

Revising Essays & Research Papers: Main Strategies

- Leave 20% to 30% of your total available time (or at least 30 minutes per page) for revision and editing. Leave a day or two between the writing and revision processes.
- Perform a thorough scan of your paper several times, narrowing your focus from overall structure to smaller grammatical issues. Just as “it’s hard to see the forest for the trees,” it can be difficult to identify a variety of different problems in one pass over.
- Use a checklist like the one below to focus your attention. Develop your own editing checklist based on issues that have been noted in your writing. As you review your writing, imagine yourself as a critical reader or as an editor.
- Have someone read your work and provide feedback about sentences that are not clear and about passages that seem weak or underdeveloped. Remember that you must do all rewriting and revising yourself. If you get someone else to revise or edit your paper, you are engaging in a serious form of academic misconduct.

1. Content, Structure, and Transitions

- Have you fulfilled the requirements for the assignment?
- Is your **title** specific to your paper? If someone else might have the same title, make your title more specific.
 - **Strategy:** *Add a colon plus a subtitle to make your title more specific.*
- Have you written for a **general audience** in your paper (unless instructed otherwise)?
 - **Strategy:** *Define key terms in your paper and provide adequate background information.*
- Does your paper reflect the theoretical insights and the specialized analytical methods and terminology that you learned in the course?
 - **Strategy:** *Ask yourself if the paper could have been written by someone who has not taken the course. If your answer is yes, then revise to add more analytical depth. Focus on themes and concepts mentioned in your course outline and assignment sheet.*
- Does your **thesis** sum up the main point or central argument of your paper? Does it assert an arguable proposition? Does it appear in your introduction?
- Does your **introduction** frame your paper effectively?
 - **Strategy:** *Get rid of overly general sentences. (For example, edit out observations about human nature. If your opening paragraph is weak, check if your second or final paragraph might actually make a better introduction.*
 - **Strategy:** *If your introduction seems boring, try starting with a relevant quotation, an arresting fact or statistic, or an apparent paradox.*
- Is your paper **structured effectively**? Generally, papers should be organized thematically according to your analysis. For example, an analysis organized around causes or effects would be a better choice for a history paper than a completely chronological structure.
 - **Strategy:** *If your paper’s structure seems weak, make an outline of sections and subsections. Look for a duplication of ideas, gaps, and potential ways to restructure.*
 - **Strategy:** *Consider whether the first few paragraphs of your paper should provide background or context for your argument (e.g., historical background, definition of key terms or issues)*

- **Strategy:** *If you are struggling to find a structure, you may need to do some more thinking and planning. Try producing a visual map or representation of your arguments and evidence. Group related information. Identify your key and supporting ideas.*
- Do the **opening sentences of paragraphs (and sections)** capture the main point of the paragraph (section) that follows and implicitly or explicitly link to the paper's thesis or to the previous paragraph or section?
 - **Strategy:** *Read your introduction, the opening sentence (topic sentence) to each paragraph, and your conclusion to see whether you get the sense of a coherent, advancing argument. Revise any opening sentence that seems "off topic"--even if you make the connection later in the section.*
- Have you provided enough evidence and discussion to support your arguments? If you can imagine a reader asking questions, presenting counter-arguments, or requesting additional evidence, then try to strengthen your arguments and to fill in any gaps.

2. Paragraph Development and Sources

- Are the paragraphs effectively focused and developed?
 - **Strategy:** *If any paragraph is only one or two sentences long, check to see if it should be attached to an adjacent paragraph or if it needs to be more fully developed (e.g., by adding evidence or examples or by making your reasoning more specific).*
- Are your paragraphs coherent – does each sentence flow logically?
 - **Strategy:** *If adjoining sentences seem to be about different concepts, rewrite the beginning of the second sentence to provide a clear link between content.*
- Have you used your sources effectively? Do they support the point you are making?
 - **Strategy:** *Quote only if the original wording — not just the information or idea — is important; otherwise, you should paraphrase. Consider quoting if you are working from primary sources (e.g., historical documents, literary or other texts, or interview data), if you are comparing definitions, or if the original wording is particularly important to creating an overview.*
- Have you used quotation marks to signal quoted material?
- If quoting a source in your paper, have you indicated clearly who is speaking?
- Have you cited the source for all quotations and borrowed information – even for paraphrases?

3. Clarity, Precision, and Conciseness

- Are your sentences all clear and readable?
 - **Strategy:** *Read your paper aloud. If a sentence seems confusing or awkward, ask yourself what the main action is, make that action into the main verb, and precede it with the doer of the action.*
 - **Strategy:** *Ask yourself how you would explain your point to a younger person; typically, your response will lead you to a clearer, more straightforward expression.*
- Have you used pronouns effectively?
 - **Strategy:** *Reword to get rid of **you** and **your**.*
 - **Strategy:** *Edit out uses of **I**, **me**, and **my** except when you are referring to personal experience or when such pronouns add clarity, for example, by distinguishing your point of view from that of others or when referring to your personal experiences (as in a reflective paper). Note*

that, usually, phrases like "in my opinion" or "I believe" lessen impact rather than add emphasis.

- **Strategy:** After the word **this**, add a word to clarify the reference (e.g., "this what").
 - **Strategy:** Wherever possible, keep nouns in your discussion plural so you can freely use the pronouns **they** and **their**, avoiding sexist usage, cumbersome he/she pairs, and ungrammatical pronoun shifts (e.g., a student →they)
- Is your writing concise?
- **Strategy:** Cut out unnecessary references to your paper (e.g. "In this paper, I will try to prove...")
 - **Strategy:** Get rid of adjectives like "very," long introductory phrases that say little, and unnecessary "it is" and "there are" phrases.

4. Grammar, Citation, & Referencing

- Have you used the past tense when referring to published research?
- Have you documented every instance of borrowed information and included a reference list in a standard format (e.g., APA, Chicago, MLA, CSE, etc.)?
- Have you edited your paper systematically?
- **Strategy:** If English is not your first language, check each verb for (1) correct tense, (2) correct verb form, and (3) proper agreement with the subject of the verb.
 - **Strategy:** Invest in a good dictionary (e.g., the Collins Cobuild). Use spellcheckers but beware of their limitations. Run a grammar checker program if you really want to identify passive voice constructions.
 - **Strategy:** Test for sentence fragments by using the following phrase:
It is true that [insert suspected fragment]. If something seems missing, revise your sentence.
 - **Strategy:** If you have used **it's**, make sure you mean **it is** or **it has**; otherwise, write **its**.
 - **Strategy:** Use **Effect** (a noun) when you mean consequence or result of; use **Affect** (a verb) when you mean to Act on something.