Revision Techniques

Revising involves re-seeing your essay from the eyes of a reader who can't read your mind, not resting satisfied until you're sure you have been as clear and as thorough as possible. This handout is intended to offer some advice and specific strategies to help with your revision.

Common Complaints/Myths About Revision

- Myth: Revision is proofreading
    - **Revision is rewriting!** Proofreading is last step in revision process.
- Complaint: "I don't want to lose what I have written"
    - Hard to lose work you've done but think of it as removing a tumor—at best it is doing nothing and isn't needed, at worst it is killing your paper!
- Complaint: "I don't want to lose this great thing I wrote!"
    - **Kill your darlings!** Sadly, beautiful writing is not the same as good writing—if it isn't adding to your paper, it's a tumor!
- Complaint: "I don't have anything more to say"
    - BS—there is almost always more to say, or better ways to say it
    - Bounce ideas off a peer, do more research or brainstorming, see how you can strengthen your points/support—**Focus on strength, not length!**

HOCs vs LOCs

In revision, focus on big global issues first, like your thesis, argument, ideas, support, organization, structure, etc. These are called **Higher Order Concerns (HOCs)** because they take a higher priority in revision.

Smaller local issues, like grammar, spelling, syntax, mechanics, formatting, etc., are also very important, but come later in the revision process. These are **Lower Order Concerns (LOCs)** because they take a lower priority in revision.

Just as you wouldn't paint a house before it is built, you wouldn't fix minor grammar issues in your paper until you've finished rewriting. **Ideas take precedence over style!!**

Some Revision Tips

Revision is work, but it pays off in the end. Don't fear the work but embrace it as an opportunity to make your paper stronger and better.

- Quick Tips:
    - Have a revision plan! Prioritize concerns
        - Planning out the steps you need to take in your revision keeps you focused and gives you goals
    - Give yourself space/time
        - Take breaks between revision/drafting. The more time you can give yourself the better, because taking that space helps you approach the revision with fresh eyes
    - Bite-size revision

    - Work in 15-20-minute increments. Tackle one section, one technique, one part of your plan, etc., at a time then take a brief break and come back. This will help you stay focused and alert, without feeling overwhelmed, bored, or distracted
- Read aloud
    - Read your paper out loud. This will help you not only see but also hear the flow of your ideas. It also helps you catch grammatical errors!
- Focus on your Thesis
    - The most effective strategy is to make sure that **your thesis is clear and strong** and your **whole paper actually supports that thesis**
    - Everything in your essay should work to support your thesis and it should always be clear to your reader how each point/piece of evidence/example/etc. relates to your thesis
- Keep it simple
    - The basic rule for strong academic writing is to **say everything relevant in as few words as possible**—don't include anything you don't need or doesn't help your argument
    - Avoid making sentences overly complicated or using big fancy words just to sound "smarter"—**clear and interesting writing is always better than "fancy" writing**
- Guide your reader
    - Check that the content is **logically sequenced**. The paper should walk the reader step by step through your reasoning and support. Have you presented the best progression of ideas?
    - Make sure that you use transitions and other verbal markers to help your reader follow along with your points
    - **Your reader cannot read your mind**, so you need to make your meanings, analyses, explanations, warrants, etc. explicit and clear
- **Changing one idea can affect many ideas**
    - Altering one link in the chain of thought can cause a larger chain reaction than we might expect. It is always important to follow ideas to their logical end – if one thing can change, everything might change.
- **There is no one, right procedure**
    - Each paper is its own self-contained engine, designed to respond to a specific prompt. Different parts of different papers will malfunction, requiring different attention and different tools.

Some Revision Techniques/Strategies

Strongest vs Weakest

This is a strategy where you go through your paper and identify the strongest and the weakest paragraphs in your essay. Examine what makes the strongest one good and apply those lessons to the weak paragraph. Revise the weakest one to become the new strongest. Repeat with the new strongest and weakest paragraphs.

You can also apply this technique at the sentence level. In each paragraph, pick the strongest and the weakest sentences and revise as you did above.

Add, Move, Change, Delete

This is a strategy where you go through your paper and Add a new paragraph, Move an existing paragraph, Change (revise) an existing paragraph, and Delete an existing paragraph. You have to do all four!

These changes do not have to be permanent but can be an exercise to think about what is working or not in your paper. If forced to delete a paragraph, why did you pick the one you did? Should it stay deleted, or does it need to be revised? Why did you move the one you did? Is it better now? Repeat as necessary!

You can also apply this technique at the sentence level. In each paragraph, Add a new sentence, Move an existing sentence, Change (revise) an existing sentence, and Delete an existing sentence.

You can also apply this technique at the word level, sentence by sentence!

Reverse Outline—Method One

A reverse outline in this method is where you take your completed draft and build an outline from the paper's main points or main ideas—usually your paper's topic sentences and primary evidence. Examine the organization. Is it logically structured? Does every section support your thesis? Are there any anomalous tangents? Does everything belong? Is anything missing? Make any changes that you need to your draft based on your analysis of your organization.

Reverse Outline—Method Two

A reverse outline in this method is starts when you feel your paper is off track or you want to refocus your argument, but you have a completed draft. Rather than trash your current draft, set it aside and build a new outline that structures the argument that you want to make now. After putting together the new outline, go back to your draft and identify pieces that fit the new argument—cut and paste those pieces into the new outline. Take only what fits. Now write a new draft filling in what's left.

One Sentence at a Time

Go through your entire paper one sentence at a time. Focus on each individual sentence. Is it clear? Does it communicate exactly what you mean it to? Is it grammatically correct? Does it logically follow the sentence before it?

Alternatively, you can do the same but go through your entire paper one sentence at a time backwards (i.e. starting at the end and moving to the beginning)!