
Revising: Cultivating a Critical Eye

Why and How to Revise

Most of us who compose on a computer understand revision as an ongoing, even constant process. Every time you hit the delete button, every time you cut and paste, every time you take out a comma or exchange one word for another, you're revising.

Real revision, however, is more than making a few changes here and there. Real revision requires that you open yourself up to the possibility that parts of your paper—even your entire paper—might need to be rethought, and rewritten.

Achieving this state of mind is difficult. First, you might be very attached to what you've written. You might be unwilling to change a word, let alone three or four paragraphs. Second, there's the matter of time: you might sense that the paper needs major work, but it's due tomorrow, or you have an exam in physics, or you're coming down with a cold and know that you need to sleep. Third, you might have difficulty understanding what, exactly, is wrong with your paper. Finally, you might simply be sick and tired of the

paper. How can you make another pass through it when exhaustion has you in its grip? Why should you be bothered with (or overwhelmed by) the process of revising?

Of course, we might convince you that revision is worth the extra effort simply by saying that revising a paper will help you achieve a better grade. A good reader can sense when a piece of writing has been thoroughly considered and reconsidered. This *consideration* (and here we mean the word in both of its meanings) is not lost on your professor and will be rewarded.

More important than grades, however, is the fact that revising your papers teaches you to be a better writer. Studies have shown again and again that the best way to learn to write is to rewrite. In the revision process, you improve your reading skills and your analytical skills. You learn to challenge your own ideas, thus deepening and strengthening your argument. You learn to find the weaknesses in your writing. You may even discover patterns of error or habits of organization that are undermining your papers.

Though revising takes time and energy, it also helps you become a more efficient writer down the road. If, for example, you have discovered through the revision process that you tend to bury your topic sentences in the middle of the paragraph, you can take this discovery with you as you draft your next paper. You are less likely to make that particular mistake again.

Perhaps we've answered the question "Why should I revise?" The next question, of course, is "How?" There are many different kinds of revising:

- **Large-scale revision.** Large-scale revision means looking at the entire paper for places where your thinking seems to go awry. You might need to provide evidence, define terms, or add an entirely new step to your reasoning. You might even decide to restructure or rewrite your paper completely if you discover a new idea that intrigues you, or a structure that seems to be more effective than the one you've been using.
- **Small-scale revision.** Small-scale revision needs to happen when you know that a certain part of your paper isn't working. Maybe the introduction needs work. Maybe one part of the argument seems weak. Once you've located the problem, you'll focus on revising that one section of your paper. When you're finished you'll want to reconsider your paper as a whole to make sure that your revisions work in the context of the entire paper.
- **Editing.** Too often students confuse editing with revision. They are not the same processes. *Editing* is the process of finding minor problems with a text—problems that might easily be fixed by deleting a word or sentence, cutting and pasting a paragraph, and so on. When

you edit, you're considering your reader. *You* might be happy with how you've written your paper, but will your reader find your paper clear, readable, interesting? How can you rewrite the paper so that it's clearer, more concise, and, most important of all, a pleasure to read?

The very best writers revise their writing in all the ways listed here. To manage these various levels of revision, it's very important that you get an early start on your papers so that you have time to make any substantive, large-scale revisions that might be needed. Good writers also understand that revision is an ongoing process, not necessarily something that you do only after your first draft is complete. You might find, for example, that you're stuck halfway through the first draft of your paper. You decide to take a look at what you have so far. As you read, you find that you've neglected to make a point that is essential to the success of your argument. You revise what you've written, making that point clear. In the end, you find that your block is gone. Why? Maybe it's gone because what was blocking you in the first place was a hole in your argument. Or maybe it's gone because you gave your brain a break. In any case, stopping to revise in the middle of the drafting process often proves wise.

Developing Objectivity

We have yet to address the matter of how a writer knows what she should revise. Developing a critical eye is perhaps the most difficult part of the revision process. But having a critical eye makes you a better writer, reader, and thinker. So it's worth considering carefully how you might learn to see your own work with the objectivity that is essential to successful self-criticism.

The first step in gaining objectivity is to get some distance from your work. If you've planned your writing process well, you'll have left yourself a day or two to take a break. If you don't have this luxury, even an hour of video games or a walk over to the printing center to pick up a hard copy of your draft might be enough to clear your head. Many writers find that their mind keeps working on their papers even while their attention is turned elsewhere. When they return to their work, they bring with them a fresh perspective. They also bring a more open, more detached mind.

