the rules of logic (one way to check is “STAR—sufficient, typical, accurate, relevant.”)? Do I complicate the subject, acknowledge ambiguities, and make concessions when necessary? Do I make wise choices about what researched material to include (the authority of text from experts in their fields is probably the highest kind of academic evidence), and do I use it effectively, knowing when to quote and when to paraphrase?

Audience Awareness and Disciplinarity: Have I adjusted my presentation to fit the discipline-specific needs of my audience? For the humanities, this means: not address readers as if they already agree with me or know the context for the assignment; not assume my experience is common to all by making comments like “We all have a religious upbringing,” but show understanding of the diversity of other perspectives; make direct claims and exact assertions rather than beat around the bush with phrases like “The movie is about what society fears.”; state my ideas clearly in my own words using concrete, specific, explicit statements and not ask the reader to “read in-between the lines”; keep my tone scholarly and not “preachy.” Imagine your audience as your professor, diverse students, and all the English faculty at the college.

Exigence and Voice: Have I made this topic my own or is it a repetition of class discussion? Is my own originality reflected in the paper? Is this *me* talking (maybe with my newly educated voice)? Did I get engaged with my subject and assert something I personally care about? (Writing without voice sounds empty and mechanical. The biggest difference between an A and a B is often found here, in the creativity and risk-taking of a well-supported original argument.)

Revision: Have I revised ideas and content rather than merely correcting wording or editing earlier drafts? Have I responded to feedback from peers, tutors, and instructor? Have I gone beyond feedback and enriched my argument and evidence with my own critical thinking?

Lower-Order Issues

Organization: Are the paragraphs in the essay arranged in the most sensible order? Are the sentences in the paragraphs arranged in the most sensible order? (A useful arrangement of sentences in a good paragraph loosely looks like this: General statement of topic → enough sentences to support it → general statement to make sense of it all.) One of the benefits of a computer is that it allows a writer to pour out ideas in a pile of words, as fast as they come to you. But the resulting coherence is usually disorganized. Use the cut and paste features to reorganize original ideas so that the presentation flows more smoothly.
Clarity: Is my wording spelled out and not implied? Is my wording specific and precise, not vague and inexact? Does the wording sound smooth and not overblown or jumbled? Have I avoided wordiness, or unproductive repetition? Every sentence must speak for itself, must not perplex the reader with garbled wording and need other sentences to make it understandable.
Transitions: Are there clear transitions, or “bridges,” from one paragraph to the next? Are there signposts within the text to help guide the reader through my train of thought? (e.g. “Although teasing is affectionate when used by my immediate family, the same teasing is not affectionate but disrespectful when used by my cousin.” The repeated words guide the reader.)
Articulation: Have I checked for common writing errors?
Title: Does my title capture the essence of my big point? Is the title creative and compelling? Have I typed it correctly? (not underlined, not in quotes, not in a different font; capitalize all main words)\
Introduction: Is the first sentence (or group of sentences) an attention grabbing “hook”? Do I give necessary background the readers need to know? Is the background <i>related to my claim</i> ? Do I avoid a writer-based background that repeats the steps I went through before I nailed down my claim? Do I clearly assert my claim in a statement that directly claims my central point? Do I avoid a commonplace “announcement,” such as “I will now discuss ads”? First impressions are powerful—make the introduction capture your readers.
Conclusion: Does my essay have a satisfying finish? Does it tell a “so what” about my topic? Does it avoid empty repetition, getting “preachy” or “drippy,” using clichés, or saying “In conclusion”? (Warning: if your conclusion is merely a point-by-point summary of the main points, it is probably “just plain redundant and boring”.) The last word leaves a permanent effect: make yours be the <i>finale</i> that seals your presentation.
Spell check: Have I put the final copy through spell check? Have I looked for spelling errors myself?
Proofreading: Have I read the final, printed copy (not the screen)?
MLA format: Have I checked for correct rules of MLA citation and documentation?
Correctness: Have I checked for grammar rules?
Design form: Have I checked margins, spacing, title form, abbreviations, and other rules of layout form?
Read out loud: Read your finished paper out loud, slowly, deliberately, in full voice at least once.