

Stage 5: Refining To The Final Draft

How To Do a Line-by-Line Reading

This is a slow, careful, detail-oriented process. Take your time and prepare to do a lot of re-reading over several rounds of refining your essay!

Pull up your essay on Google docs or another application (or print it out in hard copy, if that works better for you). Make sure your reading partner, if you have one, also has access to the document and the ability to make comments on it.

Refinement Round 1

In round one, read your essay out loud. Stop after **every** sentence and **every** paragraph and think carefully through the questions below (by yourself or in conversation with a reading partner). You can make adjustments to your essay immediately or make notes within your essay to come back to later.

Gayatri, one of our student test-drivers, suggests retyping your essay out, line by line, in a new document. That is: read a line, reflect on the questions below, then retype the line in a brand-new document, fixing errors and integrating changes as you go. Gayatri explains, “Basically, it forces you to slow down and not skim through your work. You’re double checking as you read and as you retype the essay. I tend to catch a lot more errors this way than just reading aloud because I can correct mistakes as I type.”

These are the questions to think through as you read your essay out loud, line by line:

1. After every **SENTENCE**:
 - a. Are there any words in this sentence that you’re not sure about or think could be more specific, more illuminating, more interesting...?
 - b. Are there any images that could be more clear?
 - c. Is this a complete sentence? Is it a fragment? Is it a run-on?
 - d. Any issues with punctuation? Are all the commas and quotation marks and semicolons used correctly and in the right place?
 - e. Are there any words misspelled or used incorrectly in this context?

2. After every **PARAGRAPH**:

- a. Does this paragraph flow? That is, is it smooth and easy to read, or do you find yourself stuck on particular words or sentences that feel clunky, out of place, or hard to understand?
- b. Is there a good variety of different sentence lengths? Are there several short, choppy sentences in a row? Are there several long, complex sentences in a row?
- c. Is this paragraph logical? Does it make sense? Does any information seem to be missing?
- d. What's the overall tone of this paragraph? Is that what you were going for?

3. Make changes to the things you've identified in steps 2 & 3, if you haven't already.

4. When you've made it through the entire essay and have made tweaks and corrections, repeat steps 1-3 again. You might find that you want to change a few things back to how they were, or that the solutions you found aren't fully satisfying. You might also catch little errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar that you didn't catch before.

On the website you'll find a Quick Guide to Common Style Issues that may be helpful at this stage: storiesofselfworkshop.com/commonstyleissues.html

Refinement Round 2

You have now done 3 or 4 drafts of your essay! Hopefully, you feel pretty good about it at this point.

If you feel like you're done after several rounds of refinement -- you are!

If you'd like to do one more check of your essay, here are two options. You can do one or both of them (and you can do Option 2, New Reader Check, multiple times with multiple readers, if you like).

1. **Solo check:** if you're working by yourself, here's a quick way to make sure your essay is structured as tightly and logically as possible:
 - a. Open your essay or print out a fresh copy
 - b. Highlight or bold the first sentence of each paragraph.
 - c. Read JUST the first sentences of each paragraph. (You can also copy-paste the first sentence of each paragraph into a new document and read them that way.)

- d. That collection of topic sentences should present a basic summary outline of your essay: the major events you are SHOWING and the major reflections you are TELLING.
- e. If the first sentences don't quite do that, try the same process with the last sentence of each paragraph.
- f. If the last sentences also don't form a strong skeletal summary/outline, revise so that each paragraph contains one strong, stand-alone line that expresses one of your major ideas.

2. New Reader Check: Ask a new reading partner to read your essay--not the person you've already been working with in Stage 4 or Stage 5, but someone who's never seen it before. (If you haven't yet worked with any reader, this will be your first reader).

Don't tell your new reader what your essay is about or what you're trying to demonstrate about yourself. Don't give a lot of nervous disclaimers about all the things you don't like about. Just say, "Would you please read my college essay and answer three questions about it?" These are the questions:

- c. What is this essay about?
- d. What would you say the tone of this essay is?
- e. If you didn't know me, how would you describe me based on this essay?

Are their answers reasonably close to what you were hoping to achieve? If not, ask them more questions about why they responded as they did, and look for new opportunities to tweak wording, add more images, or clarify your reflections.

In the End...Just Hit Send!

It is easy to endlessly second-guess your essay. Some people return to their essays again and again, picking it apart and stitching it back together--or even throwing the whole thing out and starting over.

If you have gone through several stages of revision, including feedback from others, and thought you felt good about your essay, but are now suddenly seized with doubt: sleep on it. Do not destroy your essay or panic-write a whole new one at 2am. Take a step back,

breathe, get out of your head, and come back later.

This is an extremely normal and common feeling. Remind yourself of that.

It is unlikely that an essay you panic-write at 2am will be better than one you carefully thought through, got feedback on, revised several times, and did feel good about at one point. It's possible that a 2am panic essay is a great essay, but it's not likely. Remember that also.

Ask yourself:

Does this feel true to me? Does it sound like me?

If the answer is yes, that's all your essay needs to be, in the end: true to you. Release yourself from the burden of trying to control someone else's reaction to you and your story. Just send it.