

Strategies for REVISION

Why revise?

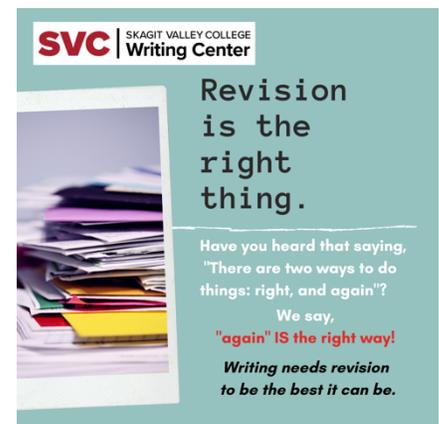
Revision is one of the most important aspects of successful writing. When you revise, you work to “re-see” the writing to determine how well it is working and what is needed to strengthen it. Revision involves making big changes to the piece of writing as a whole—changes that focus on the focus, organization, development, and coherence.

It should never be a goal to draft “so well” that revision isn’t needed, and remember that revision is **NOT** correcting errors, checking spelling, or making very minor changes—that’s editing. (See our *Writing Guide* “*Revision & Editing: What’s the difference?*”) Revision is at the heart of the writing process.

Get ready to revise

Make revision a key part of your process.

- First, **take time away**. Your brain needs a “rest” from drafting, so that you can more easily “re-see” the writing.
- **Plan lots of time**—possibly up to 30 or 40% of your total writing time should be spent on revision. (This is why drafting “the night before it’s due” is **not** a good strategy!)
- **Eliminate distractions** while you’re working, as you should for any part of the process.
- **Prepare to make several passes** at revision; don’t try to do it all at once.
- **Plan to check your work against the assignment prompt and/or rubric** to make sure your hard work doesn’t go astray of what is expected. It’s useful to develop a checklist, and consult it throughout your revision.



Assess your draft

Different drafts need different revisions. Assess yours carefully to decide what is most needed; consider the key **focuses for revision**. To make your assessment (or to continue after you’ve made it) try some of the **strategies for revision** offered below. Based on your assessment, make your **revision plan**.

Focuses for revision:

- **Identify what’s working**. Mark these parts of your draft, or make a list. Knowing which aspects of the draft are effective will help you make ongoing revision decisions.
- **Consider the purpose**: Is the writing intended to explain, argue, analyze, describe? (Be sure to check the assignment regularly to make sure you’re on track.) Once you know for sure, you can check each part of the draft to see where it is—and isn’t—working toward that purpose.

- **Asses for organization, structure & coherence, and development.**
 - **Organization:** Are the ideas in a logical, meaningful order? How the parts of essay are arranged shouldn't be an accident, and it shouldn't be random. (See "Concepts vs. categories," below.)
 - **Structure & coherence:** Is the organization clearly signaled by key structural elements: thesis and topic sentences? (The ideas might be in good order, but the reader needs to be able to tell!) Are there clear transitions between ideas? Logical order and clear transitions = coherence.
 - **Development:** Is the essay focus developed with sufficient evidence and discussion? If it's an argument, what about opposing arguments?
- **Assess the paragraphs for "DUC":** development, unity, and coherence. (See also our Writing Guide "Topic sentences & Writing effective paragraphs.") Each body paragraph should have a clear topic sentence that communicates its focus, and that focus should be fully and logically developed with evidence, discussion, etc.
- **Evaluate the topic sentences.** Each body paragraph should have a clear t.s. (See "Try a topic sentence outline," below.)

Strategies for revision– Organization

Reverse outlining– You may or may not have used a planning outline to help you organize your ideas before you drafted. A "reverse outline" happens after you've completed a draft. It can help you assess your draft's organization and development.

1. Number the paragraphs in your draft
2. For each paragraph, identify its focus and write it out in a summative statement. Don't use one word "labels"; you want more specific information.
3. Put these summative statements into a list or outline using a separate page or file.
4. Review this actual plan of the draft as it is now. Where is it making sense? Is there anything out of order? Is the focus of any of the paragraphs unclear? Is something missing?

Concepts vs. categories– Examine your draft (or your reverse outline, if you created one) to analyze it's structure.

- Is it a basic, more or less interchangeable "list" of categories?
- Or is the organization based on concepts/ideas?

You want the second of these! If the organization seems to be based on categories, look inside of them to see what is said about each–those are likely your concepts. Reorganizing based on those will lead to a lot of rearranging of material–and probably a clearer and more meaningful discussion.

(For a great discussion of "categorical and connective organization," see the handout from the Thompson Writing Program at Duke University at https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/site-images/finding_your_flow.pdf)

Talking and listening– You don't need to revise in isolation!

