

Writ 101 Strategies for Revision

As with all steps in the writing process, revision is work. But in many ways revising is the most exciting and productive part of writing. You have words and ideas on the page. Now, start improving them, shaping, refining, strengthening them. The first step is to determine *what* needs revision, then *how* to address it. Sometimes this is clear; others, it's more that we know *something* is off, but aren't sure what.

Problems with Purpose

- "I don't know why the writer is writing this paper."
- "The beginning of the essay seems to be about one thing and the rest of it is about several others."
- "I think there are several different topics in the draft. Which one do you want to write about?"
- "This is supposed to be an argument but the writer never says anything arguable."

Problems with Meaning (big idea, thesis, claim)

- "So what?" "Who cares?"
- "I can't tell what the writer is trying to say."
- "I think I can guess what the writer wants to say, but doesn't quite say."
- "There doesn't seem to be a point."
- "I think there's a main idea but there isn't an emphasis on it."
- "I thought the thesis was saying something pretty obvious."
- "The argument is unconnected reasons or a bunch of evidence without an explicit claim."

Problems with Information

- "Parts of the draft seemed pretty vague or general."
- "I couldn't really see what you were talking about. It could use more detail."
- "It seemed like you needed more facts to back up your point."
- "You make some assumptions that aren't universally true."
- "Your evidence doesn't come through as credible or accurate, or there isn't enough of it."
- "Who says?" or "Why should I listen to this person?"
- "I want to know more about..."
- "This is good data but there's nothing special about the wording. Paraphrase."
- "Good research. But what does it mean? Can you interpret?"
- "You seem to be inserting a bunch of information to hit the required word count."
- "The essay is mostly information from sources. It's more somebody else's words than yours."

Problems with Structure

- "Your transitions need work."
- "This could be re-organized."
- "I was confused about..."
- "This seems to be related to the topic of your other paragraph."
- "I understood your point but I couldn't figure out what this part had to do with it."
- "The essay doesn't flow."
- "The claim, reasons, or evidence aren't clear, or connections aren't clear."
- "What is this passage/sentence/info. doing for the draft?"

Problems with Clarity and Style

- "This seems a little choppy."
- "Didn't you already say this, earlier?"
- "What do you mean? Could you be more specific?"
- "I couldn't follow what you were saying in this paragraph."
- "This sentence seems awkward to me."
- "This sentence is a run on, or incomplete."
- "Grammatical problems distracted me from what you were saying."
- "This citation lacks page numbers" or "Cite your source."

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These revision strategies (from Bruce Ballenger's *The Curious Writer*) are designed to help you address significant issues. Keep in mind that your draft may have more than one of these issues. Refer to your evaluation sheets, what has been marked Needs Work or OK, and my suggestions for revision.

PROBLEMS WITH PURPOSE

What do you want to know about what you have learned?

1. Choose a draft you'd like to revise, and reread it.
2. Answer--*in writing*--the following question: "What do I understand about this topic now that I didn't understand before I started writing about it?"
3. Build a list of questions--perhaps new--that the topic still raises. Make this list as long as you can.
4. Choose one or more of the questions as a prompt for a fastwrite. Write for ten minutes. Follow your writing to see where it leads and what it might suggest about new directions for revision.

PROBLEMS WITH MEANING

Reclaiming Your Topic

1. Spend ten or fifteen minutes reviewing all the notes you've taken and skimming key articles or passages from books. Glance at your most important sources. Reread your most current draft. Let your head swim with information.
2. Clear your desk of everything but your notebook. Remove all notes and materials. Put draft away.
3. Fastwrite about your topic for seven full minutes (set a timer, if you can). Tell the story of how your thinking about the topic has evolved. When you began, what did you think? What were your initial assumptions or preconceptions? Then what happened, and what happened after that?
4. Skip a few lines. Write "Moments, Stories, People, and Scenes." Now fastwrite for another seven minutes (really!), this time focusing more on specific case studies, situations, people, experiences, observations, facts, and so on that stand out in your mind from the research you've done so far, or perhaps from your own experiences with the topic.
5. Skip a few more lines. For another seven minutes (yep!), write a dialogue between you and someone else about your topic. Choose someone who you think is typical of the audience you're writing for. Don't plan the dialogue. Just begin with the questions most commonly asked about your topic, and take the conversation from there, writing both parts of the dialogue.
6. Finally, skip a few lines and write these two words at the top of a new section: *So what?* Now, spend a few minutes trying to summarize the most important thing you think your readers should understand about your topic, based on what you've learned. Distill this to a sentence or two.

