

Revising and Editing

*The beautiful part of writing is that you don't have
to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon.*

Robert Cormier

Writing is really more about revising than about writing. Revising is such an essential aspect of writing that it warrants special consideration here. Seldom, if ever, do any of us write a first draft and then feel that we are done with a written assignment. Written material is reworked, reorganized, reworded, removed, and rewritten before it really starts to make sense. How you write and subsequently revise a paper can be a very individual process. Some people like to get out ideas quickly, without much attention to detail or organization, and then take the time to rework it into a coherent argument. Others prefer to write more deliberately, taking time and thought with each sentence, even each word, and then spend less time going back over their work. Your approach to the first draft will inform how you end up revising. Nevertheless, there are a few general guidelines that are applicable to any writing style that are worth sharing here.

Everyone can benefit from revising. We are increasingly accustomed to seeing or doing something once and then moving on. We watch a television show and then turn the television off; we pick up a newspaper and move quickly from one article to the next; our nightly news is chopped up into increasingly smaller pieces. Writing is different. We need to spend time with the material, think it through, revisit it a number of times, and grapple with the ideas before we can expect to have anything close to a finished work. It is always worth spending this time, even if we are not used to it.

Rewriting serves at least two complementary purposes. The first is obvious: rewriting improves your writing by making sure that you are paying attention to key

elements of writing, such as content, organization, and style. The second may be less obvious: rewriting helps to clarify your thinking on a subject. It is often the very act of writing, of putting thoughts down on paper, that challenges us to make sure we understand something. And in the act of rewriting, we make sure that the arguments are clear, well supported, and presented in an organized manner.

There are a variety of ways to go about rewriting and one way is not better than another. One strategy for rewriting is to go about it in two phases. In the first phase, pay attention to the major elements of writing: What is the argument? Is it stated clearly? Is the argument well structured? Is the paper well organized? Do the ideas flow easily? Is the argument well supported? Am I using the best evidence? In other words, this is the time to pay attention to such broad issues as argument, content, cohesiveness, and organization. The second, narrower phase occurs once the major elements are in place. Go back and consider some of the details, including elements of grammar, word choice, spelling, and the like. This two-phase approach emphasizes that rewriting does not mean simply going over the paper for spelling mistakes. Rewriting involves looking at what you have written and making sure you are saying what you want to say.

Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind as you revise your own papers:

- Consider going through at least three drafts as you revise; four to five drafts are not unreasonable.
- Try reading your paper aloud. Sometimes listening to your written work is the clearest way to spot problem areas, difficulties with logic, and grammar mistakes.

- Do not be afraid to make major changes to your work. While sometimes it is hard to discard hard-won sentences or reorganize a beloved passage, keep in mind that your ultimate goal is to put together a coherent, well-articulated paper. If a word, sentence, or passage is not working, or if the organization does not serve the argument, a major change may be just the thing.
- Print out your paper. In the editing and revising process, it is often useful to see several pages at once and not be confined to what fits within the limited space of a computer screen.
- Be aware of and address your writing weaknesses. By the time you reach college, you hopefully have had enough feedback on your writing to at least have some idea of your strengths and weaknesses. Knowing your weaknesses and rewriting with an eye towards these is very helpful. If you know you have trouble with transitions, ask yourself whether each paragraph flows easily to the next. If you have been told that you rely too heavily on secondary sources, ask yourself if you have used and cited the best primary evidence. In other words, know and explicitly address problems that you know you have.
- Realize that your computer spell-check will not catch all of your spelling mistakes. For example, it will not pick up words that are misspelled but become other words, such as is/if or deaf/dear. It also does not do a very good job with technical words, sometimes even automatically changing a correct word to something entirely inappropriate.

- Come at your paper with a fresh eye. The word “revise” after all means to see again, and it is hard to see something again without a bit of time between drafts. This often means leaving your paper for a day or two and then returning it. Of course, to do this means completing one or two drafts well in advance of the due date. While this may be difficult, such planning often pays off in terms of being able to get some distance from your work.
- Seek help and advice from others, including professors, teaching assistants and peers. Make use of the Writing Center as well.