HOW TO WRITE AND REVIEW A FIRST DRAFT OF A PAPER

The purpose of the first draft is to get one’s ideas on paper and to try out a plan of organization for those ideas. Of course, it should follow the outline that you have prepared beforehand! Much of the effort of a first draft is experimental. For example when writing, one should err toward including, rather than excluding, information and ideas. That is, the first draft is the time to see whether or not an idea or approach works. If you leave it out, neither you nor another reader will be able to evaluate the appropriateness, of that idea to the paper or its manner of expression there.

The draft is written for you to use. It is a tool. It often is shared with colleagues, advisers or classmates whose opinions you respect because you wish to have their criticisms and their ideas for improvement. They should be honest in their evaluation, giving reasons for their criticisms and suggesting methods for improvement if possible. You should be open to their suggestions, evaluating them objectively and non-defensively. Accepting suggestions will greatly improve most papers!

If a format is prescribed for a paper either by a professor in case of a course paper, by an adviser or department in the case of a thesis, or by a journal editor when preparing a manuscript for publication, attempt to follow the format immediately from the first draft onward. Be precise; follow it exactly. A prescribed format is not “guidelines”; it is an expectation. (Suggested formats are “more like guidelines” but they too should be guiding you.) Virtually all journals have on-line “suggestions to authors” or “instructions for authors” or some such on the journal web page. Print a copy of these; read them carefully and keep them at your side as you write. They will include information about figures, tables, reference styles and submission methods as well. Adhere to them.

A thesis is often a special case of this writing process, and a first draft of a thesis is a document of critical importance to your success. (See Guidelines for preparation of Theses in Geology) Thus, even the first draft should be as correct as is possible in format, style and grammar so that it is your ideas and expression that are getting the most attention from your helpers, the reviewers. It will be a poor thesis that begins by a first draft devoted to spelling corrections, comma positioning and bad grammar. Attend to such things immediately in your first reading, called “proofing” or “proof reading”, of it and BEFORE sharing with others.

As a reviewer, one should concentrate on the larger issues of the paper including its organization, clarity expression, logic, scientific accuracy, citation and conciseness. The second time you read your draft ask:

- Is there a natural progression of sections and ideas in the paper, or would an alternative organization work better?
- Is the topic, or its presentation, so broad that ideas are treated only superficially?
- Do some sections or aspects of the paper work much better than other sections? Why?
- Has the topic been adequately researched?
- Is the writing style clear and readable?
- What aspect of the paper is strongest? Weakest?
• Make helpful suggestions for improvement or change.

These are examples of the types of questions one should address when providing feedback on a first draft. To reiterate, reviewers should not have to focus on spelling, grammar, and sentence construction before they can understand your ideas!! These “nuts and bolts” issues are important but you should have taken care of them when you proofread the draft!! Do not wait for the final draft to repair a mistake; repair it in the first draft. If the first draft is filled with a large number of typos and spelling and grammatical errors, they will mask the quality of your ideas and expression making review an onerous task and making most reviewers “unfriendly”. ALL SUCH ERRORS NOTED BY REVIEWERS IN THE FIRST DRAFT SHOULD NEVER BE REPEATED IN THE SECOND DRAFT!! Some reviewers refuse to help with a second draft if they see that their grammatical corrections on the first draft were not accepted and dealt with immediately, and who could blame them.

Reviewers may provide feedback to an author using global comments in the form of a memo, as opposed to detailed comments throughout the text. That is, on the back of the paper, the cover page if there is room, on a separate sheet of paper, you should prepare a memo to the author. In this memo, one should select only a few aspects of the paper to address. Concentrate on emphasizing what is working well and what most needs to be changed to improve the paper. Detailed comments should be penned on the draft where they apply.

When giving your own first draft to a reviewer, consider providing the reviewer with some guidance. For example, if you tried to take a particular approach, ask the reviewer to specifically address the effectiveness of that point. If you are having difficulty with a particular section, ask the reviewer for his or her assessment of what is needed in that section. If used effectively, a good reviewer can play a vital role in the development of a paper.

Finally, remember that the draft is a tool used in the writing process. It is not a process to be rushed. **Begin your paper EARLY.** This is a DRAFT that you are preparing. There should be at least two further drafts – generally reviewed by fewer people or by only the author – on the way to the final product! Make every draft count toward final excellence of expression and communication.

This UFI (Useful Flyer of Information) was developed and written by Mark A. Davis for the benefit of the students. It has been highly modified by J.M. Erickson, W. Caesar and the Geotechnical Writing class (2010) at St. Lawrence University.