

24.

REVISION STRATEGIES

Learning Objectives

- Distinguish between higher order concerns and low order concerns
- Understand how to use a variety of revision strategies

Revision Strategies



Revision encompasses everything from transformative changes in content and argumentation to minor corrections in grammar and punctuation. As such, revision can be daunting: how does one progress from initial drafts (called “rough drafts” for good reason) to a polished piece of writing? While you may have feedback from your classmates and/or professor to help you revise, the feedback is not likely to be a step-by-

step set of instructions that you can follow to produce a much stronger draft. Rather, you have comments and suggestions to help you think about ways to make your ideas come across more clearly and more powerfully. Even if you have a lot of errors, writing isn't like answering questions on a quiz or solving a math problem. Writing well can take many, many different forms, and good writing is always about conveying a specific message to a specific audience. Revision, therefore, is about making that message reach its intended audience, and there is no "right answer" to how to do that.

You can, however, learn specific strategies to help you revise effectively. In addition, you can and should develop a systematic process for revision. Doing so will help you produce thoughtful, polished texts and improve your written communication skills. Consider, then, a systematic approach to revision, including strategies to employ at every step of the process.

A System for Approaching Revision

Generally, revision should be approached in a top-down manner by addressing **higher-order concerns (HOCs)** before moving on to **lower-order concerns (LOCs)**.

In writing studies, the term "higher order" is used to denote major or global issues such as thesis, argumentation, and organization, whereas "lower order" is used to denote minor or local issues such as grammar and mechanics.^[1] The more analytical work of revising HOCs often has ramifications for the entire piece. Perhaps in refining the argument, a writer will realize that the discussion section does not fully consider the study's implications. Or, a writer will try a new organizational scheme and find that a paragraph no longer fits and should be cut. Such revisions may have far-reaching implications for the text.

Dedicating time to tweaking wording or correcting grammatical errors is unproductive if the sentence will be changed or deleted. Focusing on HOCs before LOCs allows writers to revise more effectively and efficiently.

Higher Order Concerns

Bearing in mind the general system of revising from HOCs to LOCs, you can employ several revision strategies.

- **Begin by evaluating how your argument addresses your rhetorical situation**—that is, the specific context surrounding your writing, including the audience, purpose, and constraints.^[2]

In a required college writing class, the actual audience for your work is your professor and maybe fellow classmates, and the reason you're revising the essay is to improve. To revise effectively, though, you have to imagine an audience and situation beyond the classroom. Your professor may read your essay and know what

you mean or follow your logic, but when grading the essay, the professor is going to imagine how a far less sympathetic audience will respond to your work. You need to do the same.

For example, you may write an article describing a new medical treatment. If the target audience comes from a variety of disciplines, you may need to include substantial background explanation, consider the implications for practitioners and scholars in multiple fields, and define technical terms. By contrast, if you are addressing a highly specialized audience, you may be able to dispense with many of the background explanations and definitions because of your shared knowledge base. You may consider the implications only for specialists, as they are your primary audience.

Because this sort of revision affects the entire text, beginning by analyzing your rhetorical situation is crucial. You need to imagine what an educated reader who doesn't know you or your assignment. How would that audience react to what you've written?

- **Analyze your thesis or main argument for clarity.**

Make sure that your thesis responds to the assignment you've been given and to the rhetorical situation you have identified. Your thesis is an answer or solution to a question that your target audience wants or needs to have answered. A good thesis goes beyond the obvious to offer new insight, new thinking, a fresh perspective. If your thesis doesn't directly respond to the assignment, if it doesn't address the needs of the situation (including your audience), and/or if it makes an unoriginal or obvious statement, you will need to revise it so that it more effectively responds to the rhetorical situation.

Consider, too, if your thesis over-promises. Interrogate the thesis by thinking of as many questions or objections as you can. If you brainstorm a lot of objections or questions, you have too broad a thesis, which means the first step in revising is to narrow your focus. A more specific thesis will ensure you provide a more in-depth discussion of our topic.

One more way to analyze your thesis: Have you presented a different thesis in the concluding paragraph or maybe in one of the body paragraphs? Often, the process of writing an essay will lead to a stronger thesis. As you think more about what you want to say, you come up with better ideas. Look closely at the topic sentences for each paragraph and at your concluding thesis. Could one of those be a better thesis?

A change in thesis requires a change in the body paragraphs. If your thesis statement is ineffective, the body paragraphs (which are based on the thesis) are likely to be ineffective as well. With an improved thesis, examine each paragraph carefully to make sure it supports the point you want to make.

