



A Mindset to Revise

Your primary goal in revising your drafts is to find every way you can to be courteous to your reader. One dictionary defines courtesy as: consideration, cooperation, and generosity in providing something; or an act showing respect for and consideration of others.

Why focus on courtesy instead of accuracy? Or completeness?

First, your readers deserve it. They are colleagues, committing hours and hours in service to the university and the academy—and to our shared goals of effectiveness, excellence, and accomplishment. They are reading so many pages, so many words. Do not make them work hard to grasp your meaning.

Second, your persuasiveness depends, at least in part, on the speed with which the words on the page get inside your reader's mind. Think of it as reducing friction. Every bump from an awkward wording, every stall from the reader not readily understanding your terms, your context, is a slow-down, friction that makes it harder for your words to move into your reader's head. That means it's harder for the reader to grasp your intent, your meaning—and the merits of your case.

Third, focusing on being courteous to your reader helps you have the mindset to be gracious, not defensive. That makes your writing different. Instead of being infused with the tone of an astringent junior attorney in her first litigation for a plaintiff, your writing can sound pleasant, gracious, even breezy.

That's the why. Here are a few ways to show your courtesy:

Use headings and subheadings, so the reader can easily orient on what you are addressing where. When you hold your document at arm's length and scan the headings and subheadings, you should be able to recognize the whole “storyboard” of your narrative, addressing every major element in

every criterion's standard. There should be a logical flow, as well as a comprehensive arc.

Use bulleted lists when appropriate, to create white space and to help the reader navigate categories of criteria or similar elements of evidence. Indent the margins for quotations from The Document or other sources for similar reasons—to create white space and help the reader recognize easily when you are invoking words from another source instead of using your own.

Courtesy includes recalling that your reader does not know your department or your discipline as well as you do. So, provide context and explanations in plain language.

Use course names as well as numbers. Explain where your courses are in the curriculum, whether they are required or elective. Give a brief summary of what each covers.

Similarly, describe what you research, why your research is important, and the contributions of your published works in terms that a smart neighbor can understand.

Within each section, create a section summary. You might think of the section summary as that friendly restaurant manager who speaks to you as you're leaving: We hope you enjoyed your meal here! Thanks so much for coming! The words do not have to be profound to be orienting: Here is what you experienced in this part. We hope you found it pleasing. You are now ready to transition to the next section...

Summarize information in tables. Tables provide compact visuals for a lot of data. Create tables to portray the various stages of your research "pipeline" if that's part of your criteria. Create tables to summarize your teaching statistics by semester.

Creating a table does not relieve you of the responsibility to convey the information in sentences. You must write sentences explaining each table and its "punchline". (See? I have multiple streams of related research, and different kinds of outputs in each—that's evidence I satisfy one of these criteria.)

But tables provide a super visual "punctuation mark" to which a reader can return and easily navigate to refresh the memory on elements of your evidence. More than once, I have seen review committee members flip to a table to reinforce a point in relation to a candidate's case during deliberations.

When you ask trusted colleagues for a "friendly review" of your statement, go ahead and tell them: You are trying to be courteous to your reader. Ask them what you can do to be even kinder to the colleagues reading your dossier and listen to what they say.