

Writing Tip Sheet: The Writing Process: Revising

Revision is an ongoing process, often done over many drafts. It is a key to good writing. No one writes a perfect first draft. (Those who claim they do are either lying to us or just begging for a beating.) First drafts are made to be rewritten. This process allows you further exploration, development, and understanding of your paper.

When you revise you must not allow yourself to be too attached to what you have already written. Be receptive to cuts and changes. Be willing to let go of sentences, paragraphs, and even entire sections of your paper.

Approach your paper as readers, people unfamiliar with your ideas and style, might approach it. Try to put yourself in their position, ask yourself – are your ideas too abstract? Are your claims too general? Are your ideas presented in a haphazard or confusing manner?

It's not always easy to recognize these problems in your own writing. (After all, you know *exactly* what you want to say, you just have to remember that everyone else doesn't.) Below is a checklist you can use as you revise.

However, don't just check up on your writing yourself. Give it to others to read. Seek feedback from multiple people. This is what experienced writers do. They know listening to critical feedback is the best way to improve their work.

I) Revising versus editing

It is important to be aware that there is a difference between revising and editing.

To revise means to consider a paper at a “global” level. Revision may include:

- Evaluating a paper's focus. Possibly even changing it.
- Restructuring a paper, moving sections of the paper around.
- Adding or deleting entire sections.
- Providing more information, detail, or evidence. “Building out” paragraphs.
- Reconsidering the audience for the paper and measuring whether the paper speaks to that audience.

Editing usually happens later in the writing process and happens more at a sentence level. It may include:

- Correcting the wording of certain sentences.
- Attending to punctuation.
- Fixing spelling errors.
- Checking verb tenses or subject/verb and noun/pronoun agreement.

Fixing spelling errors when a paper needs to be completely refocused or restructured probably won't improve it much (and instructors frown upon this sort of thing). Make sure you have addressed more fundamental concerns before you start worrying about correcting technical errors.

II) Revision checklist

Evaluating Thesis & Focus

- Identify the thesis. Is it stated or unstated?
(an unstated thesis is where an author never comes out and explicitly states his/her position, but as the reader, you know exactly what it is.)
- If stated, is the position made clear in the introduction? If not, does this affect the focus of the essay?
- Is the thesis open or closed? If closed, does the thesis dictate the structure of the paper?
(An open thesis just states the overall claim. A closed thesis includes reasons for this claim.)
- Identify the main supporting points of the essay. Are they all connected to the thesis/focus?
- Is the argument appropriately balanced?
- Does the essay maintain focus or seem to go off on tangents?

Evaluating Organization

- Are the paper's reasons/supporting arguments organized in a logical manner (i.e., by order of importance, by logical connection)?
- If there is a closed thesis, does it control the development of the essay?
- Is it clear where one point ends and another begins? Are there clear topic sentences to introduce points?
- Are there effective transitions? Do all ideas connect smoothly? Does the essay flow?
- Is there an effective introduction? Does the opening grab your attention? Is the thesis stated clearly? Is there a single introductory paragraph or an introductory section?
- Is there an effective conclusion? Does the conclusion merely summarize what has already been said (ineffective)? Does it present a final thought that leaves the reader thinking?

Evaluating Evidence/Support

- What kind of evidence is presented? (Data/stats? Examples? Anecdotes? Personal experience? Case studies? Authoritative testimony? Descriptive information?) Is the evidence sufficient? Is there a broad enough spectrum of support? (Don't be satisfied with a single piece of evidence. Demand more.)

- Are Precedents and Antecedents clearly defined and expressed? Is the connection between the design and the Precedent and/or Antecedents clearly stated?
- Is there too much personal experience and not enough of other types of evidence?
- Is the evidence timely? Is the information presented the most up-to-date?
- Is the evidence credible? Is the expert testimony actually from experts? Is the magazine/web page source a legitimate, professional source?
- Is the evidence biased?
(Example: If the paper is a pro-gun essay, does all of the author's evidence come from the NRA, or has he/she included material from more objective sources?)
- Are there any places where more detail is needed?

Evaluating Style

- Is the essay formal or informal? Does it maintain this tone consistently throughout?
- Is the tone appropriate for the audience?
- Note the diction. Is the word choice appropriate? Consistent? Does the author use words correctly or does he/she seem to be forcing language?
- Is there design jargon/language that may not be clear to a general audience?
- Study the sentence structure. Is there a varied sentence structure? Are there any problems with sentence construction? Any awkwardness?
- Are there any technical errors? (Even a handful of technical errors give a paper an unprofessional feel.)
- Are there any places where clarity can be improved?
- Are there places where you are stating the same point again and again—or stretching out your language so as to take up more space, or using ten words when one would do?

Evaluating Ideas

Logical fallacies are errors in reasoning. They can ruin a paper's argument by alienating your reader or undercutting your credibility. A paper rife with logical fallacies may communicate to the reader that the author hasn't taken the time to give the topic his full attention or may not really understand the relevant issues. So, you want to relentlessly weed them out of your writing.

There are three main kinds of fallacies that you should avoid.

A) Fallacies that distract

- Ad hominem – Attacking the opposition or casting them in a questionable light in order to distract the reader from weaknesses in your argument. Often seen in political circles.
- Red Herring – Introducing a side issue, again to distract the reader.

Fallacies, continued.

B) Fallacies that twist data

- Statistical manipulation – Misrepresenting numbers. Selectively presenting information to give a skewed impression.
- Improper sampling – Drawing a conclusion based on a sample that is too small.
- Biased data/ignoring evidence – Presenting evidence from sources on only one side of an issue. Ignoring opposing arguments and support.
- Manipulative language – Using loaded words to influence your reader. Example: If arguing about abortion, instead of saying, “Every time a doctor performs an abortion,” you say “Every time a doctor murders a baby,” the reader will process these lines quite differently.

C) Fallacies that demonstrate weak reasoning skills

- Jumping to conclusions – Reaching a conclusion based on insufficient evidence.
 - Overgeneralizations – Similar to above. Overstating your position based on the evidence that you have.
 - Non sequitur – Reaching a conclusion that does not logically follow from the information previously presented.
 - Begging the question – Saying something is true just because you say it is true. Essentially failed to provide any support for a claim.
 - Slippery Slope – Claiming a first step will lead to a second step will lead to a third, without any evidence to prove this will happen. Examples: If we ban guns, we’ll be on the road to a police state. If we cut down this tree, soon we’ll have no trees left.
 - False Analogy – Making an inappropriate comparison.
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The above is **not** an exhaustive list, but it should provide a solid basis to strengthen your revision skills.

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| <p>For more about the writing process, see also Writing Center tip sheets <i>The Writing Process: An Overview</i> and <i>The Writing Process: Prewriting</i></p> |
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