Questions as Knives

Questions are to ideas as knives are to onions. Slice your ideas with questions from the "W" family.

1. Subject your tentative thesis to some narrowing. Write your theme, thesis, or main point as a single sentence at the top of this section.
2. Slice it with questions (Why? Where? When? Who? and What?). Each time, rewrite/restate your thesis so the question's answer is included.
3. Continue this until your point is appropriately sliced; that is, when you feel that you've gone beyond the obvious and stated what you think or feel in a more specific and interesting way.

PROBLEMS WITH INFORMATION

Backing Up Your Assumptions

Every claim rests on assumptions: what do you have to believe is true to accept that the claim is true?

1. Write your claim at the top of a section, then list the assumptions on which it seems to rest. Your list should have at least five items.
2. Which of the assumptions behind your claim would be stronger if there were "backing" or evidence to support it? Write at least three new supporting sentences for your list item. This will give you new direction for research. It might strengthen the argument, too.

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Beyond Examples

When we add information to a draft, we normally think: examples. Often, these are personal experiences or observations from surroundings. This is helpful, but you should consider other types of information, too. Choose three items from this list. Write at least two sentences you could add to a draft for each.

- Present a counterargument: Generally included in persuasive essays. Presents an alternative view. Gives readers better understanding of the issue, and enhances ethos because you seem fair.
- Provide background: In a personal essay, readers may want to know when and where the event occurred or the relationship between the narrator and a character. In a critical essay, it might be necessary to provide background on a short story/essay because readers may not have read it. In a research essay, it's often useful to provide background information about what has already been said on the topic and the research question.
- Establish significance: Your essay needs to identify a problem and establish why it is significant, especially if it is a problem about which there is little awareness or consensus. Your readers need to have a reason to be interested in whatever or whomever you're concerned with; give them one.
- Give it a face: One of the best ways to make an otherwise abstract issue or problem come to life is to show what it means to an individual person. Add case studies, anecdotes, profiles, and descriptions that put people on the page to make the essay more interesting and persuasive.
- Define it: If you're writing about a subject your readers know little about, you'll likely use concepts or terms that readers want you to define. Go through your draft and find at least one instance where readers won't know what you mean. Define that term or concept.

Explode a Moment – for personal evidence, narrative

1. Choose a draft that involves a story or (personal) narrative.
2. Make a list of the moments (scenes, situations, turning points) that stand out in the narrative.
3. Circle/choose one that you think is most important to your purpose in the essay.
4. Name moment at top of a new page (e.g., “the snow geese on the acid pond, when the ice broke,” or “when I saw my grandfather in his coffin.”)
5. Put yourself back at that moment and fastwrite about it for 7 full minutes. Make sure you write with as much detail as possible, drawing on all your senses. Write in the present tense if it helps.
6. Use this method with other moments in the narrative that may deserve more emphasis. Rewrite and incorporate the best of the new information in the next draft.

PROBLEMS WITH STRUCTURE

Multiple Leads

1. Choose a draft that has a weak opening, lacks a strong purpose, or needs to be reorganized.
2. Compose four *different* openings to the *same* draft. Choose from the list below:
 - Announcement: explicitly state the purpose and thesis of the essay.
 - Anecdote: brief story that frames the question, dilemma, problem, or idea behind the essay.
 - Scene: describe an event, place, or image that clarifies the central question, idea, or problem.
 - Profile: case study or description of a person involved with the question, problem, or idea.
 - Background: Provide context with info. that shows significance of question, problem, or idea.
 - Quotation or dialogue: voice of someone (or several) involved or whose words are relevant.
 - Comparison: Are there two or more things that, when compared or contrasted, point to the question, problem, or idea?
 - Question: Frame the question the essay addresses.
3. Reflect on the openings. Write about why they are or aren't successful. Choose the best one.

