

How to be a Critic of your own Writing

“There is no good writing, only rewriting.”

-- James Thurber

Revising is an often overlooked part of the writing process, not simply a quick check for spelling and grammar mistakes (though this will be part of the process). Being a critic of your own writing involves taking a long, hard look at what you've written and doing the hard work of cutting and rewriting when you need to.

HOW MUCH TIME DOES REVISION TAKE?

The various steps of the process take time. As a general rule of thumb, **plan to spend about as much time revising your work as you spent writing the first draft.**

I recommend the rule of thirds: plan to devote 1/3 of your time to researching and planning, 1/3 to writing your first draft, and 1/3 to revising.

Tip: Book a writing centre appointment for one week before your due date (false deadlines can be very useful in helping you actually finish a draft).

STAGE 1: REVISING THE OVERALL STRUCTURE, FOCUS AND ORGANIZATION

This is where you must be willing to get messy. I always save a draft of my paper under a different name before I start this process. That way, even if I butcher my draft beyond recognition, I can feel confident knowing that I still have the original version if I decide I said it better the first time.

What you need to check during this phase:

1. Introduction:

- does the introduction help your reader understand the context of your writing? do you give enough background? do you get to your point quickly enough so they don't get lost?
- is it clear why you're writing about this topic? have you indicated why you think it's meaningful or relevant to you, your class, the art world, etc.?
- can your reader easily locate your thesis or argument (if you have one)?
- is there a sentence or "road map" to let the reader know what to expect in the rest of the writing?
- does it explicitly answer the question or topic specified in the assignment sheet?

2. Paragraphs:

- do paragraphs stick to one main idea?
(tip: longer paragraphs often hide several points in them)
- are paragraphs about the same ideas grouped together?
(tip: shorter paragraphs can often be grouped together to make one longer paragraph)
- do the paragraphs follow one another in some logical sequence?
- are any paragraphs talking about issues that don't seem to fit with the overall focus of the writing?

3. Conclusion:

- does it summarize the main points of the paper in a new way?
- does it relate to—without actually repeating—what you say in the introduction?
- does it suggest any implications of what you've written? or possible future areas of study?

My favourite tool for this stage of revision is the **reverse outline** (see separate handout).

STAGE 2: CHECKING YOUR PARAGRAPHS FOR COHERENCE

Paragraphs dictate how readers read—we pay the most attention to the start of paragraphs, slightly less to the ends of paragraphs, and we tend to skim over the middle of paragraphs quite quickly.

There is no firm rule on paragraph length, but aim for between 1/3 to 2/3 of a page. This is about as much information as a reader can process at any one time. It's better to have 3 reasonably-sized paragraphs on a related point than one massive paragraph.

Fine-tuning your paragraphs is key to creating a good reading experience. Here are some of my favourite strategies:

- look at each paragraph by itself: without the paragraph before, do you still know what this paragraph is about?
- read your paragraphs out of order
- for long or problematic paragraphs, create a mini-outline

STAGE 3 EDITING AND PROOFREADING

Things to consider in this stage of revision are:

sentence variety and length:

- are your sentences really long and complicated? if so, can you make them shorter or divide one sentence into smaller ones?
- are your sentences short and choppy? if so, can you make them longer or combine 2–3 sentences into one longer one?
- do you have some variety in your sentences?

style and word choice

- are you using any “jargon” or technical language? if so, can you define it for your reader?
- are you relying on clichés to make your main points (check your introduction and conclusion especially)?
- do you understand all the words you are using? if not, look them up or replace them with a word you know.

spelling, grammar and punctuation

- check for errors in subject–verb agreement, run–on sentences, punctuation (check a usage guide or online grammar site for support)
- use your computer spellchecker (though don’t rely on it to catch all errors!)
- check the spelling of proper names
- ensure all quotation marks and parentheses are used in a pair

citations (if you have them)

- know what documentation format you need to use (MLA, APA, etc.)
- consult handouts or online guides for each specific documentation format
- ensure in–text citations and bibliographic entries are handled correctly
- check to make sure you have included a complete, accurate works–cited page or reference list, as required

Strategies for this stage of revision:

Print a copy of your paper. We notice different things when reading on paper compared to reading on screen. For this stage of revision, you will likely catch more errors if you work on paper.

Read your paper aloud. This forces you to read slowly and with emphasis.

Have someone else read your paper aloud to you. Any parts that make you cringe are worth noting! Encourage your reader to ask questions if they are confused. Alternately, use screen reading software to have your computer read aloud to you: it’s less embarrassing and may be just as effective!

Read your essay backwards. Read backwards through your essay or through sections of your essay, working sentence by sentence. This will help you focus on each sentence individually and highlight problems with wording or grammar.

Read your paper looking for only one thing at a time. Look only at your citations, for example, or your commas. Reading for too many things at once can make it easy to miss most of them!

Create a personal “style sheet” or self–editing checklist. Editors use style sheets to flag recurring problems in a text or to ensure consistency. Learn to pay attention to the errors you make (on your graded papers for example) and use these to build a checklist of things to watch for in your own writing.

Tips for editing and proofreading:

- *Know what good writing looks like:* read examples of good writing, both academic and non-academic. This will help train your “ear” so that you can hear when something you’ve written just doesn’t sound right.
- *Use dictionaries but don’t rely on a thesaurus to help make your writing more “academic.”* By all means expand your vocabulary by extensive reading, but make sure that both you and your reader can understand the words you are using.

OTHER RESOURCES

Grammar Girl: <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/>

Writing at U of T: <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/style-and-editing>

Explorations of Style: <http://explorationsofstyle.com/2011/01/19/committing-to-extensive-revision/>

The OWL at Purdue: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/4/>