- **Evaluate the global organization of your text by writing a reverse outline.** Unlike traditional outlines, which are written before drafting, reverse outlines reflect the content of written drafts.

Many writers use a reverse outline to check their work. Reverse outlining is a process whereby you take away all of the supporting writing and are left with a paper's main points or main ideas, sometimes represented by your

paper's topic sentences. Your reverse outline provides a bullet-point view of your paper's structure because you are looking at the main points of the paper you wrote.

Experienced writers, especially when writing longer papers about a complex subject, need ways to test their drafts for the logical sequence of points: its structure. A reverse outline allows writers to read a condensed version of what they wrote, and provides one good way to examine and produce a successful paper. Specifically, it can help you

1. Determine if your body paragraphs each support your thesis
2. Discover places to expand on your evidence or analysis
3. See where readers might be tripped up by your organization or structure
4. Identify off-topic sentences in body paragraphs

If you have trouble creating a reverse outline, that might be a sign that your body paragraphs are not unified. Looking carefully at the body paragraphs is another HOC.

- **Evaluate the unity, organization, and coherence of body paragraphs.** As with essays, paragraphs need to be focused around one specific idea or sub-claim, and the sentences within the paragraph should be arranged in a logical order, with strong transitions between them.

If your reverse outline reveals that some of your body paragraphs are not focused, you may need to delete information that you initially thought related to your topic sentence, or you may need to divide one paragraph into two paragraphs, which then requires developing more content for both paragraphs. You should also make sure you have a logical order to the sentences in your paragraphs, and that you use transitions to signal that order to the reader.

Lower Order Concerns

Now it's time to consider the lower order concerns (LOCs). The difference between higher order and lower order concerns is simple: HOCs are global issues, or issues that affect how a reader understands the entire paper; LOCs are issues that don't *necessarily* interrupt understanding but that may distract or annoy your readers. Addressing LOCs is also a way to make your writing more powerful.

HOCs	LOCs
Audience	Grammar
Thesis statement	Punctuation
Organization	Citation
Focus	Spelling
Development of ideas	Sentence structure/style

These are just a few examples of LOCs, and some LOCs are more important than others. If you have a couple of misplaced commas, you probably aren't going to make substantial improvements to your draft by simply correcting the commas. On the other hand, if you have a lot of sentence fragments in your essay, your readers are likely to get confused, so eliminating fragments will definitely improve your writing. Always try to think in terms of, "Does this affect my understanding of the writing?"

How to Address LOCs

Analyze your use of source material. Check any paraphrases and quotations against the original texts. Quotations should replicate the original author's words, while paraphrases should maintain the original author's meaning but have altered language and sentence structures. For each source, confirm that you have adhered to the preferred style guide for the target journal or other venue.

Consider individual sentences in terms of grammar, mechanics, and punctuation. Many LOCs can be revised by isolating and examining different elements of the text. Read the text sentence by sentence, considering the grammar and sentence structure. Remember, a sentence may be grammatically correct and still confuse readers. If you notice a pattern—say, a tendency to misplace modifiers or add unnecessary commas—read the paper looking only for that error. Read the document backwards, word for word, looking for spelling errors. Throughout the writing process and especially at this stage of revision, keep a dictionary, a thesaurus, and a writing handbook nearby.

Strategies such as reading aloud and seeking feedback are useful at all points in the revision process. Reading aloud will give you distance from the text and prevent you from skimming over what is actually written on the page. This strategy will help you to identify both HOCs, such as missing concepts, and LOCs, such as typos. Additionally, seeking feedback will allow you to test your ideas and writing on real readers. Seek feedback from readers both inside and outside of your target audience in order to gain different perspectives.

Read your paper from end to beginning. Yes: from end to beginning, not beginning to end! Sometimes, we simply can't see the problems in our sentences because we know what we want to say and see what we want to say, whether it's there or not. Reading an essay backwards, though, can force us to see the writing differently. It becomes unfamiliar.

Use an editing checklist. You can make a list of common problems you tend to make and use that to check your essay. Knowing what to look for makes finding problems much easier.

Revising Takes Time

Addressing both HOCs and LOCs will take time. Most successful writers will devote far more time to revising their work than they devote to writing a first draft. Devoting the appropriate amount of time to revising, therefore, is perhaps the most important step you can take to becoming a successful writer.

Key Takeaways

- For most successful writers, revising is more important than writing
- Revision is more than just “making corrections”
- Begin revising the big picture issues, such as content and organization
- After addressing big picture items, identify problems or weaknesses with word choice, sentence structure, and citation errors