How My Writing Has Improved

English 101 has been a very interesting class in many different ways. But what I've learned about writing is that it is a natural process and I do my best writing when I follow the rules of that process. What I will try to prove here is that my writing has improved by using techniques that allow me to take control of the natural process.

One useful technique has been to clearly identify a strong thesis. For example, in the semi-final Personal Narrative Essay I did not develop a clear thesis; I only had an idea in my head. My "What I'm like now moment" consisted of describing a day when I startled a man with the exhaust sound of my sport bike, stating: "When the bike started, the exhaust sound was very loud and clearly startled this man. I felt embarrassed and ashamed as I rode out of the parking lot. Soon after, I sold the bike." This didn't clearly convey the change in me. While writing the Argument Essay I was forced to define a clear thesis for each article I was comparing in order to properly compare them. I then applied this to the Narrative, defining my thesis as "I rode sport bikes irresponsibly and now I don't because I am more responsible". Then I changed the what I'm like now moment, to my observations of a sport biker riding on the freeway: "Once in the car pool lane, he assumed his place as Lord of the Freeway and shot away at around 100 mph. Just as I was shaking my head and muttering "Dumb##&*t", I remembered that I used to do the same thing... all the time." This gives a better idea of how I've changed, not just what happened or how I felt. Whether I am writing my own paper or analyzing another author's writing, having a clear thesis makes the rest of the paper easier to write by
making the key points easier to identify. Having a strong thesis helps by making the points easier to prove or by giving more material to work with in proving that point.

Another useful technique has been to revise multiple times. For example, in the Expository Essay I revised the night before it was due, and again in the morning. The graded paper was deducted points for very simple punctuation and format mistakes like quotation marks in random places or not using my own title. At the time I turned it in I had read it over twice and thought it was ready, but since I had been working on it so consistently I had become used to over looking the small editing mistakes while I focused on the major points of the essay. When I read what I have written a day or two after, it always looks very different. This has taught me that my mind does much of the revision on its own and needs time in between writing to rest.

Feedback has been very useful. Before turning in the semi-final Expository Essay I received feedback that said I was just listing the sections of the story without relating them to the theme: “Then a man comes to the scrap pile wanting a 2x4 for his deck. He provides a contrast to Stafford.” My mistake was obvious when pointed out; I didn’t say anything that involved my theme of mindfulness. I revised it to say: “He provides a contrast to Stafford by insulting him and his work but not seeming to notice.” Feedback is like speeding up the revision process because the reviewer has a different perspective and has not become used to reading the paper, so they easily spot mistakes.

Using the concision tool of cutting a percentage of words was surprisingly useful. I managed to reduce the final draft of the Argument Essay from 1460 words to 1280, removing a surprising amount of repeated ideas and useless information, leaving room for more substantial content. When I started this exercise I couldn’t see
how it was possible to cut 10% and thought it would take all night. But by committing to cut a certain number I was forced to think hard about what was really necessary which resulted in seeing the paper with a fresher, more objective perspective. It was relatively easy and only took an hour to do. This is another example of how recognizing writing as an internal process and then using tricks that reveal or speed up that process, gives the writer much more control over what happens naturally.

All of these techniques are basically things most people naturally try to do when writing. Whether writing a text message or a letter to the IRS, the writer always has a subject (thesis) in mind. But we don’t always sit down and give hard thought to what exactly we want to say. But by doing this, we can focus on the best or strongest form of the message we want to convey. Most people don’t revise constantly unless they are very serious about what they are writing, like when writing a resume or a letter to a loved one. So by using revision in all important writing, especially when the writer is not heavily invested in the writing emotionally, the writing will naturally improve. Getting feedback is also something people do when the writing is very important to them. When writing an emotionally weighted letter, people will commonly ask friends how the letter sounds, if they got their point across, etc. People are naturally concise when they are required to be. A person on their phone in an airport quickly sums up the important points of their conversation when their seat section is called for boarding. Just recognizing these natural mechanisms and then forcing myself to use them, has been very educational and has definitely improved my writing.