



Tip of the Month 03: The Mulligan Rule

An agonizing moment in the writing process occurs when, after working for countless hours on a draft of your paper, you pass it by your advisor or writing coach, only to see your words become entwined with slashing penciled notes and arrows of every dimension drawn in every direction. Shoulders slumped, you return to your computer, and stare at the screen, outwardly calm, while inwardly screaming, “No! It cannot BE!! All that cursed writing—down the tube!!!”

In golf—at least among the unpaid players of the gentility—there’s an unofficial rule called “taking a Mulligan,” named after the legendary golfer who took the very first Mulligan. A golfer, having shanked the tee shot, to great embarrassment, retakes the shot while quietly leaving the shank off the scorecard.

Assuming that a golfer taking a Mulligan learns from the experience and improves on the second try, we can apply the analogy to the poor student above. All that cursed writing was not down the tube. There’s nothing sacred about a first draft; many times, it’s a necessary rite of passage that forces the mind to organize its thoughts. Often, the first draft, while being inadequate, gives clarity, a deeper understanding of the problem. It doesn’t matter that you started out arguing the wrong research question, or arguing the right question from the wrong perspective. While writing the first draft, you figure out a better way to approach your paper, focus your thesis, define your topic, or strengthen your counterargument. You achieve a perspective that only the first draft could reveal.

So, turn off that self-critical voice, pat yourself on the back, and take that Mulligan. Look once again at the computer screen with hopeful eyes. Rewrite your paper, knowing that this is how discovery works. Award yourself that “free shot.” And keep your eye on the ball.