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Dear WC

Letter from the Editor

Dear Students,

This year we’ve been making some changes to the newsletter in the hope of serving you better. Earlier this year, we started delivering the newsletter electronically to College Writing students. This month, we’re publishing the newsletter on our website so that all AU students can more easily access the information and articles it contains.

We’d love to get your feedback on this new format. Let us know what you think.

Our April newsletter includes a special section on how to manage the heavy end-of-semester workload and the inevitable stress that comes with it. Check out the personal stories of Writing Center Consultants Alicia Case and Shannon McMahon, along with the useful tips they have to share in the articles “How Not to Write a Paper” and “This Year Will be Different.”

This month’s “Dear WC” column answers a reader question about addressing the other side of an argument. Plus, we have an article on Revision and Proofreading, which comes right on time for polishing those end-of-semester papers.

We hope you’ve had a great year here at AU and we look forward to seeing you in the Writing Center!

Melissa Wyse, Editor

Writing Center

Hours for the Spring Semester

Monday – Thursday:
11:00am – 8:00pm

Friday:
11:00am – 4:00pm

Sunday:
4:00pm – 7:00pm

Closed Saturdays

Sessions start on the hour and last 45 minutes.

Dear WC ...

Dear WC,

I’m writing a research paper on why industrialized farming does more harm than good. But I keep running into articles that argue the opposite. Should I just ignore these sources, and focus on the ones that affirm my thesis? Or does this mean my argument is wrong and I should just start over?

Signed, One-Sided Magee

April 2010
Call x2991 for an appointment.

Remember:
Writing Center
Appointments are FREE and CONFIDENTIAL.
We tell your professor that you’ve been to see us only if you request that we do so.

Check out the Writing Center Website, where you can access writing and citation guides, meet our consultants, and visit online writing labs. http://www.american.edu/cas/writing

The Writing Center is located in Battelle 228.
Stop by to browse our extensive collection of handouts and reference materials, to make an appointment, or to enjoy some complimentary hot tea and pretzels.

Dear One-Sided Magee,

There are two sides to the argument in almost any analytical essay. You don’t need to change your thesis just because some evidence contradicts it. In fact, if your thesis was completely undisputed, it wouldn’t make for a very good paper. You just need to know how to address the other side of the argument.

Don’t leave out the information that goes against your thesis. Leaving out the other side will weaken your argument, because part of proving your point involves responding to critics.

Part of your paper should outline the basic stance of opponents of industrialized farming. Next, you should include your own response to this stance. This response should be in part a critique of what you deem to be the weaknesses of the argument, but it should not disparage every claim made by your opposition. Instead, you should try your best to be fair. You can admit that industrialized farming has some benefits while still maintaining that it does more harm than good.

Good luck!

Signed, WC

How Not to Write a Paper
By Shannon McMahon

It was three o'clock in the morning and I was still researching. I had spent hours and hours going through my sources and finding just the right quotes. I had written a little, but the paper needed to be ten pages – and that was the absolute minimum.

I closed my laptop and piled all of my books and notes into my backpack as quietly as I could so as not to wake up my roommate, threw on a pair of flip flops and hiked to the Eagle's Nest. The coffee from earlier had worn off. I bought a Rockstar energy drink and opened it as soon as I left, sipping from the cold, tall can on my way to the library. Already I was starting to feel better. I would get this done, and get it done well.

Well, I got it done, at least. Six and a half hours later I was putting the finishing touches on my Works Cited page – that is, in-between trips to the bathroom to throw up and frantic phone calls to my mom. Apparently, too much caffeine can make you sick, as well as panicked and jittery. Knowing it was probably the worst paper I'd ever written, I emailed it to my professor in tears and told him I would not be able to make it to class that day.

Dear One-Sided Magee,

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Good luck!

Signed, WC
This was not a fun experience. Lying in bed feeling too sick and jittery to sleep when you haven't done so in over twenty-four hours is not a good feeling. However, worse than the physical consequences was the dissatisfaction I felt with my paper – and the grade I later received. It's impossible to do an assignment well when you save it for the last minute.

Learn from my mistakes – here's some advice for getting research papers and other large projects finished early:

- **Break projects into smaller sections.** For a researched paper, a basic breakdown might be: research, pre-writing/outlining, writing, more research, revising, and editing. Even these sections can be broken down further. Breaking it up makes the project less intimidating.

- **Don't plan on doing everything in the same day.** Don't even do all of your research in one day. Set goals for when certain tasks should be finished and stick to them.

- **Start early.** The day you get the assignment, if possible. If you “don't have time,” find a way to make time.

- **Look at your schedule and see where you can fit in time.** Don't plan on doing a lot of research on a day when you also have 400 pages of reading, for example.

- **Work in spurts.** For me, about an hour and a half to two hours at a time is ideal – after that I need a long break. Figure out what amount of time is long enough for you to really get into the material, but short enough that you won't get burnt out.

- **Know how long it takes you to write, and allow extra time.** It helps to time yourself. For example, I know that it takes me about 20 minutes to write a page that includes a lot of research – however, that page will require substantial editing later.

