Print to Rewrite & Proofread!

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

Having a piece of a paper and a pen or pencil in your hand magically changes your relationship to the writing. Holding a pen makes your brain work differently. You *have* to have a hard copy to rewrite. It leads to gigantic improvements. I'll do five drafts in the computer, catch myself thinking, "Okay, I'm good here." Then I print it and discover it was nowhere near finished. New ideas come. A page I thought was 100% ready gets splashed in red. I always think, "Whew. Good thing I printed it."

Alternate between hard copy and computer. If you only work on the computer, your work will be of lesser quality. Guaranteed. This counts for a résumé, too. Believe me, your competition will print *their* work...

Keith Jones, one of my most talented writing students had this to say...

Akers demands all his students print to rewrite and 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 rewriting 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 rewrite thing. A minor hiccup in my already flawless system. Around page thirty, however, I found myself making changes 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 work 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.

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. 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.

When I proofread or rewrite on paper, I 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, after a few minutes I'll often find myself organizing my music collection. 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 rewrite and proofread is one of the few that works.