Print to Rewrite & Proofread

I started writing with a typewriter. As I wrote, I pulled out each page and automatically had a hard copy to rewrite. Today, students do their proofreading in the computer, believing (wrongly) that they will find the mistakes. So naive! Once I learned my students were only proofreading by reading the file in their computers, I began to require they print their work, proofread on the hard copy with a red pen, and then print a clean copy to hand in, stapled to the scribbled-on rough draft. They hate doing it.

One of my most talented writing students wrote this...

Akers demands that all his students print to proofread. What a waste of time! It's like showing your work on a math problem when you can do it in your head. Stubborn, I continued proofreading on the computer, cleverly making a few scribbles on an earlier draft as evidence of all the time I was putting into this print to proofread thing. A minor hiccup in my already flawless system. Around page thirty, however, I found myself catching mistakes on paper that I'd missed on the screen. At page forty-five, I was making minor rewrites. By sixty, the page was covered in red ink. I was hooked.

Taking my proofreading from screen to paper was the best thing I could have done for my writing. Computers conditioned me to skim: through my emails, through my Facebook page, and, yes, even through my screenplay. Eyes racing over a digital draft, I'd often miss an extra space or misplaced word. Not horrible mistakes, but enough to make me look stupid. On paper, red pen in hand, I'm forced to slow down, causing those errors to stand out.

Akers emailed the class Jerry Seinfeld's productivity secret a few weeks ago. Seinfeld pins up a calendar, and marks off the day if he writes new material. As the weeks pass, he's increasingly reluctant to "break the chain" of marks, so every day the work gets done. For me, this carries into proofreading/rewriting. Every page has something that can be improved, and the red pen, unlike a computer, gives me a great way of tracking whether I've made those improvements. Don't leave a page unmarked. Don't break the chain.

Additionally, with the pages of my screenplay spread across the desk, possible improvements become more obvious than on a thirteen inch screen. My habit of using the same three verbs or beginning half my sentences the same way suddenly jumps out. And if I get too carried away with these "improvements," cutting out something valuable, my original work is still there. On a computer, a momentary lapse of sanity could undo hours of hard labor.

Most importantly, when I proofread or rewrite on paper, I just get more done. While on the computer, the internet is a constant distraction. I can convince myself that the research I'm doing is essential for the story, but it's not. Taking the bold step of turning off WiFi, I'll often find myself organizing my music collection after a few minutes. A piece of paper has no distractions. Because of this, two hours of rewriting on a laptop condenses to one when I rewrite on paper.

Screenwriting books are filled with magic formulas. Printing to proofread is one of the few that works.

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