

Writing a Research Paper

Revision

The editing and rewriting process

We've been telling you all along to be critical whenever you read and reading over your draft is no exception. You hopefully turned off your "Critic" long enough to generate enough raw material in the last step; now turn it back on. The point is not that what you wrote was bad, but let's face it, not even professional writers tap out perfectly thought-out prose the first time at the keyboard. So now is the time to become your own audience and evaluate your work just as we told you to analyze texts while researching. Revision is RE-VISION. After letting your draft sit for a few days, look at your work with a new critical eye, critical for what doesn't work and what does.

Before you go over the heuristic we've devised below to help you revise, remember that revision is not proofreading. Revision deals with underlying issues and content while proofreading deals largely with surface details and presentation. Like a funnel, you have to start at "higher order" concerns (how the essay and individual paragraphs hold together) and then move down to "lower order" concerns (sentences, word choice, mechanics).

ASK YOURSELF . . .

- Does your title give readers a good idea of what's to come? (Have you even come up with one yet? Remember, "Assignment #3" is not a title!)
- Is your thesis statement or research question clearly stated?
- Is there enough lead-in in the introduction to establish the importance of and context for the statement/question? Is there too much? Too little? By the end of the introduction, is it clear to the audience what kind of material will follow? If so, are these expectations fulfilled, that is, do you follow through?
- Is it clear where your introduction ends and body begins and where the body ends and the conclusion begins? In other words, are your paragraph indents meaningful?
- At the same time, are there transitions between all sections and paragraphs to create flow and unity?
- Does each body paragraph have a topic sentence? If you took your thesis/question and all your topic sentences, would that correspond to what you want to say in your paper? If not, do you need to revise your thesis/question or re-examine your subpoints?

- Do the topic sentences (1) make a connection back with the thesis/question, (2) establish a link with the previous paragraph's content (perhaps the chronological relationship, any comparisons/contrasts?) and (3) give enough information that the audience could guess where a particular paragraph's development would lead?
- With or without a formal concluding sentence, do you somewhere near the end of each paragraph remind readers why you are saying what you are saying by moving back up to abstract, general terms?
- Does the order of paragraphs make sense? (e.g., maybe the transitions seem forced because they aren't in the right order)
- Are your paragraphs too short (say, fewer than 4 sentences) or too long (longer than about 8)? Is there some combining or separating of issues that needs to take place? Or do you simply need to generate more content or delete irrelevant material?
- Are your examples reliable, representative, and convincing? Are there enough of them (or too many) to develop the main idea of the paragraph in the word count you have available?
- Are your sources convincing? Is there enough balance between your own insights and expert opinions?
- Is anything that should be referenced, referenced?
- Are all sources and direct quotations explained or have you left them standing on their own?
- Has anything that goes off topic or is not essential (given your word limit) been cut? (TIP: whenever you know you have to cut something but you're finding it hard to do, cut and paste it in a separate file so that you feel it hasn't been obliterated. In a couple of weeks, you'll probably go back and wonder why you were so attached to the passage in the first place!)
- Does the conclusion say something different from your introduction? Does it leave a good lasting impression or is it wishy-washy?

As the folks at Ashland University's Writing Center put it, there are 4 basic actions that will occur during the revisions you now hopefully plan to make:

ADD. Insert needed words, sentences, and paragraphs. If your additions require new content, return to the idea-gathering techniques.

CUT. Get rid of whatever goes off the topic or repeats what has already been said.

REPLACE. As needed, substitute new words, sentences, and paragraphs for what you have cut.

MOVE MATERIAL AROUND. Change the sequence of paragraphs if the material is not presented in logical order. Move sentences.

All of these actions are easily done electronically, but try not to do all your revision on the computer. Alternating between "screen" and "paper" copy is a great way to achieve perspective.

Now what about 'lower order' concerns? These issues are highly individualized so look through old marked papers for comments you received at the level of sentences and diction (word choice). Are there any trends you notice? Bring in a writing sample to a tutor and we can examine a piece for you and look for things you both do well and seem to have difficulty with. The most common mistakes are a lack of clarity (perhaps because you're trying to sound "academic" or have forgotten that you're writing to an audience) and general wordiness.