

# First, Second, and Third Drafts

By Kristen Gay

In some ways, one might compare writing a polished paper to the process of getting dressed in the morning. For example, you might wake up, decide that you want to go to the beach, invite friends to go along and have a picnic, and change into beach clothes—just before you notice that it is cold outside. Because of this new piece of information, you may change into a jacket and pants. However, you quickly realize that your outfit now looks bland. You add an accessory—like a hat or a necklace—to complete your look before heading the door. But then your roommate tells you that your brown sandals do not match your black jacket, so you go back to your closet and change in order to streamline your look based on style conventions. You have revised your appearance multiple times before leaving the house, just as a writer revises his or her ideas before sending them out into the world.

For a writer, the revision process commonly involves three stages, which are sometimes referred to as first, second, and third drafts. These drafts allow writers to refine ideas, strengthen claims, develop perspectives, revise grammatical and formatting errors, reorganize points, and seek feedback from others, such as teachers and peers. Thinking of writing as an ongoing process can also alleviate some stress that may occur if a paper must be written quickly and all at once. There are various ways of conceptualizing the three drafts, but in general, you can think of the first draft as the brainstorming draft, the second draft as the trial run, and the final draft as the polishing stage.

The revision process usually begins with the first draft, which may take the form of a brainstorming draft. At this point in the process, your goal might be generating ideas, narrowing down a concrete topic, and taking a broad view of the topic being researched. At the beginning of the article, we compared the writing process to getting dressed in the morning. In this example, the first step involved getting out of bed and making a decision: to wear warm weather clothes and go to the beach. You began to make plans by calling friends, coming up with an agenda for the day, and dressing accordingly. For writers, this step in the process involves taking the first step towards planning the paper. Outlines, idea maps, and lists can be great ways to generate ideas for both the content and organization of a paper. It is important to not be overly critical of ideas at this stage in the process—try to take an open approach to several strong ideas, generate a plan for writing, and locate and analyze some sources to inform your understanding of a given topic.

Whereas writers focus on generating ideas in the brainstorming draft, in the second draft, writers generally create a full draft of a paper, adjusting their initial ideas as they write. This draft can be considered the trial run because it involves a sort of test of the ideas that were generated in the first draft. This means that while the first draft should shape the work that is done in the second draft, the writer's ideas may change dramatically in the process of writing the full paper. For example, in the example about getting dressed in the morning, you realized that it was cold outside, so you had to change the outfit entirely, and probably had to change plans with your friends. You also realized that your new outfit was bland, so you then added an accessory. In the same way, writers may realize that they cannot defend their original thesis, that there is not enough evidence to support their claim, or that they actually identify with an opposing perspective. At this stage in the process, writers will want to ensure that they are addressing global concerns, which may include having a strong, arguable thesis, using credible evidence to support their claims, logically organizing points, and ensuring that the introduction and conclusion are compelling. This process can be daunting, but remember that no one writes alone. In terms of revisions, writers may want to solicit feedback from teachers, peers, and/or Writing Center consultants at this stage of the writing process to gain further in-

sight into how their ideas and points are translating to their audience.

In the final stage of the revision process, writers tend to polish their work in preparation for submitting the final draft. In the example of getting dressed, your roommate provided advice about your outfit, and you changed in order to meet style conventions. Similarly, in this stage of the writing process, the writer will implement feedback from a teacher or peer, read the paper out loud to check for grammatical or punctuation errors, and edit out wordy or redundant sections. Now that the writer's ideas are on paper, and they appear generally effective at conveying her message, the final stage in the process usually involves refining and clarifying the writing itself. It may be useful to double check that the thesis statement is fully supported in each paragraph, for example, or to compose a "backwards outline" that lists the main point for each paragraph in the margins to ensure that each paragraph remains focused on one main point. Writers might also double check formatting guidelines and ensure that the draft distinguishes between their own ideas and the source's ideas. Finally, writers might look for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors while they attempt to make their sentences as clear and concise as possible. Thus, the goals for the third draft are: ensuring that ideas are cohesive and clear, considering and implementing suggested changes from the instructor and peers, and checking grammatical, stylistic, and local errors (i.e. sentence structure, spelling and formatting errors, and punctuation).

Although these three steps are commonly used, not everyone follows the same process when making revisions. It is important to find a strategy for revision that works for you—perhaps you spend a lot of time brainstorming and find that it works best for you to edit as you write, or perhaps you brainstorm briefly, write very quickly, and then need to make significant revisions before submitting a paper. There are no "wrong" ways to approach the revision process, only more or less effective ones. While these stages of revisions are not prescriptive, they do suggest that revisions should be approached with a strategy in mind.