

## Learning the Art of Rewriting and Editing— A Perspective

By Brooke J. Bowman

Brooke J. Bowman is Assistant Professor of Legal Skills and Special Assistant to the Dean at Stetson University College of Law in Gulfport, Fla.

*“There is no such thing as good writing. There is only good rewriting.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“The art of writing is rewriting.”<sup>2</sup>*

When I was first approached to write this column on editing, I wondered how I would even begin to write the column because I feel that I am still learning the art of editing. The second challenge was to put this “art” into words. Editing involves practice, and I believe that in order to become a good self-editor, a writer must first know his or her strengths and weakness, and second, have an opportunity to edit other people’s work. My perspective on editing has developed over years, and my editing strategies continue to evolve and change. This column discusses how I approach the task of editing and how I teach my students to approach editing.

As legal research and writing (LRW) professors, it is our responsibility to teach many of the fundamental skills that law students need to practice law: research, analysis, writing, attribution, and oral advocacy.<sup>3</sup> Typically, you will not find rewriting and editing listed as skills that we need to teach our students because rewriting and editing are incorporated into the skill of writing. But that does not diminish the importance of rewriting and editing. Editing is an important part of both writing and oral advocacy. We do not train our

students to stand in front of a panel of judges and purposely say, “Excuse me, your honors, I meant to discuss the rule of law from the following case and not the case I just discussed. . . .” Preparation before an oral argument, by writing the memorandum of law or appellate brief, prepares the student to present the argument clearly and completely. The skills of research, analysis, attribution, and oral advocacy all find their basis in writing. And the goal in legal writing is to present the LRW professor, supervising attorney, opposing counsel, or judge with a well-written, well-edited document. So as we are teaching the students how to write, how do we teach them the skill of editing?

Writing is not a linear process.<sup>4</sup> There is not one point at which writing stops and editing begins. Each stage of the writing process discussed below involves different strategies, but there is no ordered list of steps to take. The writer’s strategies may vary according to the writer’s strengths and weaknesses. The most difficult stages occur at the “end” of the writing process, the revision and polishing stages,<sup>5</sup> and students need to understand the importance of these last two stages. The polishing stage is especially important because it is before this stage (after the revising stage) that the writer may think that that he or she is done.<sup>6</sup> If the students understand the strategies in the writing process, we can help them to see the importance of editing, because “readers expect, even demand, a final copy that is clean and correct in every way.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Justice Louis Brandeis (quoted in Richard K. Neumann Jr., *Legal Reasoning and Legal Writing: Structure, Strategy, and Style* 61 (4th ed. 2001)).

<sup>2</sup> Steven D. Stark, *Writing to Win: The Legal Writer* 49 (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Ralph L. Brill et al., *Sourcebook on Legal Writing Programs* 9–33 (1997).

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Christopher M. Anzidei, *The Revision Process in Legal Writing: Seeing Better to Write Better*, 8 *Legal Writing* 23 (2002).

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Susan M. Taylor, *Students as (Re)visionaries: Or, Revision, Revision, Revision*, 21 *Touro L. Rev.* 265, 266 (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Deborah E. Bouchoux, *Aspen Handbook for Legal Writers: A Practical Reference* 206 (2005) (“[O]ne of the most difficult writing tasks begins only when most writers think they have finished a project.”)

<sup>7</sup> Andrea A. Lunsford, *The St. Martin’s Handbook* 32 (5th ed. 2003).

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## 1. Writing Process

In the first LRW course at Stetson University College of Law, the LRW professors explain to the students that there are four stages in the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, and polishing. The professors present the process early in the semester, and the key is to revisit the process throughout the semester as the students are working on written assignments.

*Prewriting* involves reviewing the problem, identifying search terms, developing a research plan, and beginning the initial research. This is the planning stage in which the writer determines the purpose of the document and who the audience is, and begins to brainstorm about the issues and arguments. At this point, some writers plan by outlining.

The *drafting* stage involves getting words down on paper, reevaluating and revising the research plan, and continuing to conduct additional research. This is the exploration stage in the writing process in that as the writer begins composing and getting words down on paper, the writer is thinking about what he or she already knows and what information he or she still needs to learn through research. Drafting involves discovering more about the topic<sup>8</sup> and coming up with new ideas.<sup>9</sup> The writer should also evaluate his or her research to determine the best sources to use to support the analysis. Notice, I said “evaluate” the sources. Students have a tendency to want to put “perfect” citations into the document during the drafting stage. It would be a shame to put the citations in perfect form at this time, and end up deleting the case and arguments in the next stage of the process, the revising stage. The goal during the drafting stage “is not a final copy.”<sup>10</sup> This is very difficult for law students to understand. Yes, the writer should continue to conduct research (continuing one of the strategies discussed in the previous stage), but

the writer should not be concerned with minor nitpicky details (sentence structure, word choice, punctuation/grammar, or citation) at this point in the writing process, because if the writer starts editing before the revising stage, the writer will find that it is very difficult to remove or delete sections, paragraphs, or sentences, which is what is involved in the next stage.<sup>11</sup> There is a time for attention to details. Right now, the writer should be trying to get all ideas down on paper, and should try to not stop drafting in order to make changes to sentences, phrases, or words.

The next two stages—revising and polishing—are challenging for the new LRW students because the students do not see revising and editing as two separate stages,<sup>12</sup> which is why I developed a visual aid that I use in my LRW classes, training sessions for student teaching fellows,<sup>13</sup> classes for students writing scholarly papers for seminar classes, and law review new associate training.<sup>14</sup> I also point out to students that the revising and editing stages take time. A first-year, non-LRW professor once told me that the writing process took him as long as the time he spent researching, and I agree. In fact, I would argue that revising and polishing a document take almost as long as the prewriting and drafting stages. In fact, I stress with the students that it is important to set the document aside after drafting before revising, in order to allow the writer to look at the document through new eyes. By setting the document aside, the writer will be able to revise and polish more effectively and efficiently.

The *revising* stage involves evaluating and reviewing the content or substance of the document, focusing on the “big picture,” and verifying that the document flows in a logical

“A first-year, non-LRW professor once told me that the writing process took him as long as the time he spent researching, and I agree.”

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Muriel Harris, *Prentice Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage* 14 (5th ed. 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Terri LeClercq, *Re-Vision Before Editing*, 49 *Tex. B.J.* 838, 838 (1986).

<sup>13</sup> A teaching fellow is a second- or third-year student who is interviewed, hired, and trained by the Research and Writing Department to work with first-year students on their writing assignments.

<sup>14</sup> See *infra* sec. 2.

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manner. This is the rewriting stage. The writer must think about the document as a whole and how the information is presented in the document. (The initial question should be, “Does the document contain all the required information?”) The writer should rethink the organization of the entire document, as well as the organization within each section of the document. In addition, the writer should review the arguments and determine whether each argument is properly supported. The writer should question whether he or she has misrepresented facts or overstated authority. At this point, the writer should “re-think the draft from the perspective of the audience,”<sup>15</sup> and determine whether the document is clear, coherent, and complete. Basically, revising is “re-seeing”<sup>16</sup> the document. The writer must add, change, delete,<sup>17</sup> or shift information within the document, before he or she can start the polishing stage or the “repair” stage.

*Polishing* involves repairing or adding the finishing touches—editing and proofreading. The goal in polishing is “to ensure [the] document is correct in all aspects.”<sup>18</sup> The polishing stage involves a careful and attentive eye to details because this attention to detail lends credibility to the writer.<sup>19</sup> The students

should learn that there is a difference between editing and proofreading the document. Editing involves examining the mechanical details of the document—sentence length; correctness in grammar, spelling, word choice, citation form, and punctuation—whereas proofreading involves finding all the typographical errors or imperfections. Editing involves “clarifying, strengthening, and condensing the communication,”<sup>20</sup> and proofreading involves eliminating all the errors and other obvious mistakes. Proofreading “involves a special kind of reading: a slow and methodical search for misspellings, typographical mistakes, and omitted words.”<sup>21</sup> It is important to edit before you proofread.<sup>22</sup> But it is important to point out to the students that changes made during the polishing stage, specifically when editing, may cause the writer to go back to the revising stage to determine whether the changes affected the substance or organization of the document.

## 2. Visual Aid

As discussed above, I use a visual aid in many of my classes to illustrate the different strategies that occur during the revising and polishing stages of the writing process. The visual is a depiction of what I described above. The visual aid seems to help students separate the revising strategies from the polishing strategies.<sup>23</sup>

I first developed this visual aid in an attempt to help myself when editing, as a self-editor and an editor of others’ work. In order to understand my editing strategies, you will need to know that I love citations! Because one of my “weaknesses” as a writer and editor is that I gravitate toward citations, I knew that I needed to change my perspective when editing. Therefore, my goal in designing this chart was to help me put the revising and polishing strategies into perspective. I saw this problem (students gravitating toward citations or other mechanical details) in my

<sup>15</sup> LeClercq, *supra* note 12, at 842.

<sup>16</sup> “Because writing is a recursive process that calls upon the writer to ‘see’ many things at once, revision must serve more than the last stage on an assembly line where the writer corrects errors. Instead, revision, literally ‘re-vision,’ is a process by which the writer becomes the reader with new eyes in order to see in his [or her] work what the audience will see.” Taylor, *supra* note 5, at 274–275 (footnotes omitted).

<sup>17</sup> Deleting information that you have written is a very difficult task as well. “It takes a mature writer to realize that some of the information that [he or she has] included is unnecessary.” Donald H. Graves, *A Fresh Look at Writing* 221 (Heinemann 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Bouchoux, *supra* note 6, at 206.

<sup>19</sup> Toni M. Fine, *Legal Writers Writing: Scholarship and the Demarginalization of Legal Writing Instructors*, 5 *Legal Writing* 225, 239 (1999) (“The ‘lack of careful scrutiny required for a credible legal analysis has a subconscious impact on the reader.’” *Id.*); John D. Ramage, John C. Bean & June Johnson, *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing* 733 (3d ed. 2003) (“Attention to details is essential because it ‘reflects directly . . . on the reader’s image of you as a writer.’”). One misconception that first-year law students have is that attention to details does not matter. Mark Cooney, *Get Real About Research and Writing*, 32 *Student Law* (May 2004) (available at <[www.abanet.org/lstd/studentlawyer/may04/get-real.html](http://www.abanet.org/lstd/studentlawyer/may04/get-real.html)>).

<sup>20</sup> Debra Hart May, *Proofreading Plain & Simple* 45 (1997).

<sup>21</sup> Diana Hacker, *Rules for Writers* 29–30 (5th ed. 2004).

<sup>22</sup> *E.g.*, May, *supra* note 20, at 45.

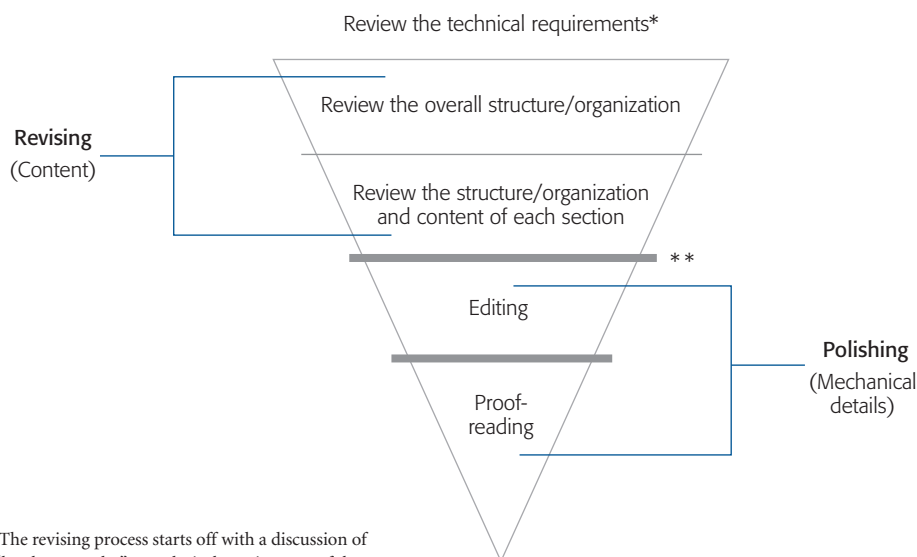
<sup>23</sup> See the visual aid at the end of the article.

LRW class as well, and the chart helped to show the students that they should not worry about the details until after the revising stage of the writing process.<sup>24</sup> Another goal for designing the aid was to get the students to start thinking about every part of the document that they should revise and polish.<sup>25</sup> The goal is to start “big picture,” focusing first on the content and organization, and then to proceed to the sentence-by-sentence, line-by-line, word-by-word review of the document. Hopefully, the students will learn that revising may lead to more drafting, which means that more revising will be necessary later on. Consequently, another benefit of talking about the revising and polishing stages early in the semester would be that the students would learn that writing takes time and rewriting takes even more time.

### 3. Closing Thoughts

The bottom line is that we want students to see the importance of revising (rewriting) and polishing (editing and proofreading) their documents. An artist does not frame his or her painting until the painting is complete; therefore, students should not start revising or polishing until they have a complete section or a complete draft to work with. “Editing is the fine-tuning process of writing.”<sup>26</sup> But more important, “effective writing is a lifetime goal, never a final accomplishment,”<sup>27</sup> which means that the art of rewriting and editing will continue to evolve for every writer.

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\*The revising process starts off with a discussion of the “local court rules” or technical requirement of the assignment. Actually, I encourage the student to format their documents according to the “rules” before drafting begins—ensuring font, margins, and page numbers are set and any autocorrect features are disabled. But it is always good for the students to reverify that the document is in compliance.

\*\*The thick gray lines indicate that the writer will need to take a break between the revising and polishing stages of the writing process.

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<sup>24</sup> I introduced this visual aid at a presentation at the Legal Writing Institute conference in June 2006.

<sup>25</sup> This visual aid can be used while the class is developing a checklist of items to check in the document that the students have been writing.

<sup>26</sup> Harris, *supra* note 11, at 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ruggero J. Aldisert, *Winning on Appeal: Better Briefs and Oral Argument* 242 (2d ed. 2003).