



Wait!

The best technique for catching errors both on the sentence and content levels is waiting between drafts, which I explain to students to encourage them to begin sooner. At times, I require this step so they can see its value by having them hand in an essay and then giving it back to them several days later to proofread.

They are almost inevitably shocked by the errors they find, and they realize that the distance they've gained simply by waiting allows them to read their writing through fresh eyes.

Why It Works

To demonstrate this principle, I ask students to read something they wrote at the beginning of the previous year. Do they remember writing it? Do they remember proofreading it? And yet how many errors can they find (or did their teachers find)? Why is it easier now for them to see those errors than it was last year?

To some degree it's because they have grown as writers, but their distance from the composition process allows them to forget what they were thinking when they composed the piece. In the moment, students know so intimately what they meant to say that they struggle to see what they actually said.

Try It Yourself

You'll see that setting aside your writing for several days or more allows you to return to it with a clearer vision and a sense of reading as the reader rather than as the writer. You'll notice not only typos and other surface mistakes but also places where your expression wasn't as clear as you thought it was. These discomfiting realizations are one reason people don't like to look at their old writing, but if you encourage students to do so before sharing it with their readers, they'll feel so much better about the work they've done.