What is Revision? What does it involve?

Revision involves returning to an earlier piece of writing and making improvements or corrections. As you have probably all heard, writing is a process, so the revision portion of this process can literally be endless. For most people, though, revision is simply what happens between a rough draft and a final draft.

Some basic elements of academic writing that can be addressed during revision include: organization, development, grammar, syntax, cohesion, mechanics (punctuation and spelling), and clarity (among others).

Be careful not to confuse this inclusive definition of revision with the rather limited concepts of “editing” or “proofreading.” While editing/proofreading clearly has a place in the writing process, it is usually a final step taken when all other elements are under control. Most writers use this final step to check for typing errors, unintentional repetition, or mistakes that occurred during the actual re-working of content during true revision.

Tips and Techniques for the Revision Process:

Start smart –do adequate research and pre-writing. This usually results in a stronger first draft and helps you avoid much of the major revision those who skip this step will need down the line.

Be sure to read all teacher comments and ask if you do not understand what something means. The teacher took the time to write, underline, circle, highlight, etc. You need to be sure to address all of these items. Nothing is more irritating to instructors than seeing mistakes repeated or remaining after they have already commented on them.

Work early; work often. Don’t leave all the drafting and revising until the night before (or the morning of). Try to work in chunks. This helps reduce the stress of working on a project and it also gives you a chance to let your ideas evolve. Best of all, each time you return to a paper after taking a break, you can view it with fresh eyes. Reacquaint yourself with the paper by reading it aloud.
Consider **outlining**. Do you have a clear thesis? Are main points clearly identified and supported. Think about the sequence of your ideas. If need be, turn your paper over and rough out your main ideas. Note which points are main ideas and which are supporting details. Notice which main points are lacking support or clarity. If you didn’t pre-write, this may be especially important. Actually putting your paper into outline form will make development issues especially clear.

Check and re-check **your thesis statement**. Ask a friend to read through your draft and underline your thesis statement. If she can’t find it, perhaps it won’t be clear to others either. (Remember that the most common location for a thesis statement is at the very end of the introduction.) Once you are sure your thesis statement is clear and obvious, double-check to be sure it matches your paper. An argumentative essay, for example, must contain an arguable thesis (that is, a thesis statement that reasonable people could disagree about).

Think about your **organization of content**. One technique is to work with a partner. Cut your entire essay apart into individual paragraphs and have your partner try to figure out the order. This really helps you see whether the progression of ideas and transitions are logical and successful. This same activity can be done with individual sentences within a single paragraph.

Be sure all **the components of your essay** are present. One idea is to get out some crayons and color code: red for the introduction, green for your first main point and all supporting points, orange for your second main point and support, blue for your conclusion, and so on. You can choose to color blocks of your text to see how balanced (or unbalanced) your essay is, or you can underline sentences or parts of sentences to be sure your ideas are grouped according to their function.

Check each **paragraph**. Every paragraph should have a topic sentence and support. One strategy is to note in the left margin a short sentence or group of words that expresses the main idea of the paragraph. After completing this for every paragraph, move to the right-hand margin and note the purpose or function of each sentence in the paragraph (i.e. support, examples, etc.) Any sentences that don’t serve a clear purpose should be addressed. This can help you see that what you had intended to be the main idea perhaps isn't really what you have written or that some of your sentences are unnecessary/unrelated.

Check your **sentences**. All writers have their own typical sentence-level issues, but there are some common problems to watch for. Look out for sentences that begin with just “This” and a verb and modify them so that it is always clear what “this” refers to. Likewise, watch for sentences beginning with “There is/There are” to be certain the number agrees with the subject that follows. Also check to be sure that all sentences are complete independent clauses (that is, be sure that they are not fragments). Watch for subordinators like “because,” “although,” “while,” “when,” and so on. If a sentence begins with one of these words, it needs to be followed by a comma and attached to another sentence (independent clause).

Check your **transitions**. Avoid using only single-word transitions, especially simplistic ones like “first,” “next,” and “finally.” Try to keep in mind the broader purpose of transitions: to link the previous idea to the next idea. Experiment with doing this using transitional phrases or whole sentences. Ask a friend to read through your draft and highlight any places where it “doesn’t flow” well. Work on integrating appropriate transitions in these areas (or consider moving or omitting sentences or content that does not fit well).
After you’ve completed one draft, leave it for a while (at least for a few hours if not a whole day). Then, return to the paper and, without looking, think about who your audience is and what the content of the paper is. Jot down a few quick notes. Next, try to write a new introduction for your paper without looking at your old version. Take a break and then try to write a new conclusion without checking your previous one. Many students are surprised to find they prefer these new introductions and conclusions better because they are a better, more thoughtful fit for their papers.

Always double-check your documentation, avoiding plagiarism in all forms: missing citations, missing quotation marks, and improperly handled summaries and paraphrases. Check each and every in-text citation to make sure all elements are covered (typically author name, page number, year, etc. in various combinations). Be sure you have included your Works Cited List, Reference List, or Bibliography. Be certain these are alphabetized and properly formatted according to the documentation style you are using. Keep a model on hand for easy reference. Also, do a quick check to be sure every source mentioned in the paper also appears in the reference list.

**Punctuation** gets us all from time to time. Check for your most frequent errors (or, if you don’t know what your most frequent errors are, check for things like comma splices that many people struggle with.) Set up an appointment with your writing instructor or a writing center consultant to find out what the actual rules are for whatever mistakes you make most frequently.

Grammar isn’t everything, but it is something. **Grammar revision** should be one of your last steps –after you are sure that the text you have is the text you want. Go through and check for errors, of course, but also look at your sentence structures. Are they all the same? Try adding some variety. Is every sentence the same length? Sometimes a single short sentence can create real impact. Good editing strategies include reading through your entire paper out loud or reading your paper backward from last line to first.

**Ownership** of the paper means taking responsibility for the final version. Do not depend on the Writing Center, your best friend, or even your instructor to “guarantee” your paper is the best it can be. All feedback you receive needs to be processed and considered by you. Then you can decide what, if any, changes to make.
Things to Avoid when Revising or Drafting in General:

Don’t blow the obvious! Read instructor’s comments carefully and always refer back to your assignment sheet to be sure you are answering the assignment.

Avoid being overly wordy or indirect because you are trying to sound “smart.” Impressive words and lengthy sentences impress no one if the meaning of your ideas is not clear. When in doubt, look away from your paper (turn it over if you must) and pretend to “tell a friend” what you mean to say. Often this everyday language is more clear and concise—and more effective. Be judicious in your use of the thesaurus function. Always cross-check unfamiliar words to be sure the meaning you intend is what is most common. Use a good quality dictionary to be aware of collocation and connotations.

Avoid getting too attached to any wording, phrases, paragraphs, etc. Remember the goal is to support/prove your thesis. Sometimes you have to sacrifice a paragraph you love for the good of the paper.

Don’t forget to include counterarguments. Watch any political ad these days from a candidate you don’t support and see how often you find yourself saying, “Wait—that’s not right! That’s only part of the story!” Without counterarguments included and addressed, your argumentative essay becomes nothing more than one-sided propaganda.

Don’t proofread or edit before actually revising the whole paper.

Frequent Teacher Comments on Papers:

"develop/elaborate"
"clarify."
“watch your coherence in both sentences and paragraphs”
“be sure to include conclusion sentences”
“be careful with informality in tone”
“need more sentence variety”

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