When you return to your paper, the first thing that you'll want to do is consider whether or not the paper as a whole meets your (and your professor's) expectations. Read the paper through without stopping (don't get hung up on one troublesome paragraph). Then ask yourself these questions:

- **Did I fulfill the assignment?** If the professor gave you instructions for this assignment, reread them and then ask yourself whether or

not you've addressed all of the matters you're expected to address. Does your paper stray from the assignment? If it does, have you worked to make your argument relevant, or are you coming out of left field? If the professor hasn't given you explicit instructions for this paper, you'll still want to take a moment to consider what the professor expects. What books has the professor asked you to read? What position do they take toward your topic? Has the professor emphasized a certain method of scholarship (feminism, Marxism, etc.)? Has he said anything to you about research methods in his discipline? Does your paper seem to fit into the conversation that the professor has been carrying on in class? Have you written something that other students would find relevant and interesting?

- **Did I say what I intended to say?** This is perhaps the most difficult question you will ask yourself in the revision process. Many of us think that we have indeed said what we intended to say. When we read our papers, we're able to fill in any holes that might exist in our arguments with the information that we have in our minds. The problem is that our readers sometimes don't have this information in mind. They fall into the holes of our arguments and can't get out. It's very important, therefore, to think carefully about what you've said—and to think just as carefully about what you haven't said. Ask yourself these questions: Was I clear? Do I need to define my terms? Has every stage of the argument been articulated clearly? Have I made adequate transitions between my ideas? Is my logic solid? Is it *there*, for all to see? If the answer to any of these questions is no, you will want to revise your draft.
- **What are the strengths of my paper?** In order to develop a critical eye, it's just as important to know when you've written well as it is to know when you've written poorly. It helps, therefore, to make a list of what you think you've done well in your draft. It's also helpful to pick out your favorite or strongest paragraph. When you find a good paragraph, sentence, or idea, think about why it's good. You'll not only be gaining an understanding of what it means to write well, but you'll also be giving yourself a pat on the back—something that's very important to do in the revision process.
- **What are the weaknesses of my paper?** Looking for weaknesses isn't as fun as looking for strengths, but it's necessary to the revision process. Again, try to make a list of what you haven't done well in this paper. Your list should be as specific as you can make it. Instead of writing, "Problems with paragraphs" you might say, "Problems with unity in my paragraphs," or even more specific, "Problems with the transitions

between paragraphs 3 and 4, and 12 and 13.” Also force yourself to determine which paragraph (or sentence) you like least in the paper. Figure out why you don’t like it, and work to make it better. Then go back through your paper and look for others like it.

Analyzing Your Work

If you’ve been considering the strengths and weaknesses of your paper, you’ve already begun to analyze your work. The process of analysis involves breaking down an idea or an argument into its parts and evaluating those parts on their merits. When you analyze your own paper, then, you’re breaking down that paper into its parts and asking yourself whether or not these parts support the paper as you envision it.

The following checklist reiterates our earlier advice. Use it to analyze your whole paper, or use it to help you figure out what has gone wrong with a particular part of your work.

› Consider your introduction

- If you’re writing a research paper, does the introduction place your argument in an ongoing conversation?
- If you’re not writing a research paper, does the introduction establish context?
- Does the introduction define all of your key terms?
- Does the introduction draw the reader in?
- Does the introduction lead the reader clearly to your thesis?

› Consider your thesis

- Does the thesis say what you want it to say?
- Does the thesis make a point worth considering? Does it answer the question, “So what?”
- Does the thesis provide the reader with some sense of the paper’s structure?
- Does the paper deliver what your thesis promises to deliver?

› Consider your structure

- Make an outline of the paper you’ve just written. Does this outline reflect your intentions?
- Does this outline make sense, or are there gaps in the logic—places where you’ve asked your readers to make leaps for which they haven’t been prepared?
- Is each point in the outline adequately developed?
- Is each point equally developed? (That is, does your paper seem balanced overall?)

- Is each point relevant? Interesting?
- Underline the thesis sentence and all of the topic sentences. Then cut and paste them together to form a paragraph. Does this paragraph make sense?

➤ **Consider your paragraphs**

- Does each paragraph have a topic sentence that clearly controls it?
- Are the paragraphs internally coherent?
- Are the paragraphs externally coherent? (That is, have you made adequate transitions between paragraphs? Is each paragraph clearly related to the thesis?)

➤ **Consider your argument and its logic**

- Have you really presented an argument, or is your paper merely a series of observations, a summary?
- Do you see any holes in your argument, or do you find it convincing?
- Have you dealt fairly with the opposition? Or have you neglected to mention other possible arguments concerning your topic for fear that they might undermine your work?
- Have you supplied ample evidence for your arguments?

➤ **Consider your conclusion**

- Is the conclusion appropriate, or does it introduce a completely new idea?
- Does the conclusion sum up the main point of the paper?
- Does the conclusion leave the reader with something to think about?
- Does the language resonate, or does it fall flat? Have you inflated the language ridiculously to try to pad a conclusion that is empty and ineffective?