Revising Drafts

“Rewriting is the essence of writing well—where the game is won or lost.”
—William Zinsser

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.

Why is revision important?

Writing is a process of discovering, 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
1. if it’s really worth saying
2. if it says what you wanted to say
3. if there’s anything more that you might venture to say
4. if there’s anything that might be said more clearly and forcefully

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.

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 and aligned them properly, then rephrasing them won’t make any difference.
THE REVISION PROCESS

What steps should I use when I begin to revise?

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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?

4. 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?

5. Think again about how you’ve foregrounded your argument. Does your introduction clearly indicate what you intend to do? Does it establish a context, address a problem of interpretation, and launch the essay with its thesis? Does it draw the reader in?

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

1. 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?

2. Check that you have kept your promises to your readers: Does your paper follow through with what the thesis promises? Do you support all the claims in your thesis? Is the tone and formality of language appropriate for your audience?

3. 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?

4. 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?

5. Check your conclusion: Does the last paragraph tie the paper together in a memorable way and end on a stimulating note, or does the paper die a slow, redundant, lame, or abrupt death?
How do I make my expository prose come alive?

1. 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.”

2. 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.

3. 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 personal integrity in Huck Finn,” would be much better this way, “Huck Finn repeatedly addresses the issue of personal integrity.”

4. 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 introductory clauses—i.e., beginning with a subordinate clause rather than the main clause.

5. Aim for precision in word choice. Don’t always 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.

6. Look for sentences that start with “It is” or “There are” and mark through them with a heavy black marker and swear that in the future you will use such constructions only in the most desperate cases.

7. Don’t avoid a rhetorical flourish (simile, metaphor, analogy, allusion, etc.) that strikes you as appropriate to the occasion and helpful to your argument, but don’t rely too heavily—or even primarily—on rhetorical flourishes, either.

How do I expedite the process of revising? Any general tips?

1. Work from hardcopy; it’s easier on the eyes. Also, problems that seem invisible on the screen somehow tend to show up better on paper.

2. Read the paper aloud, sentence by sentence. That’s one way to see how well things flow. Peter Elbow offers useful advice in Writing with Power: “Look for places where you stumble or get lost in the middle of a sentence. These are obvious awkwardnesses 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” (135).

3. 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 do everything at once.

4. 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.
MORE QUALMS & QUERIES

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

But I don’t have time for revising.
Of course you won’t if you start your paper the day before it is due. So in the future please, please start early. 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 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. This handout has gone through numerous revisions. Hemingway rewrote the last page of A Farewell to Arms thirty-nine times. If you’re still not convinced, reread some of your old papers. How do they sound now? What would you revise if you had a chance?

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 trash 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 stuff 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. A writing teacher once told my class to “Kill your babies.” Sorry for the grim image, but she meant that writers must be willing to sacrifice their favorite bits of writing for the good of the piece as a whole. In order to trim, though, you 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 just revise 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.

**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

**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 as if you’re dating it, seeing if you’re compatible, finding out what it’s like in the morning. If a better-looking (i.e., more compelling) thesis comes along, dump the old one. Don’t think of revision as just rewording. It’s a chance to look at the entire paper, not just isolated words and sentences.

**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. Remember these three things:

1. The more you produce, the more you can cut.
2. 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.
3. The more you demand of yourself in terms of clarity and elegance, the more clear and elegant your writing will be.