



REVISION

Myths

There is a myth that great writers just sit down at the typewriter, or hunch over a café table, and write brilliantly just by recording what comes to mind. Another myth is that a student can produce a good essay in a single draft composed in the hours before the paper is due. In truth, good writing always involves revision—which is a process of rethinking your ideas, honing your argument, and finding new ways to say more precisely what you mean.

Levels of Revision: Ideas Before Sentences and Mechanics

Revision can take place on different levels and at various times during the process of writing a paper. Sometimes students mistakenly think of revision only as fixing punctuation, doing a spell-check and a quick read-through. While you must do this type of editing before you hand in a paper, this is revision on its most elementary level. Far more important is the revision of ideas and substantial stylistic revision.

Such revision often involves developing ideas in more detail, pulling in more evidence, taking analysis one step further, sharpening an introduction, and reorganizing sentences in a paragraph or paragraphs in a paper. It involves shifting your focus, changing your emphasis, adjusting the tone in your writing. Revision also entails deleting material that no longer appears germane to your argument, and incorporating new material. Don't be afraid to throw away a chunk of writing and rewrite it from scratch. This can be painful to do when so much work and energy can go into writing even a single sentence, but a paragraph or section of a paper that isn't working can be a sign that there is a gap in your argument or lack of clarity in your thinking. True revision can help strengthen your writing by improving your thought.

Using an Outline

One way to revise your writing substantially and effectively is to use an outline. An outline is a point-by-point summary of the ideas of your paper. A good way to create an outline is to write down all of your essential ideas in the form of complete sentences. Using full sentences helps you express your ideas precisely. Merely writing headings comprised of a word or phrase is too vague if you are trying to clarify your thoughts because an outline isn't just a list of the things in your essay. An outline ought to reveal the *structure* of the essay by stating clearly and concisely the thesis, the argument for that thesis, how one thought or line of reasoning leads to another, and how the parts of the argument work together to give the reader a reason for believing that the thesis has merit.

As you look at your outline, ask yourself if this condensed version of your paper clearly expresses your central idea. You can judge the development of your argument by checking how easily and successfully you were able to restate the main point of each part of your argument or paragraph. You should also check to see that each point you make contributes to your argument by advancing your line of thinking, presenting evidence, or interpreting data. As you look at your paper in light of your outline, don't be afraid to go back and cut sections that are redundant or don't fit. Your paper may be shorter, but it will also be better because your focus will be

clearer. Just as often, however, outlines reveal gaps—missing evidence, fuzzy arguments—as well as redundancies and irrelevancies. (For more advice on how to use outlining, see the Writing Center's handout "Outlines.")

Polishing Your Prose

While revising prose is important, don't restrict your revision to checking the clarity of individual sentences. Remember, there's no point in spending a lot of time refining your sentences if your ideas are sloppy and disorganized, and if you're going to end up cutting those sentences once you've straightened out what you want to say.

After you've revised your ideas and argument, you can polish your prose to insure that you give your ideas clear, strong articulation. To help yourself find problems in your prose, read your writing out loud. For some reason, you are much more likely to notice awkward passages in your own writing when you read it out loud than when you read it silently. This holds true even with writing that you've just produced. Better yet, have someone else read what you have written out loud while you take notes for revision based on what you hear.

Re-seeing Your Writing

If you are having trouble revising, there are a few strategies for reading your paper objectively and critically. First, if you have time, try to set part or all of your paper aside for a while—a few hours, or even a day or two. When you come back to what you've written, you will read it with a fresher eye. When you are knee-deep in writing, it is easy to be deceived into thinking that your writing is clear. It may be that your ideas are clear in your mind but haven't been well expressed in your writing—and you won't be able to recognize this situation without some distance. Reading your writing after having set it aside is more like reading someone else's writing, and it is easier, therefore, to spot the problems.

You can also show your paper (or bothersome sections of it) to someone else, and ask her to tell you what she doesn't understand. These friendly readers don't have to do anything more complicated than that. As long as your readers aren't telling you how to revise your writing or making changes for you, you are not violating the honor code by having them point out what's not yet clear in your paper (mid-terms and take-home exams excepted, of course).

Proofreading

After you've done the major work of revising your paper, you will need to proofread it. Even an incisive, well-argued paper can be marred by careless mechanical errors. Each of us has her personal writing foibles, so there may be specific mechanical and stylistic problems you want to look for as you proofread your prose. Some common problems to watch out for, for example, are wordiness and inappropriate use of the passive voice. Become aware of the sorts of grammatical errors *you* tend to make and be particularly careful about eliminating those before you consider your paper finished. Avoid depending entirely on computer programs that check spelling or grammar. The computer will only catch some errors; if you spell *their* as *thier*, for example, the program will catch the error, but it won't catch *there* when you meant *their* because that is a correctly spelled word (although it may be wrong in the context of your sentence). Grammar checkers are also subject to flaws, and too often encourage writers to simplify their prose. At least for the time being, computer programs cannot replace the skills of an able editor. In a related vein, avoid using a computer thesaurus because such programs offer limited choices completely out of context. If you need to use a thesaurus, use a book instead, and double-check definitions of the words you are considering in a good dictionary. Finally, remember that while proofreading can (in principle) be left to the last minute, real revision cannot.

Tutors at the Writing Center will be happy to help you work on substantial revision, including helping you review your thesis and argument and cut clutter from your prose; they will help you diagnose nagging grammatical problems and provide grammar and usage instruction. Tutors will not, however, proofread or copyedit your paper for you.

Related Writing Center Handouts

Outlines

Abstracts

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