Revising the Whole Essay

Writing is a process of discovery, and you don’t always produce your best stuff when you first get started. So, revision is a chance for you to look critically at what you have written to see:

- if it’s really worth saying
- if it says what you wanted to say, and
- if a reader will understand what you’re saying.

Effective writers adopt a strategic method of re-seeing their work when they revise an essay draft. Instead of just jumping in helter-skelter and correcting the most obvious or glaring errors, thoughtful re-writers proceed methodically through their drafts in a sequence of stages. They begin with a draft’s most significant elements and end with its most superficial ones, viewing their writing from a reader’s perspective.

What real impact will correcting a misspelled word or adding in an overlooked comma make on a draft that lacks a clear focus or inadequate evidence or illogical development? Not much.

When revisiting a draft, look at its component parts in the order of importance in terms of an essay’s success. Begin at its core and then proceed to its surface.

What steps should I use when I begin to revise? Don’t try all these revisions all at one time. Instead, focus on two or three main areas during each revision session. And wait awhile after you’ve finished a draft before looking at it again. The Roman poet Horace thought one should wait nine years, but that’s a bit much. A day – a few hours even – will work.

When you do return to the draft, be honest with yourself, and don’t be lazy. Ask yourself what you really think about the paper. As the Scott Forrester Handbook for Writers puts it, “THINK BIG, don’t tinker” (61). At this stage, you should be concerned with the large issues in the paper, not the commas.

Purpose — What is the reason for writing the essay: to narrate or tell a story? To describe or create a dominant sensory impression? To inform, illustrate, explain, define, compare/contrast, or classify? To persuade or argue?

Focus — Check the focus of the paper: Is it appropriate to the assignment? Is the topic too big or too narrow? Do you stay on track through the entire paper? What is the essay’s core or central idea? Where in the essay does that primary point become clear? Think honestly about your thesis: Do you still agree with it? Should it be modified in light of something you discovered as you wrote the paper? Does it make a sophisticated, provocative point, or does it just say what anyone else could say if given the same topic? Does your thesis generalize instead of taking a specific position? Should it be changed altogether?

Structure — Is the essay segmented into a distinct three-part structure – introduction, body, and conclusion? Does the introduction engage the reader’s attention? Does it create a context for the ideas that follow? Does the conclusion provide a sense of closure? Does the essay’s beginning and end sustain that consistent focus? Has the essay fulfilled the commitment made by its thesis?

Organization — Does your paper follow a pattern that makes sense? Do the transitions move your readers smoothly from one point to the next? Do the topic sentences of each paragraph appropriately introduce what that paragraph is about? Would your paper work better if you moved some things around?

Development — What main ideas support the core idea or thesis? Does the order of those main ideas logically fit the essay’s purpose? Is each idea adequately developed? Does the evidence offered in support of the main ideas seem skimpy, overdone, irrelevant, or repetitious? Does the content contribute to a reader’s understanding?

Unity & Coherence — Which, if any, sentences or paragraphs do not contribute to a reader’s understanding of the thesis? Does a sentence or paragraph digress from the essay’s focus? Do the ideas flow smoothly
and clearly? Where could the reader get lost or confused? What transitions feel awkward or rough?

Tone — How does the draft sound? Is the voice or tone suited to the essay’s purpose, topic, and readers?

Title — Does the title accurately reflect the essay’s content and purpose? Does it suggest the focus topic briefly and clearly?

Final Tips

Work from a hard copy — It is easier on the eyes. Also, problems that seem invisible on the screen somehow tend to show up better on paper.

Read the paper out loud — That is one way to see how well things flow.

Examine the balance within your paper — Are some parts out of proportion with others? Do you spend too much time on one trivial point and neglect a more important point? Do you give lots of detail early on and then let your points get thinner by the end?

Whoa! I thought I could just revise in a few minutes! Sorry. You may want to start working on your next paper early so that you have plenty of time for revising. That way you can give yourself some time to come back to look at what you’ve written with a fresh pair of eyes. It’s amazing how something that sounds brilliant the moment you write it can prove to be less-than-brilliant when you give it a chance to incubate.

But I don’t want to rewrite my whole paper! Revision doesn’t necessarily mean rewriting the whole paper. Sometimes it means revising the thesis to match what you’ve discovered while writing. Sometimes it means coming up with stronger arguments to defend your position, or coming up with more vivid examples to illustrate your points. Sometimes it means adding or deleting material for balance or emphasis.

And then, sadly, sometimes revision does mean trashing your first draft and starting from scratch. That would be better that than having the teacher trash your final paper.