

## Week Nine: Revising and Reorganizing

### Introduction: Another way of looking at your writing

There's no doubt about it: revising is hard work. When you finish your first draft, you may feel confident that your argument makes perfect sense, that you've organized the paper in a way that is easy to follow; and that the only work that remains is to tighten up a few sentences and remove whatever passages have raised questions. You may also just feel tired of trying to get the ideas to fit together and feel that there's not much to be gained by going back to what you've written.

One way to get the revision process started is to try to imagine how someone else might read your work. This may seem like paradoxical advice, for how can you read your own work the way someone else would? Can't you only read your own writing as you would? However paradoxical this notion may be, this is exactly what you must learn how to do to revise well, for it is the skill of anticipating your audience's response that allows you to move your writing from being a private act to a public one. In the exercises that follow, we offer you two strategies for revising that involve making your own writing unfamiliar enough so that you can see it as someone else might.

### Finding out what you actually wrote: the post-draft outline

You were probably taught, at one point or another, that you should produce an outline *before* you write a draft. While preliminary outlines of this kind can help you organize your initial thoughts, they can be restrictive if they prevent you from following your ideas wherever they lead you once you actually get down to the business of writing. Our feeling is that it is a good idea, after you've finished a draft, to produce a *post-draft outline*, one that provides a map of where your paper started and then where it went once you started writing. Thus, while the preliminary outline provides a map of where you would like your writing to go, the post-draft outline provides a map of where your writing actually went!

Here's how you do it:

1. Number each paragraph in your rough draft.
2. On a separate sheet of paper, beginning with number 1, write only *one* sentence or phrase that summarizes discussion in the first paragraph.
3. When you have finished with the first paragraph, move on to the second paragraph and write *one* sentence or phrase that summarizes the discussion next to the number 2.
4. Repeat until you have briefly summarized each paragraph in your paper.

You now have an outline of what you've actually written. Read the sentences and phrases in order. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Can you follow the logic of your paper from beginning to end?
- Are there places where the connection between paragraphs seems hard to follow or hard to state?

- Are there places where you feel more needs to be said? Places where you need to create a bridge between paragraphs or major ideas in your paper?
- Are there paragraphs or passages that seem to repeat what has already been established earlier in the paper?
- Are the assigned readings represented clearly in your argument?
- Was there a paragraph that was particularly difficult to summarize? One that seems to belong in another place in the paper or might need to be divided in two?

With these questions in mind, you can now return to your first draft with your own diagnosis of where your writing needs additional attention. What the post-draft outline lets you see is the way your paper is actually organized and what the steps in your thinking look like beneath all your writing. So, you know that the post-draft outline has worked if it has shown you places where you can improve the transition between paragraphs, eliminate redundancy, reorganize your presentation, and add new material.

### **The essay as journey: mapping your route**

While this might seem a little hokey to you, you might, nevertheless, find it useful to think of your decisions for organizing your paper as providing your readers with a map or a set of directions to help them travel the same “road” you traveled to arrive at your position. To ensure that your readers reach your final destination, you need to provide them with a series of signposts to help them stay on the right road. Below are four kinds of signposts you can use to organize your essay.

#### *Signpost 1: Your introduction*

Your introduction should provide an explanation of the direction you will be sending your readers in and what they should look for along the way. Use your first paragraph to introduce the question or issue that has sent you out on your journey and the important concepts and terms that you started out with.

#### *Signpost 2: Focusing each paragraph*

Consider each paragraph as a place where your readers must make a turn in their thinking. In order to follow you along, the place where the readers make that turn has to be very clear. Thus it is important to develop a clear and specific focus for each paragraph. Identify one idea or connection that you will explain in detail; this will serve as your signpost to your readers. To help your readers identify this idea right away, sum up this focus in the first few sentences of your paragraph.

#### *Signpost 3: Transition sentences at the beginning of a paragraph*

Transition sentences at the beginning of each paragraph help readers make sure that they are on the right road. Transition sentences show how the ideas in the current paragraph are related to the ideas in the previous paragraph; these sentences let your reader know which direction you are turning in your argument. For example, if you want to propose an alternative to the idea you

posed in your previous paragraph, you might begin your new paragraph with a sentence that begins, “While Wilmut and Pollan pose the problem as an issue of X, I argue that the problem is better defined as Y because...” Such a transition sentence signals to your readers that you are changing the direction of the discussion, and demonstrates how the new idea differs from the one that came before.

#### *Signpost 4: Transitional sentences at the end of key paragraphs*

At the end of key paragraphs where you have reached a conclusion that is important to your overall argument, you should provide a few sentences that explain how the particular point you have made relates to your argument as a whole. This will help your readers to keep the final destination in mind, even as you take them through the complex twists and turns of your thinking.

#### **Summary**

As more is asked of you as a writer, the challenge of organizing your thoughts in ways that others can follow becomes greater. By this point in the semester, you are being asked on a regular basis to put your thoughts into conversation with at least two other essays. In order to pull this off, you need to develop revision strategies that help you see your writing the way other readers might. The post-draft outline and the essay map are two strategies that can assist you in developing the skill of making your own writing seem less familiar.