- **Don't think about grades.** I know, this is pretty radical – but thinking about how well you need to do on this paper puts a lot of pressure on you, which can lead to panic and procrastination.

- **Think about what interests you about the assignment and your topic.** Obviously, this is more difficult when the topic is assigned, but the odds are that there's something about it that sparks your interest. Giving yourself a reason to write your paper other than grades will help you stay motivated – and it'll make it a lot less painful, too.

- **Just do it.** Temporarily deactivate your Facebook if you have to.
This Year Will be Different

By Alicia Case

It's that time of year again! Spring break has come and gone, and with finals only a month away, most of us are walking around campus with wide-eyed, overwhelmed looks on our faces. This time of year makes me think of semesters past—and I've been through quite a few now. I begin to compare the stress level of the current one against the ones behind me, and I always think this year will be different. I'm not going to be a stressed out mess. I'm going to start ahead of time and make sure I take care of myself.

...Unlike that one year when I was an undergraduate junior and had to write two twenty-page literature papers that would impact my grades in two different classes significantly. Plus, I had a ridiculously difficult final in my Rhetorical Theory class, which was just as obscure as it sounds.

It wasn't that I waited until the last minute to prepare for these things. Rather, I diligently pulled together research, and spent hours picking out the perfect quotes to use for both papers. I also spent hours complaining, stressing and crying to my mother about all the things I had to do, instead of actually translating that research onto the page. I lost sleep nightly, and developed a heavy addiction to caffeine.

I see now my mistake was that I never actually began writing until about two days before both papers were due (of course, they were due on the same day), and I was left with only a day to study for my exam, which I'm not pleased to say, I bombed. Obviously, I had not managed time well and had wasted a lot of energy, well, freaking out.

Here are five tips for managing your heavy workloads and stress this finals season:

1. **Time Management:** Large papers require a lot of research. So, yes, start that research early. But don't wait until you finish the research to start writing a draft.

2. **Sleep:** Be sure to get at least six or seven hours. You'll be amazed at how much easier it makes daunting tasks.

3. **Easy on the caffeine:** We all need a pick-me-up every now and then, but it's far more important to eat well and drink plenty of water.

4. **Take time for you:** Whether it's a brisk walk with a friend, an hour at the gym, or just some time spent gently stretching, your body will thank you.

5. **Reward yourself:** This has been one of the most powerful tools in helping me get through stressful times. I like to set a daily goal, work toward it, and then reward myself with something (often an hour to shutting off my mind with mindless television or internet surfing).
Strategies for Revising and Proofreading

It's important to remember that revision and proofreading are actually two distinct stages of the writing process.

Often, after finishing a difficult draft, it's all too easy to conflate these two steps, skim through the paper draft for any obvious errors, change a couple of words or sentences, add a comma, and call the paper finished.

However, this approach deprives you of one of the most pleasurable stages of the writing process: revision.

**Revision** calls for more than just a few minor tweaks and changes; it's an opportunity to re-see your paper draft – to step back and take a look at your work so far -- and make creative decisions about where you want to take the paper next.

And, unlike writing the first draft, during the revision stage, you don’t have the burden of starting with a blank page – or a cursor blinking at the top of an empty Word document.

**Proofreading** comes after revision. This is the final stage of the writing process. A big part of proofreading is looking for grammatical errors and typos.

But the proofreading stage also offers you opportunities to make creative stylistic choices in regard to word choice, sentence structure, and phrasing. It gives you a chance to check your paper one last time for clarity, and to “polish” your writing.

It’s a good idea to save this “polishing” until the end of the writing process because, after all, there’s no point in polishing a beautiful sentence that you wind up deciding to delete during the revision phase.

More tips and suggestions:

1. **Leave some time between each stage of the writing process.** If possible, take a few days away from your paper between the draft and the revision process – or at least get a good night’s sleep before you try to revise. This is important because it gives you a chance to get some distance, so that when you do revise you can truly have a fresh view of your paper draft.

   It’s also important to take some time between revision and proofreading. When you’ve just spent a lot of time reading and re-reading your paper, you start to see the sentences the way they ought to be, and not the way they’re actually written. It's all too easy to skim over typos and grammatical mistakes because – frankly – at this point you’re sick and tired of looking at this paper draft. After a couple days away, or at least a good night’s rest, those errors will jump off the page and you'll be able to see and fix them much more easily.
For tips on managing your stressful workload so that you’ll have adequate time to revise, check out the articles by Alicia Case and Shannon McMahon.

2. **Check out The Writing Center’s Handouts on Revision and Proofreading**, which contain strategies that other writers have found to be effective when tackling these two stages of the writing process.

3. **Make an appointment with one of the consultants at the Writing Center.** We’re available to help students during all stages of the writing process: brainstorming, formulating a thesis, and outlining through revising a draft, identifying patterns of grammatical error, and polishing the final paper.

Remember, the Writing Center consultants won’t fix your paper for you, but we can serve as valuable coaches and walk alongside you through the stages of your writing process. Just call x2991 to set up an appointment!