

Essay 1, Part 2: Revision

And indeed there will be time...
Time for you and time for me.
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917)

Congratulations. You have all written a significant research paper in music history, you dove into the stacks in the Lewis music library, and you came out with an argument and evidence. This is the first step.

We revise because upon rereading our prose, we discover that we have misjudged our reader's knowledge and desires. Or we revise because we found that the direction our writing went was not what we promised our reader we would tell her on the first page. Or we revise because we are not sure we made our argument as strongly as we could, and we know that another example will make our case that much more strongly for us.

For whatever reason, all good papers go through several versions. By only requiring two we're actually cutting many corners (though I will happily read further drafts or, in particular, drafts of particular sections if given at least five days before the paper is due). However, we will also get several more sets of eyes besides mine on the paper.

By tonight at midnight, please email the draft of your paper (as sent to me) to your two readers (see attached list) and to me. They will email back the author and me by Friday at noon at the LATEST comments to help improve the paper.

Role of the Reader

The reader's job is not in any way to grade the paper (that's mine). As a reader you will give a mix of positive comments and suggestions for improvement—if you cannot find both strong and weak points in any paper, you are not being an active enough reader. Focus both on the parts of the paper that were inspiring as well as the parts that were confusing. Whether you are talking about parts that work or parts that didn't, your evaluations should maintain a positive tone throughout: having your writing read can be scary, and you should try to lessen the pain of the experience, so people can read your comments constructively. Here are the main points that should take the bulk of your attention:

1. Idea

What is the main idea of the paper? What question does it seek to solve? What is the answer it proposes? How does it go about solving it? (That is, what's the strategy?) How is this strategy deployed? What are the main difficulties in solving it? How interesting is the question to be solved? Did the writer sell you on the importance of what he or she is doing?

2. Writing style

What are the most exciting techniques the writer uses in her or his writing? Are there trite expressions and clichés that need to be transformed into new, vivid metaphors?

Here are some points that many of our papers could be improved on:

Transitions

How well does one paragraph or one idea flow to the next? Are they connected? Once you've finished reading about one idea do you want to keep reading, or do you need to summon your energy anew for each new topic?

Integration of Sources

How are sources used? Are they cited enough that you feel that the paper is well-grounded in previous literature? Is there a variety of sources? Does the author ever confront an expert and disagree or go beyond the text? If so, how, and is it effective? If not, try to find a place where it seems to you that the expert is failing, and the writer should pounce.

The Conclusion

Why is it here? Does it summarize the earlier writing? Does it leave the reader with further questions that cannot be answered in a short essay? Does it connect the essay to broader themes in the class, in music, in life? Does it come full circle to points raised in the introduction? Could it be cut without losing anything from the essay? (If so, cut it; better no conclusion than a worthless one). Is it too long? Too short?

Concision

“For sale: Baby shoes. Never Worn.” — Ernest Hemingway

Hemingway once called that his best story. At six words it implies a life, and death, far beyond its text. Every word counts in writing. Rein in wandering paragraphs. Slash sentences that add nothing to the argument. Downsize sentences that begin “there is another aspect of this topic which must be considered.” Trim this flabby phrase, “X was very much disliked by medieval monks,” into the lean, “Monks hated X.” Slash brambles of subordinate clauses and let light shine on one short declarative sentence. Cut, cut, cut. Let a single, glorious strong verb emerge from a pile of weak verbish phrases. Smash buckets of adjectives into one spectacular noun: the perfect one for the job.

3. Musical Analysis

Is there an appropriate amount of musical analysis in the paper? Can you follow the musical examples? Are figures (musical or otherwise) well integrated into the text? Can you suggest other examples or other ways of using examples that would improve the paper?

Optional (well, only sort of): read your own paper through these questions and do your own self-review.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21M.220 / Early Music
Fall 2010

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.