

Revising Drafts

Rewriting is the essence of writing well—where the game is won or lost.

—William Zinsser

What this handout is about

This handout will motivate you to revise your drafts and give you strategies to revise effectively.

What does it mean to revise?

Revision literally means to “see again,” to look at something from a fresh, critical perspective. It is an ongoing process of rethinking the paper: reconsidering your arguments, reviewing your evidence, refining your purpose, reorganizing your presentation, reviving stale prose.

But I thought revision was just fixing the commas and spelling?

Nope. That’s called proofreading. It’s an important step before turning your paper in, but if your ideas are predictable, your thesis is weak, and your organization is a mess, then proofreading will just be putting a band-aid on a bullet wound. When you finish revising, that’s the time to proofread. For more information on the subject, see our handout on [proofreading](#).

How about if I just reword things: look for better words, avoid repetition, etc.? Is that revision?

Well, that’s a part of revision called editing. It’s another important final step in polishing your work. But if you haven’t thought through your ideas, then rephrasing them won’t make any difference.

Why is revision important?

Writing is a process of discovery, and you don’t always produce your best stuff when you first get started. **So revision is a chance for you to look critically at what you have written to see:**

- if it’s really worth saying,
- if it says what you wanted to say, and
- if a reader will understand what you’re saying.

The process

What steps should I use when I begin to revise?

Here are several things to do. But don't try them all at one time. **Instead, focus on two or three main areas during each revision session:**

- Wait awhile after you've finished a draft before looking at it again. The Roman poet Horace thought one should wait nine years, but that's a bit much. A day—a few hours even—will work. When you do return to the draft, be honest with yourself, and don't be lazy. Ask yourself what you really think about the paper.
- As The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers puts it, "THINK BIG, don't tinker" (61). At this stage, you should be concerned with the large issues in the paper, not the commas.
- Check the focus of the paper: Is it appropriate to the assignment? Is the topic too big or too narrow? Do you stay on track through the entire paper?
- Think honestly about your thesis: Do you still agree with it? Should it be modified in light of something you discovered as you wrote the paper? Does it make a sophisticated, provocative point, or does it just say what anyone could say if given the same topic? Does your thesis generalize instead of taking a specific position? Should it be changed altogether? For more information visit our handout on [thesis statements](#).
- Think about your purpose in writing: Does your introduction state clearly what you intend to do? Will your aims be clear to your readers?

What are some other steps I should consider in later stages of the revision process?

- **Examine the balance within your paper:** Are some parts out of proportion with others? Do you spend too much time on one trivial point and neglect a more important point? Do you give lots of detail early on and then let your points get thinner by the end?
- **Check that you have kept 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 the topic sentences of each paragraph appropriately introduce what that paragraph is about? Would your paper work better if you moved some things around?
- **Check your information:** Are all your facts accurate? Are any of your statements misleading? Have you provided enough detail to satisfy readers' curiosity? Have you cited all your information appropriately?
- **Check your conclusion:** Does the last paragraph tie the paper together smoothly and end on a stimulating note, or does the paper just die a slow, redundant, lame, or abrupt death?

Whoa! I thought I could just revise in a few minutes

Sorry. You may want to start working on your next paper early so that you have plenty of time for revising. That way you can give yourself some time to come back to look at what you've written with a fresh pair of eyes. It's amazing how something that sounded brilliant the moment you wrote it can prove to be less-than-brilliant when you give it a chance to incubate.

But I don't want to rewrite my whole paper!

Revision doesn't necessarily mean rewriting the whole paper. Sometimes it means revising the thesis to match what you've discovered while writing. Sometimes it means coming up with stronger arguments to defend your position or coming up with 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 change the emphasis of your points. Sometimes it means adding or deleting material for balance or emphasis. And then, sadly, sometimes revision does mean trashing your first draft and starting from scratch. Better that than having the teacher trash your final paper.

But I work so hard on what I write that I can't afford to throw any of it away!

