



Revising your rough draft

University professors have voiced that students too often submit final papers that are at best a first draft. They are not disappointed with students, but rather frustrated by what they see as a missed opportunity. If the student had set aside more time to revise, the final paper would have improved dramatically.

Revising takes times

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 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 our “Overcoming Writer’s Block” handout.

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.” By coming back to the paper repeatedly over several days, you see it with a fresh perspective each time. Thinking about revision this way—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 more satisfied with the work you turn in: organization, paragraphs & sentences, content.

First reading: ORGANIZATION

Underline or highlight the topic sentence in each paragraph. If you discover you don’t have a topic sentence, write one! Read through only the topic sentences in your paper, or block these into a second document in your word processor. Does each sentence logically follow the one preceding it? Do the topic sentences form a reasonable mini-essay in themselves? Move ideas—whole

paragraphs, sentences, parts of text—around like blocks to improve the organization.

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: 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.

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.

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. 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.

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. Circle all verbs. Change passive voice to active voice. Search for fresh, powerful verbs. For example, change "Signs were seen by..." to "Witnesses detected...."

Read each sentence in the paragraph aloud to recognize typos as well as errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Correct these mistakes.

Third reading: CONTENT

Ask a friend, your professor, or TA to read your paper and give you feedback. Then ask yourself: 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. Does every paragraph, sentence, and word serve to develop your thesis? Speak simply and clearly to your reader. Edit out irrelevancies.

Have you documented with references and footnotes all of your quotations? Have you made sure not to use too many quotes? Did you check that your final draft is clean and easy to read? Check your stylebook for proper form.

