

Writing is Revising

Part I: Plan your week **backwards** to meet your goals

Here's a hypothetical situation that you're sure to face as a college student: you've got an essay due on next Monday, which is exactly one week from today. You're a busy college student, but you're committed to getting a good grade on this essay, so let's say that you're going to spend eight hours working on this essay. The question is, which is better: spend all eight hours working on it the night before it's due, or divide up the time across the week?

If you're like the average college student, the hours you spend working on this essay will look something like this:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
Receive assignment in class	What essay? I've got all week!		Why start on the essay now, I've got all weekend to get it done.	No one really ever works on Friday night, do they?	I'd work on my essay, but this party isn't going to throw itself, is it?	Spend eight miserable hours locked in the library researching and writing and revising and editing and swearing at the printer for messing up <i>again</i> - "Why won't this stupid thing print!?!?!"	Turn in whatever you wrote on Sunday.

Anyone who has written a paper this way will tell you that it's miserable. It's *miserable*. And yet most college students, even very bright ones, will continue to work like this. Why? Because of bad habits and mediocre expectations. We see our friends working like this, so it becomes normal to think that you wait until the day before to start working on an essay.

Here's the truth: very, very few people can write well under these circumstances. That's because the single most effective way to turn a piece of mediocre writing into a piece of effective writing is to revise multiple times. But that takes time, so here's how to plan your week to include time for revision.

Now, if the assignment is one you don't care about for whatever reason, then fine, write it at the last minute. But if you want to turn in something that you can be proud of, here is a secret for managing your time: **plan backwards**.

What does that mean? It means that, while you can't control the due date, you can control what you do with your time between receiving the assignment and turning it in. So, pull out your planner and write this down:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
Receive essay assignment.							Turn essay in to professor.

Now, if you want to turn in a *polished* essay on Monday, that means you need to spend time editing your draft on either Sunday or Saturday. Let's say Sunday.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
Receive essay assignment.						Edit draft for grammar, punctuation, and citations. Time: 1 hour	Turn essay in to professor.

In order to have a draft that's worth editing, you'll need to spend some time revising first. You have other things to do on Saturday, so let's say you'll spend some time revising on Friday afternoon.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
Receive essay assignment.				Revise draft TWICE. Time: 2 hours		Edit draft for grammar, punctuation, and citations. Time: 1 hour	Turn essay in to professor.

You see where this is going, don't you? Before you can revise, you need to have a draft written, and before you can write the thing, you need to know what you're going to write about. By planning backwards, you'll get a schedule that looks something like this:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
<p>Receive essay assignment. Read assignment carefully! Questions about it? Email your professor <i>today</i> so that you can get them answered quickly. Time: 10 minutes</p>	<p>Research (if necessary), write a rough outline, and draft one body paragraph. Time: 2 hours</p>	<p>Draft body paragraphs. Time: 2 hours.</p>	<p>Draft introduction and conclusion. Time: 1 hour.</p>	<p>Revise draft TWICE. Time: 2 hours</p>		<p>Edit draft for grammar, punctuation, and citations. Time: 1 hour</p>	<p>Turn essay in to professor.</p>

Why does planning backwards work? Because we are humans, not machines.

Machines don't get tired; people do. If you try to spend eight hours writing an essay, you're going to get tired. There's no way *not* to get tired. And your brain just isn't going to perform well when it's tired. You'll make mistakes. Your ideas won't be as interesting. Your arguments won't be as strong as they could be. They just *won't*.

Planning backwards works because it forces you to do two things. First, it makes you divide up a complex task (writing an essay) into manageable pieces (writing pieces of an essay). Ask yourself, which would you rather be thinking when you sit down to work on an essay: "Okay, now I'm going to draft body paragraphs about X and Y," or "Okay, now I've got to type an eight-page argumentative essay."

The second reason is that spreading work out like this gives you time to think about your topic. After all, professors assign essays because they want to see how your ability to think critically about a subject and, I'm sorry to say, the only way to show them that you can think critically about a subject is to **actually spend time thinking about it**.

But that doesn't mean that you have to lock yourself in some sealed cloister and meditate about globalization, or whatever.

What it does mean is that **you need to spend more than one chunk of time working on an essay**. Revisiting your essay multiple times makes it much easier to think deeply about your subject and, in turn, to put those thoughts into words. If you put effort into this process, the end result is always stronger work.