Listen to what writers say:

“I write in order to know what I think.” Flannery O’Connor.

“Worked long and slowly yesterday. Don’t know whether it was good, but it was a satisfactory way to work and I wish it would be that way every day. I’ve lost this rushed feeling finally and can get back to the easy method of day by day…. Just a little bit every day. A little bit every day. And then it will be through.” John Steinbeck

“Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try.” William Strunk and E. B. White

“Writing is the most easy, pain-free, and happy way to pass the time of all the arts.” Steve Martin

How do you write? Choose the answer that best applies to you:
A) As infrequently as possible.
B) In one straight shot, never looking back.
C) In stages, with feedback

Now, stop to consider which answer is the best for anyone.

Keith Hjortshoj (pronounced Yorts-hoy) writes in his book The Transition to College Writing that many instructors complain that student papers often read like first drafts, demonstrating problems such as lack of focus or main point, no clear organizational structure, insufficient specific evidence, careless documentation of sources, and grammar and punctuation errors (57). He also points that often these papers ARE first drafts, a result of procrastination and the pressure of a looming deadline (58).

Ernest Hemingway, a famous 20th century novelist, once said, “The first draft of anything is shit.” In the Writing Center, we think of the first draft as a useful way to begin but never end. Imagine how your favorite basketball team or band would perform if the group limited its rehearsals to one run-through the night before each performance. Hjortshoj provides meaningful ways to rehearse any writing assignment (adapted and paraphrased from pp. 73-77):

Start on your assignment as soon as possible. Read the assignment guidelines closely, paying attention to the requirements and the deadline. What does your instructor want from you? How soon? Rather than procrastinating, try collaborating. The Writing Center can help with strategizing, brainstorming, or breaking down a complicated or overwhelming assignment into parts. Many students are interactive learners by nature, meaning they do their best thinking when they talk about their ideas. Pay attention to how you think most effectively.
Write a quick, exploratory draft to jumpstart the process. Composing a first draft means writing with purposefully low expectations. Remind yourself you are simply getting your early thinking about an assignment onto the page as quickly as possible. As Hjortshoj says, “[If] you give yourself permission to say anything that occurs to you, you can produce a lot of material in a short time. And if you do this exploratory writing well in advance of the deadline, you can put it aside for a day or more and come back to it with a fresh perspective, in a better position to reconsider, revise, and organize your ideas” (75).

Outline your paper between drafts to fill the holes in your thinking. All writers have blind spots, and outlines can be useful for revising: “They will reveal the structure of your draft: the connections and disconnections among points, the sequential logic of an argument, gaps, patches of fog, or contradictions” (73). Reorganize your outline and use it as a guide for your next draft.

Read your drafts aloud. In the Writing Center, our peer tutors often read drafts aloud to students so that both student and peer tutor are hearing the words at the same time, in similar ways. Strengths and weaknesses surface quickly. When you read your draft aloud to yourself, you are more likely to hear it as a reader would.

As you read a draft, look for the main idea. In first draft/last draft papers, main ideas often show up in conclusions, where writers crystallize their thinking. If your main point lands in a wayward location, reposition it within your introduction, often as the last sentence. Then find your supporting points and reorganize them into a logical sequence. For more help with organizing a draft, see A Good Blueprint for Any Paper (www.wcu.edu/11675.asp).

Don’t count on your instructors to tell you to revise. Strategic instructors often incorporate multiple drafts into their assignments, knowing their students are more likely to succeed. If your instructor does not ask for a draft, be proactive, recognizing that drafting, revising, and proofreading result in a paper your instructor will appreciate. Further, no one in the professional world will put up with poorly conceived, poorly constructed writing.

Get help before the final hour. Visit the Writing Center early and often. Our graduate peer tutors enjoy collaborating with students on their papers. Ask your professors for advice when you need it, or invite an intelligent friend to read your work and offer suggestions. No help can save you, though, if you have put off writing an assignment until the night before the deadline.

If you listen to the wisdom of fellow writers and learn to value your own process, eventually, with Steve Martin, you can say, “Writing is the most easy, pain-free, and happy way to pass the time of all the arts,” and in a real sense, you will find it true.

…composed and revised several times by Barbara Hardie, University Writing Center Mini-Course, Writing as Process, 2001. Revised 2010.

Work Cited: