

HOW DO I IMPROVE ON MY FIRST DRAFT?

You've written a draft of your assignment, as well as you can. You don't think it's as good as it should be, but if you knew how to make it better, you'd have made it better the first time round, wouldn't you?

Well, not necessarily. There aren't many people who can polish as they create, and trying to do this can cause a lot more problems than it solves. It's hard to keep track of your train of thought while trying to get it down in just the right order, in just the right words. It's particularly hard to write if you feel you've got to get the first paragraph right before you move on.

Experienced writers don't often do it that way; they're more likely to give themselves permission to put any old mess down on paper, and not be critical of it until they start to redraft. And luckily there's a method you can use that will free you up at the beginning, because you know you'll have a way of bringing all the rubbish you may write under control!

Write on only one side of the paper, leaving a wide margin and spaces between the lines (so you can add stuff in); or double space your draft on your computer, then print it out. You need to be able to manipulate the whole thing on paper, at this stage. Now, next to each paragraph, write in a few words what point it's making. A paragraph should be focused on **one** idea, and present the examples and evidence necessary to show this idea to your reader. This is not like newspaper paragraphs, which are often just a single sentence. Also, newspapers often repeat the same information several times in an article, in different paragraphs. An essay should not do that, but instead deal with each point once, in the one place.

If a paragraph isn't making any point, ask yourself what job it's doing in there; if nothing useful, weed it out. If it is useful, but you haven't yet put its point into words, do that now, and put that sentence at the beginning of the paragraph. If the point is in there, but buried in the middle or end of the paragraph, consider putting it at the beginning, as the **topic sentence**. This will make it easier for your reader to recognise. If any of your paragraphs deal with more than one point, split them into separate paragraphs, so each point gets a paragraph of its own (and a topic sentence).

Now, read down your margins so you can see what points you've made, and in what order, without getting bogged down in the writing. If you've dealt with any one point in different places, bring that material together, getting rid of any repetition. (Use your scissors and sticky tape; move pieces around on the floor!) Now look at the sequence of points throughout the draft. Do they flow logically? You can try them out in a different order, if you think that could be more sensible.

When you're happy with the order, check the transitions between your paragraphs. You may have been taught to end each paragraph with a sentence repeating the point that paragraph makes; but that can be repetitious, and it isn't really necessary. Instead, look at the flow. If there seems to be no obvious reason why one paragraph follows another, figure out what the reason is and get that connection in. It may just take a word or two in the opening sentence of the following paragraph – “however, on the other hand, furthermore, in fact, for example, in the event”. Don't just put in a connecting word for the sake of appearing to make a connection! If your word suggests a connection that isn't really there, you'll just look confused. Figure out what the connection is, and what word or phrase is best to express it. It may take a whole sentence, or, in a long and complex essay, even a short paragraph (e.g. “For all these reasons, Freud's emphasis on sexuality seems to be misplaced. An alternative way of explaining the phenomena is offered by”).

Once you've got all that under control, you can go back to the beginning of your draft and write a good introduction, because now you know what you're introducing! And this is the order in which a lot of experienced writers work – they write the beginning last. The next chapter tells you more about introductions, and conclusions.

Now make all the necessary changes on your computer draft to match what you've achieved with the scissors and paste. Then you can focus on the language, the editing, the references – those things that bothered you before, but weren't as important as the structure of the argument. Use HASU's checklist – “How do I know if my essay is meeting uni expectations?” -- to make sure your essay is what your tutor is expecting – and then, that probably IS the best you can do with this one.