The Frankenstein Draft

1. Choose a draft that needs help with organization. Make a one-sided copy.
2. Cut up the copy paragraph by paragraph. (You may cut it into smaller pieces later.) Then, shuffle the paragraphs to get them out of order so the original is just a memory.
3. Go through the shuffled stack and find the *core paragraph*. This is the paragraph the essay really couldn't do without because it helps answer the question, *so what?* It might be the paragraph that explains, implicitly or explicitly, what you're trying to say in the draft. Set this aside.
4. With the core paragraph in front of you, work your way through the stack of paragraphs and make two new stacks: one of paragraphs that don't seem relevant to your core (e.g. unnecessary digressions or information) and those that do (they support the main idea, explain or define a key concept, illustrate or exemplify something important, provide necessary background).

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Frankenstein Draft, cont.

5. Put your reject pile aside. You may decide to salvage some of it later. For now, focus on your relevant pile and the core. Play with order. Try new leads, ends, middles. Consider new methods of development (see below). As you consider new arrangements, don't worry about lack of transitions; add them later. Look for gaps where more information may be needed. Consider information in the reject pile, too. Should you add *parts* of paragraphs you initially discarded?
6. As a structure begins to emerge, tape together the fragments of paper. Splice in scraps in appropriate places that note what you might add in the next draft that is currently missing.

Methods of Development:

- Narrative
- Problem to solution
- Cause to effect, or effect to cause
- Question to answer
- Know to unknown, or unknown to known
- Simple to complex
- General to specific, or specific to general
- Comparison and contrast
- A combination of any of these

PROBLEMS WITH CLARITY AND STYLE

Cutting Clutter

Too often we use stock phrases instead of simple ones, longer words instead of succinct, direct ones, and rely on our favorite “verbal tics,” phrases that seem to come naturally to us (e.g. what we *think* are effective transitions), but also seem to dominate our papers. A few examples include *in fact, kind of, actually, basically, generally, given, various, certain, and indeed*. What's your verbal tic?

1. Replace all stock phrases, complicated words, and verbal tics with simpler, more direct options. Eliminate some words (verbal tics) and do not replace them. Create a two-column chart. On one side, note original word or phrase; on other, its replacement. Examples: change “Due to the fact that...” to “Because...”; change “Proceed with the implementation of...” to “Begin...”; “A number of...” to “many...”; “facilitate” to “ease”; “nowadays” and “in today's society” to “now.”

Actors and Actions

As you know, verbs make things happen in writing, and how much energy prose possesses depends on verb power. Academic writing sometimes lacks strong verbs, relying instead on passive standbys like *it is believed*. Not only are the verbs weak, but the actors, or the people or things engaged in the action, are often missing from the sentence. *Who* believes? This is called passive voice, and you should avoid it most writing. Get rid of passive voice by doing a “to be” search and replacing weak verbs with stronger ones.

1. Conduct a “to be” search. Forms of *To Be*: is, are, was, were, has been, have been, will be. Wherever you find passive construction, rewrite the sentence by adding in the actor (subject).
2. Replace weak, imprecise verbs with stronger, more descriptive ones. For example, you might change “found” to “discovered” or “broke” to “shattered.”

*I also recommend conducting a “would” search. Most times, you can simply delete the “would,” and the sentence will remain intact. If not, replace it with an active verb and rewrite the sentence.

Fresh Ways to Say Things

One challenge of writing is to find fresh ways to say things instead of relying on hand-me-down phrases. Removing clichés and shopworn expressions from writing will make it sound more as if you are writing with your own voice rather than someone else's. This helps readers believe you have something new and interesting to say. Clichés tend to close off thoughts rather than open them to new ideas and different ways of seeing. A cliché often leaves us with nothing more to say because someone else has already said it.

1. Reread the draft, circling clichés and hand-me-down expressions.
2. Cut these and rewrite your sentences, finding your own way to say it. In your own words, what do you really mean by “do or die” or “striking while the iron is hot” or “becoming a true believer”? Write your original sentences above your revised sentences. You should have ten new sentences.

Common clichés (there are more): *home is where the heart is, hit the nail on the head, grass is greener, more than meets the eye, rude awakening, sigh of relief, tried and true, at the end of the day.*

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