Revising and Proofreading: A Comprehensive Guide

Effective revising is a crucial part of successful writing. Revising is a deliberate attempt to counteract the normal process of reading. In other words, we usually read for comprehension, so our brains tend to fill in confusing gaps or smooth over problematic typos. Careful revising, on the other hand, requires writers to read for detail and to be open to re-thinking and re-working crucial ideas. The following guide can help you refine your revising techniques.

Task Management: Writers need to make sure they understand what the assignment requires and what readers (whether professors or real-world colleagues) expect from the document; a portion of the revision process should be devoted to making sure that the paper fulfills these requirements and expectations. To improve your task management, ask yourself these questions:

- **What tasks does the assignment require?** Keep in mind that many assignments require more than one task, and that some tasks are more valued than others (for instance, "analyze" is usually considered more important than "summarize").
- **When is your paper due?** Try to finish early. At the very least, try to give yourself a break between writing and revising.
- **Who is your audience?** Peers, professor, professionals in the field, etc.? Different audiences read for different reasons and with different expectations. Make sure that you know what your audience is reading for and what they will expect from your writing.
- **What is the page limit?** What are the penalties for running short or running long? Find out what the acceptable parameters are, and try to stick to them.
- **What citation style should you use?** If you are using MLA, APA, or Chicago Style, check out the Writing Center's Citation Guides for instructions and examples.
- **What resources are available for you to use?** In addition to the Writing Center's in-person and online resources, you may also be able to consult with your professor, TA, or other colleagues in your field. If you're doing research, you can consult with a reference librarian.

Argument Strategy: Writers need to make sure that their arguments and/or recommendations are organized, developed, and well-supported. Here are some strategies to improve organization, clarity, focus, and other problems with development.

- **Read only your introduction and conclusion.** Do they agree with each other and the other sections of your paper? Do they actually say what you think they say? Keep in mind that most writers "discover" what they really want to say as they are writing. Once you've figured it out, make sure that you explain and support your main point consistently throughout the paper.
- **Isolate your thesis.** Read this thesis along with each topic sentence only . Do the topic sentences support the thesis?
- **Review all source material.** Focus on each quote, paraphrase, summary, or synthesis. Did you provide enough evidence for your ideas? Does each source clearly relate to your argument? Did you introduce and interpret all source material? Is each source cited appropriately?

- **Make a reverse outline after you've written a complete draft.** A reverse outline breaks your paper into its components: thesis, main ideas, evidence, etc., arranged in the order in which you present them in the paper. This technique highlights any potential structural problems. You might notice that you don't seem to have enough evidence for one of your main ideas, or that one of your thoughts seems out of place.
- **Play devil's advocate.** Many writers present only the evidence that supports their opinion on a topic, without acknowledging the other possible position(s). But papers that consider, and then dismantle, counterarguments show a willingness to be open-minded and critical. Read over your paper for places where you could acknowledge an opposing position, and then explain the flaws in that position (and, thus, further support your argument).

Sentence-Level Clarity: Writers need to make sure that their writing is clear and easily readable. There are a number of technical tips and strategies to help writers proofread effectively. These methods help you focus on sentence-level concerns.

- **Read your paper aloud:** This method is great for finding omitted words or awkward sentences, but should be used with great caution for punctuation errors.
- **Set your paper aside:** Taking a day away from the paper can give you a new outlook on grammar and clarity, as well as overall organization.
- **Use a ruler:** This method forces you to concentrate on one line at a time. This helps locate specific error patterns and prevents you from reading ahead and anticipating what you "meant to say," but did not actually say.
- **Read the paper backwards:** This method is great for finding punctuation and other grammar errors. Like using a ruler, it also prevents you from reading ahead and anticipating what you "meant to say," but did not actually say.
- **Read for error patterns:** First, make an "error log" (see reverse). Once you are aware of what your typical errors are, you should read for them specifically and one at a time. For example, if you are using this method to look for subject-verb agreement, you should not also look for passive voice.
- **Read for spelling errors:** Dew knot relay on spell / grammar checkers alone. There are some errors they cannot catch. For instance, names and disciplinary terminology are not in the checkers' dictionaries - you'll have to check them yourself. Similarly, the checker cannot tell you the difference between misused but correctly-spelled words (such as to/too/two or whether/weather) or typos that create another (such as possess/posses).

The Bottom Line: Ask yourself if you're happy with your final product. Most writers are never 100% satisfied with what they've written. But if something about your paper is really bothering you, that's probably a good sign that some additional revision is needed.

Adapted from Jan Madraso. "Proofreading: the Skill We've Neglected to Teach." English Journal 82.1 (1993), 32-41.

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