

# The Portable Editor

## Tips for Improving Your Writing

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### Revising Your Writing

Hours or days after a lively discussion, have you found yourself saying, “If only I’d said...” or “If only I *hadn’t* said...” The problem with real-time discussions is there’s no opportunity for revising your words. Fortunately, if you make revision an integral part of your writing process, your written work won’t cause a case of the “If only” regrets.

Revision literally means *see again*. This process goes beyond surface improvements to reconsider four fundamental components of a paper: **structure, substance, sequence, and style** (Soles, 2006). Further, revising your work requires a two-pronged approach of large- and small-scale revisions.

#### Large-Scale Revision

Large-scale revision examines the “big picture” by answering the following questions:

- Is the thesis of the paper crystal clear?  
(Test: Can you give a one-sentence summary of your main point? If you can’t, then refocus and redefine your thesis statement.)
- Are the supporting points balanced (i.e., equal discussion and detail given for each major point) ?
- Is information presented logically and effectively? (Will the reader get the same big picture as the author?)
- Is the writing appropriate for the audience?
- Does the paper fulfill all points of the assignment?

Analyzing your writing for both its strengths and weaknesses alerts you to what works and what doesn’t. Large-scale revision identifies specific steps to take such as reordering the sequence of paragraphs, adding definitions of terms or concepts, rewriting paragraphs to clarify your point, adding substance where the discussion is thin, removing off-topic tangents, and replacing weak or tired phrases with strong, vigorous language. Sounds great, doesn’t it? However, few writers take this important first step either because they feel that they’ve invested enough time and effort in their first draft, or because they don’t think they have the ability to improve on what they’ve already written. (Those who think they *shouldn’t* have to improve their writing are urged to seek professional help.) However, writers who ignore large-scale revision can, with enough proofreading and editing, turn in a paper with flawless mechanics. In other words, it’s possible to put lipstick on a pig.

#### Small-Scale Revision

Once you’ve used large-scale revision to identify parts of your paper that aren’t working well, you’re ready to move on to small-scale revision that finds why and fixes those parts. Of course, the revision process is circular, so after making revisions you’ll need to review your paper as a whole to ensure your changes worked. So, if your introduction rambles or a main paragraph seems weak, how do you fix the problem? First, ask questions about the dodgy part:

- Does your introduction establish the relevance of your thesis (i.e., provide the argument’s context)?
- Is each paragraph controlled by **one** clear topic (i.e., are the paragraphs internally coherent)?
- Are the paragraphs externally coherent (i.e., Does each paragraph relate to the next? Have you used adequate transitions? Is each paragraph clearly tied to your overall thesis?)
- Have you presented a clear assertion or argument, or have you merely strung together a series of observations?
- Have you supplied ample evidence? Are your claims laid out step-by-step so the reader can follow your thought?
- Are there holes in your logic? Do you ask the reader to make a leap of faith or to make assumptions? Or do you present a compelling, convincing body of **evidence** in a logical order?
- Have you included the **opposing** viewpoint ? Have you dealt fairly with opposing evidence? Or have you failed to mention these arguments for fear that they will weaken your case and expose flaws in your supports?
- Is your **conclusion** appropriate (i.e., sums up your main point, restates your thesis), or does it introduce new ideas?

If the problem isn’t addressed by these questions of **structure, substance, and sequence**, it may be a **style** issue. First, look at your personal style. If you think in complex, multiword noun strings, then you should write that way, but

commit to revising your writing so it will communicate to the rest to the world for whom long word strings are confusing. Consider the following example from Williams (2005):

**First draft:** Early childhood thought disorders misdiagnosis often occurs as a result of unfamiliarity with recent research literature describing such conditions.

**Revision:** Physicians unfamiliar with recent research literature often misdiagnose disordered thought in young children.

On the other hand, if you think in informal language full of pithy slang, then that's the language you should use in writing your first draft. Just be sure to allow time to revise your thoughts into formal academic prose. But what if the problem seems to be that your writing is missing the mark, that is, it's not making the point you intended? If that's the case, you'll need to look at paragraph and sentence construction:

- Is your main idea presented clearly at the front of each sentence, or are you backing into the topic?
- Can you eliminate unnecessary words that drag down your writing and distract the reader from your point?
- Can you eliminate unnecessary passive constructions?
- Have you defined (directly or by illustration or in discussion) new or technical terms for your reader?
- Have you avoided jargon (i.e., words or phrases implying a meaning other than those defined in standard dictionaries)?

Jargon is especially difficult for the self-editor to identify because those terms are engrained in your vocabulary. Make a list of terms that you often have to explain in conversations with those outside your field, and use that list to check for jargon seeping into your writing. Below are several additional tips for improving your writing style:

1. **Avoid nominalizing** (i.e., transforming verbs and adjectives into nouns)
2. **Emphasize important words or ideas** by putting them in natural stress points at the beginning or end of a sentence (end placement has greater stress).
3. **Avoid undefined pronouns:** Search for words such as *these, it, those, they, this* to ensure the subject will be clear *to the reader*.
4. **Reduce strings of prepositional phrases:** Search for overuse of *for, by, of, to, from* in one sentence.
5. **Get the @ # \$ % ! expletives out of your writing!** In this case, *expletive* refers to empty words. Search for *in order to, there is, there are, it is* and cut out the filler words.

For **examples** of the above and more tips see: <http://www.rpi.edu/web/writingcenter/revise.html>

**Additional resources from the UNC Writing Center:** see handouts on **Reorganizing Drafts & Revising Drafts** available from <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts>

### References

Soles, D. (2006, April 6). *The "4S" method for helping students revise their writing*. Paper presented at the College English Association Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Williams, J. (2005). *Style: Lessons in clarity and grace* (9th ed.). New York: Pearson.

### SOSW Writing Support

**Drop-in** Every Monday, Noon–1 p.m. **Office 548E**

### One-on-One Writing Support

Please e-mail or call to schedule an appointment.

These hours are reserved for students, but other times may be available.

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**BREAKING NEWS:** The UNC Writing Center now has **same-day appointments** for *all* grad students.