

Revision Checklist

Congratulations! You've written your first draft – but you're not quite finished yet. Revising is just as much a part of writing as is the first draft or submitting: there is *always* room for improvement, even in the work of the most experienced writer.

Some people think that revising your work is just a question of checking the spelling and grammar. That's one part of it – but it's probably the least important, and often can be taken care of by a computer, teacher, or professional editor. Revising is a process of seeing again, of re-viewing your work, starting with the basic questions: What stays with you? What is the most important moment in this piece of writing? What part do you like best? What do you really want your story to say? What do you want a reader to feel after they've read your story?

Remember your initial intention – and see how it might have changed while you were writing your first draft! Did anything you wrote surprise you? Did you discover anything you didn't quite know when you began? That's a good sign – many of us (including Benjamin Franklin) find out what we really want to say through the process of writing itself. Ask yourself honestly what you find most powerful in your draft. That's your focus, your story.

Now that you've confirmed to yourself *what* your story is, re-read it again, and ask yourself whether you want to rearrange or change anything to make the steps in your story as clear as they can be for your readers. Here are some ways to make sure you are really looking at your work – and some things to look for!



Really looking at your work

When you read something you wrote yourself, it can be hard to spot any problems or aspects that could be improved. The fact that you wrote it means you read it quickly, already knowing what you were trying to say – and the fact that it's a story from your life means that you might bring a deeper understanding to your reading that could ever be gathered by an outside reader. What you actually need to do is reread your work with fresh eyes, trying to pretend you're an outside reader yourself. Here are some techniques that help you get some critical distance:



Read your writing aloud. Is it nostalgic or sad? Is it optimistic or funny? Is it vivid or fuzzy? Is it chatty, dry, or pompous? If you're stumbling and having to stop half-way through a sentence, that's a clue that you might have tangled together two thoughts: you can often fix a clunky sentence like that just by chopping it in half, and turning it into two sentences.



Put your writing away for a day or two, or even a week, and then pick it up and read it again. What stays with you? What did you leave out – and do you need to put it back in? Conversely, is there anything you can take out?



Reformat your writing: if you drafted the story by hand, type it up; if you're reading from a computer screen, print it. It's all about seeing the same old words in a different way.



Ask a friend or workshop / drop-in center leader or online writing tutor to read it for you – but don't just ask them to read it and walk away. First, ask them what stays with them the most, what made an impression, and what they like the best, whether it's a particular moment or your choice of words. Ask them what they think the story is about – is that what you think it's about? Ask them if they had any questions while reading or listening, or if there was something they didn't like or understand. Finally, ask if they have any suggestions for you. You may or may not take their advice – you're the author and have final say over your story – but be open-minded to ways you could help readers connect more powerfully with your writing.



Some things to look for

Don't tie yourself in knots while revising; your writing is your personal expression and one person's "vivid" can be another person's "too descriptive". Still, writing is a craft that you can work at, like practicing playing a sport or a musical instrument. Below are some of the things that you can think about as you reread your writing and try to improve it.



Are you using lots of words where one might do? It's tempting to pad writing; e.g. "She was really sad and depressed." In that example, "sad" and "depressed" are communicating the same thing, so you don't need to use both – and for that matter, sometimes adverbs like "really," "quite," and "very" are worth cutting to make your writing stronger and more direct.



Are you repeating yourself? If you've said the same thing two or three different ways you could try to take the additional insights you added each time, and compress them so you make your point once, and well.



Do your thoughts flow comfortably from one idea or topic to the next, or do they jump around? If your writing leaps around from one idea to another and then back again, it might lose some of its power and strength. Try rearranging your ideas in a more logical order and see whether you prefer the end result!



Proofread for typos, or words that you might have accidentally left out. Following each word with your finger while slowly reading aloud is a good way to make sure you're looking at every single word. You can also check your spelling and grammar at the same time, but this aspect of your writing is less important right now – and spelling and grammatical problems are always corrected as part of the publication process.



However, a couple of grammatical issues can make your work harder to understand. Watch out for any time you switch tense midway through a sentence; moving from the past to the present or future within the same thought can be confusing. Also, make sure you've identified who each "he" or "she" is – if you've mentioned your husband and your son, a reader might not know which one you mean when you refer to one of them as "he."



If you've heard a word you'd like to use but aren't quite sure what it means and how to spell it, or if you want to find a slightly different way to say the same word, you might find an online dictionary or thesaurus helpful: <http://www.m-w.com/>.