

A Guide to Revising Your Writing

Effective revising is a crucial part of successful writing. Revising is a deliberate attempt to counteract the normal process of reading. In other words, we usually read for comprehension, so our brains tend to fill in confusing gaps or smooth over problematic typos. Careful revising, on the other hand, requires writers to read for detail and to be open to re-thinking and re-working crucial ideas. The following guide can help you refine your revising techniques.

Task Management: Writers need to make sure they understand what the assignment requires and what readers (whether professors or real-world colleagues) expect from the document; a portion of the revision process should be devoted to making sure that the paper fulfills these requirements and expectations. To improve your task management, ask yourself these questions:

- **What tasks does the assignment require?** Keep in mind that many assignments require more than one task, and that some tasks are more valued than others (for instance, "analyze" is usually considered more important than "summarize").
- **When is your paper due?** If you have plenty of time, use it not only to work on your paper, but also to take occasional breaks from it. Try to finish early so that you can give yourself a day or two to forget about your draft before returning to it. A rested mind may approach the draft with a fresh outlook. Before completion, you should ideally put your writing aside at least twice—once before the revision process, when you are re-organizing your ideas and structure, and once before the proofreading stage, when you are polishing and paying attention to details.
- **Who is your audience?** Peers, professor, professionals in the field? Different audiences read for different reasons and with different expectations. Make sure that you know what your audience is reading for and what they will expect from your writing.

Revision Strategies: Writers need to make sure that their arguments and/or recommendations are organized, developed, and well-supported. Here are some strategies to improve organization, clarity, focus, and other problems with development:

- **Read only your introduction and conclusion.** Do they agree with each other and the other sections of your paper? Do they *actually* say what you think they say? Are they focused on your specific claim, or are they vague, with abstract references to “throughout human history” rather than clear statements about your topic? Keep in mind that most writers discover what they really want to say as they are writing. Once you've figured it out, make sure you explain and support your main point consistently throughout the paper.
- **Isolate your thesis statement.** Read this thesis along with each topic sentence only. Do the topic sentences support the thesis? Are they orderly? Is there anything extraneous?
- **Review all source material.** Focus on each quote, paraphrase, summary, or synthesis. Did you provide enough evidence for your ideas? Does each source clearly relate to your argument? Did you introduce and interpret all source material? Is each source cited appropriately?
- **Make a reverse outline after you've written a complete draft.** A reverse outline breaks your paper into its components: thesis, main ideas, and evidence, arranged in the order in

which you present them in the paper. This technique highlights any potential structural problems. You might notice that you don't seem to have enough evidence for one of your main ideas, or that one of your thoughts seems out of place.

- **Play “devil's advocate” or “the naysayer.”** Many writers present only the evidence that supports their opinion on a topic, without acknowledging other possible positions. But a strong paper does not present evidence supporting only one side. If your readers are likely to be thinking about a counterargument that you never address, you may lose your readers' trust and support. Papers that consider counterarguments and then dismantle them show a willingness to be open-minded, comprehensive, and critical. Read over your paper for places where you could acknowledge an opposing position, and then explain the flaws in that position (and, thus, further support your argument). If you are unable to dismantle a reasonable counterargument to your claims, then you must concede its value while still justifying the importance of your own position. If you can think of no counterarguments to include anywhere in your paper, then you should ask yourself if your thesis is arguable or substantial.
- **Switch from “writer consciousness” to “reader consciousness.”** Remember, we have certain goals as writers—to be impressive, to prove that we know a lot about the subject, to mention things we find interesting—but pursuing those goals may sometimes interfere with what our readers' needs are. Try to detach yourself from what you've written by pretending that you are one of your potential readers. Why are you reading this paper, and what are you hoping to get out of it? What parts or qualities of the paper best help you to achieve that readerly goal? What parts seem showy, distracting, unclear, or unnecessary?
- **Trust your instincts and save only the good pieces.** Creative writers often refer to this as “killing your darlings.” Sometimes when reviewing our work, we can tell that something doesn't quite belong, even if we're not quite sure why. Perhaps it is off topic, not logically sound, using unnatural vocabulary, or trying too hard to impress. We may hesitate to cut these passages—because we want people to know how much hard work we did while researching, or because it took so long to come up with that precise wording, or because we think the detail is really interesting even though it's way off topic—but we must learn to listen to the nagging part of our minds that knows something doesn't quite fit. Do all your ideas relate back to the thesis? Is there anything that doesn't seem to fit? If so, you either need to either change your thesis to reflect the idea or cut the idea out.

The Bottom Line: Ask yourself if you're happy with your final product. Most writers are never 100% satisfied with what they've written. But if something about your paper is really bothering you, even if you're not quite sure why, trust your instincts—that's probably a good sign that some additional revision is needed.

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