- **Talk through the draft** with a friend or family member. Explain the topic or make the argument verbally; then check to see if your draft covers everything you talked about, and make note of any questions your listener has so that you can work the answers into the writing.
- **Read your draft aloud** to yourself (or to someone else). Mark places where you find yourself confused or realized there's a problem with organization. (This is a good editing strategy, too.)
- **Have someone else read your draft to you.** Make notes on your assessment. (Pro student tip: Copy and paste your draft into Google translate or a dictation software and have it read back to you.)
- **Seek out feedback!** Ask for substantive feedback from a trusted friend or classmate. (Be sure to explain that you're not looking for praise or for an argument; you want to know where the essay is clear and where it's not clear yet.) Or—our favorite idea—drop into the Writing Center to have a Consultant look at your draft with you (or submit it to the SVC Writing Center online for written feedback)!

Strategies for revision— Structure & coherence

Evaluate paragraph length— Conduct a visual check of the length of the paragraphs. (This is easiest with a printed copy, but can be done on the computer.) Recall how you feel when you encounter long, dense paragraphs in reading: they're off-putting, sometimes even threatening. Paragraphs shouldn't be extra long just because your essays are getting longer; rather, they develop more levels of discussion.

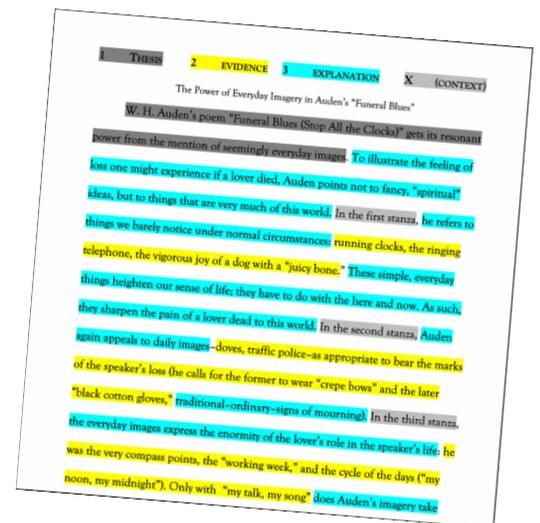
Consider ideas in a very long draft paragraph as a larger idea or section of the discussion, to be broken down into its parts. This leads to greater clarity and coherence. Think of it this way: More paragraphs = more topic sentences = more ways to present the discussion clearly to the reader.

(See also our Writing Guide, "Structuring longer essays: The "Super topic sentence"!)

Highlight paragraphs for claim/focus, evidence, and explanation— Using colored highlighters (or highlighting on the computer), go through the paragraphs and "code" them.

For example, mark the topic sentences with gray, mark each piece of evidence in yellow, and mark explanation or discussion of the evidence in blue.

Then, examine the color patterns. Missing gray in some of the paragraphs? Plan to work on topic sentences. Is there sufficient evidence in each paragraph, or should you provide more for better development? Is the evidence simply presented, or is it explained/discussed, so the reader will fully understand how it works to support the focus?



(For instructions and an example, see our Writing Guide "Color coding: Highlighting paragraphs as a revision strategy.")

Check paragraphs for "DUC": development, unity, and coherence— Each paragraph

- should have a single focus—i.e., it should be **unified**;
- should be **well-developed** with sufficient evidence and explanation; and
- should be **coherent**, with the ideas in logical order and transitions between the sentences/ideas.

You can use a highlighting process like the one described above to help with this. (*See also our Writing Guide “Topic sentences & Writing effective paragraphs.”*)

Try a topic sentence (“T + t.s.”) outline— This exercise helps you evaluate and revise topic sentences. By copying and pasting the thesis (T) and topic sentences (t.s.) into a “T + t.s. outline,” you can evaluate how effectively the t.s. are communicating the essay’s structure. Most writers find some missing or misplaced t.s. while they’re creating the outline, too—allowing for some on-the-spot revision as an additional part of the exercise.

(For instructions and an example, see our Writing Guide “Thesis + topic sentence outline revision exercise.”)

Make a plan

Once you’ve made your assessment (or, more likely, as you’re making it), you can create a revision plan. Having a revision plan will keep you on track and help you remember your revision goals.



Your job in a revision plan is to decide specifically what you need to change and to be specific about your tasks. Of course, you’ll want to write it down!

- **A not so helpful revision plan** might say something like “Revise my thesis, add more examples, cut out some unneeded material, fix grammar.” Hmm. Distressingly vague! (And “fixing grammar is editing, not revision—one thing at a time!”)

• **In a good revision plan**, here’s what “revise my thesis” might look like: “Revise my thesis: Right now, my thesis argues an issue, that not recycling is immoral. Since this is a proposal, I need to make the topic a problem to be solved rather than an issue to be argued.” Ah—specific!

A few final tips:

Get digital— It can be helpful to know how to use software revision features like track changes, insert comments, highlighting, etc. If you don’t already know how to use these, you might want to experiment.

Work in phases— Remember: Don’t expect or try to do all your revision at once; plan to make several passes, focusing on one thing each time. This will ensure you follow through on each area of your plan.

Save successive drafts— Rather than overwrite the same file with every change, save new versions, clearly labeled in the file names (e.g., LastName_Essay2_draft 2).

Use your assignment checklist— Keep checking your work against the assignment and rubric!

Come see us at the Writing Center—we look forward to being part of your revision plan!