

Revising Drafts

After reading this article, you should be able to utilize strategies to effectively revise drafts.

What Does Revision Mean?

To revise is to “see again,” or to look at something from a new angle. Revision is an essential process that consists of reconsidering arguments, reviewing evidence, redefining the paper’s purpose, reorganizing presentations, and reviving prose.

Isn’t Revision Just Fixing Punctuation and Spelling?

Nope. That’s proofreading. While proofreading is a valuable step in the writing process, it can be similar to putting a Band-Aid on a bullet wound if a paper’s main ideas are predictable, its thesis is weak, and/or its organization is a mess (For more information on proofreading, see our handout).

Isn’t Revision Just Looking For Better Words and Avoiding Repetition?

That’s editing, another important step in polishing your work. If you haven’t thought through your ideas, though, then rephrasing them probably won’t make a big difference.

Why Is Revision Important?

Writing is a process. Your first draft isn’t always your best work, so revision gives you a chance to examine:

- If something is worth saying
- If your paper conveys what you wanted to say
- If a reader will understand what you mean

The Revision Process

Here are several steps to guide you through the revision process. Try to focus on two or three areas during each revision session (For more help, see our handouts on thesis statements and revising drafts).

- **After you've finished a draft, take a break** before looking at it again. You've worked hard! When you return to the draft, ask yourself what you honestly think about the paper. Try to focus on the large issues, not small things (such as commas).
- **Check the essay's focus.** Is it appropriate to the assignment? Is the topic too big or too narrow? Do you stay on track through the entire paper?
- **Examine your thesis:** Do you still agree with it? Does it include everything you wrote in the paper? Does it say what anyone could say about the topic? Does your thesis generalize instead of taking a specific position or claim?
- **Think about the paper's purpose.** Does your introduction clearly state what the essay is about? Is this clear to your readers?

Other Steps to Consider in the Revision Process

- **Examine your paper's balance.** Are some parts out of proportion with others? Do you spend too much time on one point and neglect another? Does your paper have lots of detail in the beginning, but less at the end?
- **Keep your promises to your readers.** Does your paper follow through on what the thesis promises? Do you support all the claims in your thesis? Are the tone and formality of the language appropriate for your audience?

- **Check the organization.** Does your paper follow a pattern that makes sense? Do the transitions move your readers smoothly from one point to the next? Do your topic sentences introduce what each paragraph is about? Would your paper work better if you moved some things around?
- **Check your information.** Are your facts accurate? Are any of your statements misleading? Have you provided enough detail to satisfy readers' curiosity? Have you cited all your information?
- **Check your conclusion.** Does the last paragraph tie the paper together smoothly and end on a stimulating note? Does the paper die a slow, redundant, lame, or abrupt death?

I Thought Revision Was a Quick Process.

Not usually. You may want to start working on assignments early so that you have plenty of time to revise drafts. That way you have time to take breaks and look at what you've written with a fresh pair of eyes.

I Don't Want to Rewrite My Whole Paper!

The good news is, you probably don't have to. Revision could mean making sure that your thesis matches any new ideas you discovered during the writing process. It could mean coming up with stronger arguments to defend your position, or using more vivid examples to illustrate your points. Sometimes it means shifting the order of your paper to help the reader follow your argument, or to emphasize your most important points. It could mean adding or deleting material for balance or emphasis. Unfortunately, revision sometimes does mean starting from scratch, but it's better than having the teacher trash your final paper.

I Work Hard on What I Write. I Can't Afford to Throw It Away.

To be a polished writer, you have to use language that is as concise and specific as possible. Sometimes the idea, metaphor, or paragraph that seems the most wonderful and/or brilliant is the very thing that confuses readers or interrupts the flow of an argument. The best writers often sacrifice their favorite bits of writing for the greater good of the piece. This is why it's important not to limit yourself while you're composing the first draft. The more you produce, the more you will have to work with when it's time to edit.

Sometimes I Revise as I Go.