If you want to be a polished writer, then you will eventually find out that you can't afford NOT to throw stuff away. As writers, we often produce lots of material that needs to be tossed. The idea or metaphor or paragraph that I think is most wonderful and brilliant is often the very thing that confuses my reader or ruins the tone of my piece or interrupts the flow of my argument. Writers must be willing to sacrifice their favorite bits of writing for the good of the piece as a whole. In order to trim things down, though, you first have to have plenty of material on the page. One trick is not to hinder yourself while you are composing the first draft because the more you produce, the more you will have to work with when cutting time comes.

But sometimes I revise as I go

That's OK. Since writing is a circular process, you don't do everything in some specific order. Sometimes you write something and then tinker with it before moving on. But be warned: there are two potential problems with revising as you go. One is that if you revise only as you go along, you never get to think of the big picture. The key is still to give yourself enough time to look at the essay as a whole once you've finished. Another danger to revising as you go is that 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 hasn't yet made it to the page. 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 go about the process of revising? Any tips?

- Work from a printed copy; it's easier on the eyes. Also, problems that seem invisible on the screen somehow tend to show up better on paper.
- Another tip is to read the paper out loud. That's one way to see how well things flow.

- Remember all those questions listed above? Don't try to tackle all of them in one draft. Pick a few "agendas" for each draft so that you won't go mad trying to see, all at once, if you've done everything.
- Ask lots of questions and don't flinch from answering them truthfully. For example, ask if there are opposing viewpoints that you haven't considered yet.

Concerns

Whenever I revise, I just make things worse. I do my best work without revising

That's a common misconception that sometimes arises from fear, sometimes from laziness. The truth is, though, that except for those rare moments of inspiration or genius when the perfect ideas expressed in the perfect words in the perfect order flow gracefully and effortlessly from the mind, all experienced writers revise their work. I wrote six drafts of this handout. Hemingway rewrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times. If you're still not convinced, re-read some of your old papers. How do they sound now? What would you revise if you had a chance?

What can get in the way of good revision strategies?

Don't fall in love with what you have written. If you do, you will be hesitant to change it even if you know it's not great. Start out with a working thesis, and don't act like you're married to it. Instead, act like you're dating it, seeing if you're compatible, finding out what it's like from day to day. If a better thesis comes along, let go of the old one. Also, don't think of revision as just rewording. It is a chance to look at the entire paper, not just isolated words and sentences.

What happens if I find that I no longer agree with my own point?

If you take revision seriously, sometimes the process will lead you to questions you cannot answer, objections or exceptions to your thesis, cases that don't fit, loose ends or contradictions that just won't go away. If this happens (and it will if you think long enough), then you have several choices. You could choose to 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. Or 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 with no exceptions no matter what.

How do I get really good at revising?

The same way you get really good at golf, piano, or a video game—do it often. Take revision seriously, be disciplined, and set high standards for yourself. **Here are three more tips:**

- The more you produce, the more you can cut.
- The more you can imagine yourself as a reader looking at this for the first time, the easier it will be to spot potential problems.
- The more you demand of yourself in terms of clarity and elegance, the more clear and elegant your writing will be.

How do I revise at the sentence level?

Read your paper out loud, sentence by sentence, and 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).

Practical advice for ensuring that your sentences are alive:

- Use forceful verbs—replace long verb phrases with a more specific verb. For example, replace “She argues for the importance of the idea” with “She defends the idea.”
- Look for places where you’ve used the same word or phrase twice or more in consecutive sentences and 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 (with a subject followed by a verb, for example), then try using a different sentence pattern.
- Aim for precision in word choice. Don’t settle for the best word you can think of at the moment—use a thesaurus (along with a dictionary) to search for the word that says exactly what you want to say.
- Look for sentences that start with “It is” or “There are” and see if you can revise them to be more active and engaging.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout’s topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using.

Anson, Chris and Robert Schwegler. *The Longman Handbook for Writers and Readers*. 6th ed. New York: Longman, 2011.

- Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
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- "Tips & Tools." Writing Center, writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/.