

Week Three: Revising the First Draft

Introduction: The Difference Between Editing and Revising

After you've completed your first draft, you will be asked to revise your paper. This is common practice in a writing classroom, but what are you being asked to *do* when you are asked to revise your first draft? What does revision mean?

More often than not, at the beginning of a writing class, when students are asked to revise, they actually devote their energies to editing their papers. They cut and add a sentence here or there throughout their papers; they correct typos and other mistakes that were pointed out in their first drafts; they might even use the spellcheck function. While all of these activities are important parts of the writing process, they only produce minor changes to make the paper clearer and easier to read. This is what editing is for: it serves to fine tune an otherwise complete and well thought out paper. Few first drafts are so complete, polished, and well thought out that they are ready to be moved immediately to the editing stage. Editing, in other words, comes *after* the revision process, not before it or instead of it.

To formulate a solid final draft, you need to work with your first draft in a different way. This is the work of revision: rather than tinkering with your initial writing, you need to literally “re-see” your paper, to look at your ideas from a fresh perspective. Revisionary writing involves asking yourself difficult questions that challenge, complicate, and extend the position you began to develop in your first draft. It also requires re-reading the assigned essays to focus on passages you didn't understand or didn't consider in your first draft. And, finally, it means thinking about the implications and possible consequences of the position you've developed: it means asking yourself, “If what I've argued is true, what follows? What does it matter?”

Revising is a lot more work than editing; it is also a different kind of work. Revision is the place where you make your education your own: it is the place where you demonstrate that you take your own thoughts seriously enough to think them all the way through. So, when you revise, you will often find yourself writing an entirely new draft that reflects how your thinking has changed as a result of your increased understanding of the assigned readings, your participation in class discussion, and your exposure to the ideas and comments of your teacher and your peers. If you pay attention to all these different kinds of feedback, you won't have any trouble seeing where the thoughts in your first draft can be improved and further developed. And this is what revision is for: it's to help you think better, fuller, more carefully articulated thoughts.

So, here's a quick way to tell whether you are revising or editing your paper when you are working on it. Ask yourself the following question: “Am I learning anything new by working on this paper in this way?” If the answer is yes, then you are revising; if the answer is no, then you are either editing your work to better express your original thoughts or you're looking out the window thinking about something else altogether!

Using instructor feedback

MYTH: “The only important feedback is my instructor’s comments on my rough draft, so all I have to do is change what she makes comments on.”

REALITY: You should base your revision on a number of different forms of feedback. On the class days after you turn in your rough draft, instructors will often give general feedback to the entire class, highlighting the areas and activities that require further attention, such as creating a position or using quotations to support ideas. Your job during such discussions is to think about how your teacher’s general comments apply to your particular paper: your job, in other words, is to think connectively about the relationship between what your teacher is saying and what you’ve written. When you begin to think and write in this way, you won’t just focus on those passages your teacher has commented on; you’ll begin applying your teacher’s comments and their implications to the rest of your paper, thereby seeing and creating changes that you, yourself, have initiated.

In-class activities such as close reading textual passages, making connections between essays, and developing position statements all model the kinds of techniques you should use when you are revising your first draft. Instructors will also often provide written handouts that provide suggestions for revision. Use all of these resources to guide your writing of your final draft.

Using peer feedback

MYTH: “My classmates are as inexperienced at writing essays as I am. I can’t learn anything from them and there’s no point in following their suggestions. That’s just the blind leading the blind.”

REALITY: One of the greatest challenges students face when writing essays in school is figuring out who the audience is for their work. Obviously, the teacher is the one clear and unambiguous audience member who will read and evaluate the work, but the teacher is not the only audience member essays are written for. While many of your peers are learning college-level writing techniques for the first time along with you, you should consider all of your classmates as part of the audience for your work.

If an audience of your peers can’t follow your argument, that’s a problem that you need to take care of. As readers, your peers can tell you if you are communicating your ideas clearly. Your peers can also let you know whether what you have written seems to be an obvious or original response. So, pay close attention to the comments your peers provide in peer review activities, and especially to the questions they ask. You don’t have to agree with what your peers have said, but you should learn how to use what they’ve said to help you find gaps in the presentation of your ideas.

Working hard at being a good reviewer of your peers’ papers has benefits for your own work as well. Peer review gives you the opportunity to see how your writing compares to the writing of your peers. It also provides you with an arena for practicing assessing the work of others. Once you can distinguish between passing and failing work, you are on your way to becoming your

own teacher. So, think of peer review as a way to train your “teacherly” skills—reading with understanding, providing helpful feedback, and coming up with accurate grades.

Checklist for revising/writing your final draft

When you revise your paper, you can rewrite it on two levels: you can revise your central position and you can revise the individual paragraphs that make up your paper. Revising your central position inevitably involves revising the paragraphs in your paper, too, so it is bound to seem like much more work than just working on individual paragraphs, but more often than not substantial revision will require that you work on both levels simultaneously.

Here’s a list of activities that will help you revise your paper on both of these levels.

Central Position

Re-read your draft carefully. Then on a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of your essay? What issues or set of concerns do you address and how do you address them?
2. What are the central concepts from the essays that you explore? What relationship between those concepts do you explain?
3. Do you explain how and why the writers’ ideas relate to your own?
4. Have you looked at the issue from more than one perspective? Have you considered how individuals with a different or opposite set of interests might approach the issue? How would they respond to your position? How would you provide an answer to their insights or objections? How would you change your position because of these questions?
5. Are there issues that were brought up in class discussion, in your teacher’s comments, or in your re-reading of the assigned essays that are *not* fully addressed in your own essay?

Now go back and re-read your essay again. Underline the sections of your draft that correspond to the answers to the questions above and write the matching number in the margin.

Do you say anything in your answers that you don’t say in your paper? If so, revise or add sentences to cover those ideas. If you can’t find a part of your paper that corresponds with an answer, identify a place where that answer could contribute to your argument and work on integrating it into your essay. The suggestions for revising paragraphs should help you in this effort.

Individual paragraphs

Introductory paragraph(s)

1. Do you pose the question that your essay will seek to answer or to better understand?
2. Do you introduce the concepts that are central to your position?
3. Do you explain the focus for your essay and why it is important?

Body paragraphs

1. Do you have a clear focus for each paragraph?
2. Do you explain why you include each point in your essay?
3. Do you justify why you include each quotation (i.e. do you explain how the quote relates to your position?)
4. Do you put your sources in conversation with each other? In other words, do you explain how one writer might react to the idea of another author? Do you explain how that reaction supports or challenges your own position?
5. Do you include transitional sentences at the beginning or the end of key paragraphs? Do these sentences establish clear connections between the ideas in your paper?

Conclusion paragraph(s)

1. Do you explain why your idea or position is significant to the ongoing discussion of this topic? That is, have you explored the “action horizon” of your ideas? Have you found a way to answer the “so what?” question?

Summary

The first step in producing strong final drafts is to understand the difference between editing and revising. Editing is the process of tightening up a near finished paper; revision is the process of testing out, extending, and re-thinking the ideas in your initial draft. The most common mistake beginning writers make is to edit their first drafts when what is called for is revision.

To get the revision process started, we recommend that you take a day off from writing after you complete your first draft. Take this time to re-read the assigned essays, focusing on passages you had difficulty with and on seeking out further connections to the ideas you've raised in your paper. Then work on your revision over the course of several days: this way you can come back to your paper with “fresh eyes” several times, improving it each time you work on it. By reconsidering your ideas from multiple perspectives over the course of several days, you will strengthen your argument and address the concerns of a wider and more diverse audience.