

## Revising Your Rough Draft

One of the most frequent complaints of university professors is that students too often submit as final papers writing which is at best a first draft. They are not so much disappointed with students as they are frustrated by what they see as a failed opportunity. If the student had just set aside more time to revise, the final paper would have improved dramatically.

Most students think of revision as an eleventh-hour exercise, a quick encounter with a spell checker a few minutes before the paper is turned in. In reality, **professional writers dedicate fully 50% of their time and effort to the revision process.** That means that when working with a deadline, the revision process needs to start several days before the paper is submitted.

(For help in creating a timeline that will allow you enough time to revise, see  "Overcoming Writer's Block")

### Make multiple passes over your writing

Think of the revision as happening in several discrete passes over the writing. In each revision of the paper, focus on a different kind of concern. Remember, "revision" means literally to "see again" and that's what you are trying to accomplish by coming back to the paper repeatedly over several days, each time with a fresh perspective. Paradoxically, this way of thinking about revision—as multiple passes—is liberating. It removes much of the stress connected with catching or fixing everything at the same time.

Practicing deep rather than superficial revision teaches you a tremendous amount about the relationship between words and ideas. Indeed, it is the only way to move from writing adequately to writing well, which is the mark of a successful professional in any field.

Try this three-part approach on your next writing assignment and see if you are not more satisfied with the work you turn in:



### First reading: ORGANIZATION

Underline or highlight the topic sentence in each paragraph. (If you discover you don't have a topic sentence, write one!)

1. Read through only the topic sentences in your paper, or block these into a second document on your word processor.
  - a) Does each sentence logically follow the one preceding it?
  - b) Do the topic sentences form a reasonable mini-essay in themselves?
  - c) Move ideas—whole paragraphs, sentences, parts of text—around like blocks to improve ORGANIZATION.
2. To insure overall CONTINUITY among paragraphs, tell your reader what point you're discussing, what you'll talk about next, etc. You may need to write some new sections, transition sentences or whole paragraphs. Make navigation within the essay easy for the reader.

## Second reading: PARAGRAPHS AND SENTENCES

Take one paragraph at a time and read it out loud. Then ask yourself:

1. Does each sentence in the paragraph refer to the central idea stated in the topic sentence? Throw out **IRRELEVANT SENTENCES** or move them to a better location.
2. Look at the **LENGTH OF THE PARAGRAPH** on the page. If a paragraph is short, see if you've left questions unanswered; develop your ideas further. If it's too long, see if you can break it up into two or more shorter paragraphs.
3. Does each sentence follow the preceding one logically? Do you give your readers clues (words such as thus, therefore, first, because, but, etc.) to help them follow your thoughts? Rearrange sentences and add **TRANSITIONS** if necessary.
4. Do your sentences sound dull because they're too **SHORT**? Do they sound complex because they're **LONG**? Combine some; break others up into simple sentences. Variety in sentence length makes your writing more interesting to read.
5. Do you **REPEAT** the same words too often? Do you use words you don't need? Omit **NEEDLESS WORDS** and search the thesaurus for useful synonyms. Be sure that words convey what you mean.
6. Circle all **VERBS**. Change passive voice to active voice. Search for fresh, powerful verbs. For example, change "Signs were seen by..." to "Witnesses detected...."
7. Read each sentence in the paragraph aloud to recognize **ERRORS IN GRAMMAR, SPELLING, AND PUNCTUATION**. Correct these mistakes, as well as typos.

## Third reading: CONTENT

Ask a friend, your professor, or TA to read your paper and give you feedback. Then ask yourself:

1. Do you **BELIEVE** what you've written? Do you **UNDERSTAND** your own ideas and your reasons? If necessary, reconsider your thesis or discuss your ideas with your professor.
2. Does every paragraph, sentence, and word serve to **DEVELOP YOUR THESIS**? Speak **SIMPLY** and clearly to your reader. Edit out irrelevancies.
3. Have you documented with references and footnotes all of your quotations? Made sure not to use too many quotes? Confirmed that your final draft is clean and easy to read? Check your **STYLEBOOK** for proper form.