That's OK. Since writing is a process, you don't need to do everything in a specific order (unless that helps you). There are two potential problems with revising as you go:

1. **You never get to think of the big picture.** Give yourself enough time to look at the essay as a whole once you've finished.
2. **You may short-circuit your creativity.** If you spend too much time tinkering with what is on the page, you may lose some of what isn't on the page yet. Here's a tip: Don't proofread as you go. You may waste time correcting the commas in a sentence that may end up being cut anyway.

How Do I Revise?

- **Try working from a hardcopy.** Problems that seem invisible on the screen somehow tend to show up better on paper. Plus, it's easier on the eyes.
- **Read the paper out loud.** That's one way to see how well things flow (for more suggestions, see our handout on reading aloud.).

Don't try to tackle all of these suggestions in one draft; that way you won't go mad trying to do everything at once. Remember to ask lots of questions and answer them truthfully. Ask if there are opposing viewpoints that you haven't considered yet.

Concerns

Whenever I Revise, I Make Things Worse.

That's a common misconception. The truth is, all experienced writers revise their work (For example, Hemingway rewrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times). Try re-reading some of your old papers. How do they sound now? What would you revise?

What Gets in the Way of Good Revision Strategies?

Don't fall in love with what you write. If you do, you'll be hesitant to change it even if it's not great. Start out with a working thesis, remembering that you're not married to it. If a better thesis comes along, let go of the old one. Try to remember that revision is a chance to look at your entire paper, not just isolated words and sentences.

What Happens If I No Longer Agree with My Own Point?

The revision process can lead to questions you cannot answer, objections or exceptions to your thesis, cases that don't fit, and loose ends or contradictions that won't go away. If this happens, you have several choices: you could ignore the loose ends and hope your reader doesn't notice them, but that's risky. You could change your thesis completely to fit your new understanding of the issue, or you could adjust your thesis slightly to accommodate the new ideas. You could simply acknowledge the contradictions and show why your main point still holds up in spite of them. Most readers know there are no easy answers, so they may be annoyed

if you give them a thesis and try to claim that it is always true without exceptions, no matter what.

How Do I Get Really Good at Revising?

The same way you win achievements in video games: with practice, discipline, and a high set of standards. Remember these three tips:

- **The more you write, the more you can cut.**
- **Imagine yourself as a reader who is looking at this for the first time.** This makes it easier to spot potential problems.
- **The more you strive for clarity and elegance,** the clearer and more elegant your writing will be.

How Do I Revise at the Sentence Level?

- **Read your paper out loud, sentence by sentence.** Follow Peter Elbow's advice: "Look for places where you stumble or get lost in the middle of a sentence. These are obvious awkwardness's that need fixing. Look for places where you get distracted or even bored—where you cannot concentrate. These are places where you probably lost focus or concentration in your writing. Cut through the extra words or vagueness or digression; get back to the energy. Listen even for the tiniest jerk or stumble in your reading, the tiniest lessening of your energy or focus or concentration as you say the words . . . A sentence should be alive" (Writing with Power 135).
- **Use powerful verbs.** Replace long phrases with specific verbs. For example, replace "She argues for the importance of the idea" with "She defends the idea."

- **Look for repetition in consecutive sentences.** Look for alternative ways to say the same thing OR for ways to combine the two sentences.
- **Cut as many prepositional phrases as you can without losing your meaning.** For instance, the following sentence, “There are several examples of the issue of integrity in Huck Finn,” would be much better this way, “Huck Finn repeatedly addresses the issue of integrity.”
- **Check your sentence variety.** If more than two sentences in a row start the same way (e.g., with a subject followed by a verb), then try using a different sentence pattern.
- **Aim for precision in word choice.** Use a thesaurus and a dictionary to search for the word that says exactly what you want to say.
- **Look for sentences that begin with “It is” or “There are.”** See if you can revise them to be more active and engaging.

For more information, please visit our handouts on word choice and style.

This information originally appeared in a handout from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.