

Steps for Writing Revision

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*For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts.... Start by getting something—anything—down on paper.... The first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even God help us, healthy. —Author Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life**

1. Now that you've taken a little time away from your paper, return to it and read it entirely through.
2. You should be able to put away your paper and say your main point in a sentence or two. If and when you can, reflect on if your point is a point of analysis rather than simply summary or observation. By the end of a successful revision process, you will be able to state your historical argument succinctly!
3. Read through feedback and edits for your paper. Identify what are main areas for growth. Prioritize which you will tackle first. Don't invest too much time in polishing your syntax before addressing conceptual issues – sentences should change and disappear in the revision process.
4. Identify what the focus of your paper is. Does your paper cohere around a central argument?
5. In a new word document, create a skeletal outline of your paper's current structure: cut and paste your thesis and your topic sentences. Read closely through this list. Your thesis should be clear, concise, and analytical. Every topic sentence should relate somehow to constructing this argument. Every paragraph should relate to its topic sentence. You will do this writing exercise at least twice during the revision process. **Turn in your revision outlines with your paper.**
6. Use your topic sentence outline to reveal problem areas. Proceed to clarifying your thesis, bolstering your argument, and rewriting paragraphs.
7. The exact course of your revision process will vary according to what you will change during your process.
 - a. In the process of writing, your ideas will likely change and evolve. You may need to restructure your paper to reflect your enriched thoughts and focus.
 - b. You may need to strengthen your knowledge and evidentiary base. In that case, you will pursue secondary (and possibly primary) reading with an eye toward your honed focus.
 - c. Your structure may currently be organized around individual sources, rather than an argument. Restructure your paragraphs so that your structure follows analysis.
 - d. I encourage *everyone* to make use of the writing center. They are a resource to be utilized -- one you already pay for.
8. Throughout the revision process, it is extremely helpful to talk through your ideas with others. Pay attention to what you are saying and how you are explaining your ideas.
9. Read your paper aloud. If your sentences feel awkward coming out of your mouth, rewrite them. Speaking aloud *as* you write may lead to clearer writing.

10. Get feedback from another reader by following these directions, from <http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/writing.htm#Revising>
- a. Give your paper to a roommate or friend to read. Tell them you want to meet with them the next day to get their reaction. Give yourself 24 hours away from this paper.
 - b. When you meet your reader the next day, they will probably tell you that your paper is wonderful. Do not believe them. No first draft or second draft is wonderful. Michelangelo did not paint the Sistine Chapel after one sleepless night.
 - c. Thank them for their efforts and ask them not to look at the paper for a minute. Ask them: what was the main point of the paper? If they didn't get it, you have a problem. Your introduction and conclusion probably are not clear enough. You need to begin strong and end strong so highlight your introduction and conclusion.
 - d. Also ask your reader to show you all the places in the paper where they did not understand something you wrote. Highlight these passages—they are problems. Ask your reader what questions they had after they finished reading the paper.
 - e. If you do not have potential readers, make an appointment with those great tutors at the writing center. Have them go through the first and/or second drafts with you. We know we've told you this before, but we're going to say it again. The single best thing that you can do for your university writing career is to develop a relationship with a writing tutor at your university's writing center. They are paid to help you--take advantage of it. After college you will need good writing skills for almost any job. This is not about a grade—this is about your life.
11. When you think you have addressed the paper's areas for growth, initiate the wrap-up revision process. In a new word document, create another skeletal outline of your paper's current structure with your thesis and your topic sentences. Read closely through this list. Your thesis should be clear, concise, and analytical. Every topic sentence should relate somehow to constructing this argument. Return to your paper and read through it again -- every paragraph should relate to its topic sentence.
12. Allow plenty of time to correct small errors: typos, comma placement, citation formatting, etc.
13. Put your paper away for 24 hours. Read it again and address anything else, then turn it in!
14. Bask in your writerly glory.

Writing means many different things to me but one thing it is not: writing is not the transcription of thoughts already consciously present in my mind. Writing is a magical and mysterious process that makes it possible to think differently.

[O]ne is not born a writer but rather becomes one. Learning to write well is a lifelong endeavor.

-- Historian Lynn Hunt in *How Writing Leads to Thinking (and not the other way around)*

<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1002/1002art1.cfm>

Resource: "How to Get the Dead Dogs and Leaning Chocolate Cakes out of Your Paper," by Genya Erling and Trish O'Kane, from *Learning Historical Research* <http://www.williamcronon.net/researching/index.htm>