

Reading and Editing Essays

by Alfred J. Drake

Here are some thoughts about the editing process and its relation to reading. Perhaps you will find the following ideas useful, at least as a point of departure.

At its best, good prose -- even scholarly prose -- is a minor art form. What do you do with art? Well, you put something out there and then reshape and refine what you see on the page, in the marble, on the canvas, or whatever medium you are using. It makes sense to divide the editing process into stages:

1. Stage one is reading the text attentively.

Read attentively the first time around, forming major impressions about the characters and the way the story proceeds, and noting questions and observations that occur to you as you read. The best criticism is founded upon attentive but enjoyable first readings, supplemented by further concentration on detail, structure, and theme in subsequent reading. Why? Because if you can't register the effects the text generates in *you*, you will never be able to assess and communicate its special qualities, the things that make a work such as Homer's *Odyssey* or Camus' *The Stranger* interesting to you and others. What really strikes you as remarkable or subtle about the text, about the way the text handles its characters, themes, and story? What really draws your attention? In his Preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), the Victorian critic Walter Pater advises that we ask,

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence and under its influence? The answers to these questions are the original facts with which the æsthetic critic has to do; and, as in the study of light, of morals, of number, one must realise such primary data for oneself or not at all. (viii)

It's true that Pater's Impressionist aesthetic critic is out of fashion in this century. But don't forget that the Greek root of "aesthetic" is *aisthanomai*, which means "I perceive for myself." Criticism is a self-reflexive activity. The point is not to tell your readers that *The Odyssey* reminds you of Aunt Flo or that it makes you sad. Those things are as uninteresting to another person as your dreams. Rather, Pater is suggesting that you should take stock of the impressions produced in you as an attentive reader. Those impressions may prove to be the *starting point* in developing your paper or exam response. To suit our literary context, I would ask again, "what really strikes you as remarkable or subtle about the text, about the way the text handles its characters, themes, and plot?" Good critics spin a convincing *story* (or *narrative*) about the text -- though not, of course, in the "once upon a time" sense of that word; they make us want to go back and reread the work. You can't do that if you have no story to tell, if you're just constructing a statistical, abstract "reader" and then conforming your own interpretation to what you suppose that reader would find true or acceptable. At bottom (and whatever fancy methodologies they happen to be using), good critics tell interesting stories about stories, plays poems, and so forth.

2. Stage two is making a note file.

Writers have long kept "commonplace books" in which they set down observations for later use. Before you begin your rough draft, perhaps even as you do your initial reading, you should set down some observations based on that first reading -- ones you hope will make sense when you selectively place them in conjunction, tossing out some while retaining or emphasizing others. If you want to write down impressions as you read, it would probably be best to keep a paper notebook and then transfer the jottings to a word-processed file as time permits. Maintaining a note file makes it easier to start a rough draft because you won't feel as if you have nothing to say. Keep your note file through subsequent readings and add to it as necessary. By the way, if you want to go high-tech you could record your initial ideas as you read through the text, or use speech recognition software to capture your thoughts.

3. Stage three is re-reading the assigned text.

Here the goal is to supplement the first impressions I mentioned in my comments on stage one. At this point you should be reading the work as a scholar -- as someone who is about to write an essay that will enhance other people's experience with a given text. So you must assess your past and current thoughts about the text and try to "connect the dots" into a convincing essay. Which of your ideas do you want to emphasize? What do you now consider less important than you previously thought? Which parts of the text would it be most sensible to dwell upon, given your interpretive emphasis? While I never stress predetermined sets of questions to ask about a literary work -- some students may find an introduction to that kind of question set helpful, at least to get acquainted with the process of reading literature in a scholarly way. The main literary elements are plot, characterization, setting, point of view, and theme. See, for example, the question sets and reading strategies on **Muskingum College's Learning Strategies Database**.

4. Stage four is your first draft.

If you feel writer's block closing in on you, that's normal. Writer's block comes partly from the anxiety that once we set down a thesis, we are trapped and will then have to wrench everything in the text to fit the thesis. And we know that's a trap likely to produce a stale reading. Perhaps it helps to see writing as a reciprocal shaping activity, like sculpting -- the sculptor makes a cut with chisel and hammer, steps back and looks at the result, then makes another cut, and so forth. First you must set the words in your mind down on the page. They become the equivalent of the sculptor's block of marble. Then, when you see your first block of words, they will seem almost like someone else's words, like statements demanding a response. Keep responding to your own writing until you have "sculpted" your words and paragraphs into a promising essay.

5. Stage five consists in re-reading your draft and dealing with any problems you see in its thesis, structure, logic, and rhetorical effectiveness.

You may think everything you say is clear and connected, but are you confident that others will understand you?

Are you omitting important points or failing to make the necessary connections among your ideas?

If you are getting your most important ideas across and making the necessary connections, are you doing so within a structure that best emphasizes those key areas of your essay?

When you cite a passage, are you providing proper context for it so that it doesn't seem awkward or irrelevant to your argument? Regarding this issue, please see my Grammar Guide's section on quotation problems.

It's fair to say that here, if anywhere, lurks that "reader" I mentioned unflatteringly above. But our "gentle reader" exists only at the level of common logic and grammar, the things that enable us to recognize speech as meaningful.* One good tip is that while finished college essays are generally deductive in form -- they begin with a thesis and then explore the thesis -- drafting tends to be *inductive*. That is, we start out with a placemaker thesis or a sketchy set of ideas that we mean to reshape when we become dissatisfied with them. Then we gradually clarify our purpose and insights as the draft proceeds. It would be logical, therefore, to check the last part of the draft carefully to see if it provides the material for a better thesis.

6. Stage six is the polishing stage.

Read your paper out loud, even if doing so seems strange. Be on the lookout for the usual suspects -- the problems that you and your instructors keep coming across. We all have our strengths and weaknesses as writers, and it's helpful to keep them in mind as we move towards a finished essay. For example, in initial drafts I may be overly allusive and too fond of my own wit. I also catch myself using phrases where a single word would have done. I "overuse" "quotation" "marks," and I sometimes repeat words rather than find acceptable variations of them. My pseudo-aristocratic contempt for excessive wittiness and my dislike of sloppy writing, however, force me to chip away at those problems until I have eliminated them as best I can. The only way to become an excellent essay-polisher is to do a fair amount of reading and writing. It's intelligent to refresh your understanding of grammar basics, but that alone won't make you an excellent writer -- it is a bit like studying the dictionary and then boasting about your book learning.

Notes

*The other thing that makes speech recognizable as meaningful is what the early twentieth-century linguist Ferdinand de Saussure called "difference": i.e. c-a-t does not equal r-a-t; the substitute letter "r" establishes a difference that generates meaning. Speech and writing generate the effect we call "meaning" because they work as a web or system of such differences. But of course that's a very technical point, not something you need to know as an editor.