



Revision Strategies

Done drafting your essay, complete with intro, thesis, body and conclusion? Congratulations! Your work had just begun! Revision is an essential (and often overlooked) step in academic writing. Here are five simple tips on revising:

1. Go away

Allow some time to pass before looking at your draft. Have you ever finished a paper and handed it in with eyes closed, thinking "There - it's done and I don't even want to look at it - just take it!" This is a natural feeling - we are too wrapped up in the mindset of producing a paper to be able to suddenly turn around and examine it with a calm objective eye. So don't try to revise your draft right away; set it aside and go do something else. You will be amazed at how different your paper looks when you come back to it after a day or two with a cleared mind, and how much easier it is to see which parts work and which parts are lacking. In other words, when you look at your paper later, revising it actually makes sense.

N.B. You may have noticed that this strategy requires leaving some time between when you finish your draft and when you turn in your paper. This is a very good reason why it is important not to write your first draft at the last minute (which is really later than the last minute because you're not leaving enough time to finish your paper by revising it).

2. Get someone else

Have someone else read your paper and get his or her response. Papers are meant to be read by others, so an obvious way to see if you succeed in conveying your ideas is to hear what a reader thinks after reading the paper. It's a lot easier to give an objective critique to someone else's work than to our own, so it's always very useful in revising to get an outside opinion. (They're also not sick of your draft in the same way you might be). A great way of doing this is to take your paper to a consultant in the Writing Center. If you can't get to the Writing Center, however, remember that reading a paper and responding to it is not a mystical power - anybody can read a paper and tell you if it's clear or unclear. Friends can give helpful feedback as real-life readers. Learning how to respond to writing, in fact, is a useful thinking skill to develop.

3. Talk

Read your paper aloud to yourself and you will probably hear awkward phrasings, unnecessary repetitions, or vague sentences that seemed just fine until you had to try saying them. You can also catch grammar and spelling errors this way too.

N.B. If you find yourself pausing in the middle of a sentence and there's no punctuation, that probably means there's a logical break in the sentence that needs punctuation.

4. Count your points

Make a brief outline that lists the main point of each paragraph in order. Start with your introduction, and write down on a separate sheet the main point of that paragraph. Underneath it, write the main point of the next paragraph, and so on, through every paragraph. With this list, you can now look at the structure of your paper at a glance. If you have one paragraph whose main point is "Many characters in this book suffer persecution", and another one five paragraphs later whose point is "The main character is persecuted for his beliefs" you can now see that maybe these ideas should be grouped together (either made into one paragraph or put in sequence and connected with a transition, maybe placing the second paragraph immediately after the first as an example). This is a structural change that you might not have noticed in your draft, when the two paragraphs were three pages apart.

N.B. If there isn't one main point in your paragraph - if you need to use two sentences to describe the two main ideas in it, for example - this is a good indication that the paragraph needs to be changed. Whether it should be split into two paragraphs or whether one idea belongs with another paragraph (or maybe doesn't belong at all) is for you to figure out, but making the outline gives you the clue that the paragraph is not unified and needs fixing. Also, if you can write down the main point of a paragraph, but can't point to one sentence in the paragraph that states that main point in its entirety, this is a clue that the paragraph is probably not clear enough and most likely needs a good topic sentence (or thesis statement, if the paragraph is the introduction).

5. Start at the end

Compare your conclusion to your introduction. It is very common in a rough draft that the actual writing of the draft gives you a clearer idea of what you want to say about your topic. A concluding paragraph is thus a great place to start in looking at a rough draft, since it often contains the points you really wanted to say all along. Then compare your conclusion to the introduction and body of your paper. Are they making the same points? Is there an important idea in the conclusion that none of the paragraphs in the paper have talked about? Is the final argument in the conclusion noticeably different from the thesis statement in the introduction - perhaps more complex, more specific, or even contradictory?

There are many strategies for revision - it is not necessary to follow these five specific steps, but you probably should use them as a first try if you are not familiar with revising. Give them a try on at least one paper; if you set aside time for revising, you may find that the less stressful process and the more polished results are worth doing again.