



Reread, Rewrite, Revise

You've completed your essay – well done! A large part of the ground has been covered, but the work is far from over. This is because your draft, by definition, needs revision. The primary purpose of the first few drafts is to get your thoughts down on paper. The primary purpose of revision is:

1. To analyze your thoughts for coherence and consistency. (Are there any gaping holes in your argument? Better you weed them out yourself rather than have them pointed out by the reader.)
2. To ensure that your writing is properly communicating your thoughts to your readers.

Since both of these objectives are essential to any strong essay, it is useful to learn more about the process of revision. This section focuses on the two stages of revision that all good academic essays pass through before completion: (1) editing and (2) fixing the nitty-gritties, also known as proof-reading.

Stage 1: Editing

How do you begin the revision process? By focusing on the argument. At the first stage of the revision process, also known as global revision, read your paper with the sole aim of judging how clearly and coherently your argument is unfolding over the pages. In effect, this task is the reverse of writing the first draft: then, the argument was in your mind and your job was transferring it to the page; now, the task is to re-read what you've written and judge whether your writing corresponds with the argument you want to make, or the message you want to convey.

Once you're confident that your writing communicates what you want to say, you must now consider the content of your thought—much easier now that you can *see* your thoughts in writing. In other words, you must evaluate the strength of your argument. Are all your major claims backed by strong supporting evidence? For instance, if you're arguing that smoking should be allowed in campus because not smoking negatively affects students' performance in class, you must not assume that this is obvious (for instance, it is not sufficient to say "how can a smoker concentrate without a cigarette?"). Instead, cite another book/article or provide strong evidence yourself such as a short survey, private interviews etc.

In evaluating your argument, it is also important to anticipate counter-arguments that your opponents might put forth. Ask yourself: Is there an alternative explanation for the same data? If yes, have you given sufficient reasons to rule it out? Suppose you cited the relatively lower grades of students who usually smoke as evidence that not being allowed to smoke is affecting their



grades. A reader might argue, however, that most students who smoke are actually those who are already receiving low grades, and hence the ban on smoking is not responsible for their poor performance. Good writers are themselves able to identify counter-arguments such as the above and refute them. In this case, you could refute the counter-argument by stating that the performance of both smoker and non-smoker students was checked before and after the ban, and it was only the students who smoked who suffered a dramatic decrease in their grades *after* the ban, all subject to research of course. Don't make anything up!

Other questions to ask yourself: Have I used any technical terms without adequately explaining what they mean? Are all the paragraphs logically building upon each other or are there gaps in the reasoning? Should I add an example to make a particular point clearer? Is the essay 'flowing' smoothly from one idea to another?

As you continue to read, carefully following the development of your argument, you will notice sentences and even whole paragraphs that are not contributing to your argument. Cut them out. Remove every word that is not contributing to your argument. This includes all those bits of information thrown in only to show off your command of the subject. Remember, good writers are *ruthless* when revising. In short, if it's not relevant to the argument, let it go.

Global revisions can be hard, and you may be tempted to skip the arduous process of scrutinizing your own writing—not least because it will save you the trouble of modifying your argument or conducting further research or finding a reference. Also, the deadline might be near and you might feel that you don't have sufficient time for revision. You might be more concerned about grammar and punctuation. Or you might simply be too tired after writing the essay to go over it again. Remember, though, that the strength of your paper, the impact it has on the reader (as well as your final grade) depends heavily on the strength of your argument. Think of the argument as the cake-mixture and proper punctuation and grammar as toppings. The toppings are essential to a delicious cake, but no amount of topping will help if the cake-mixture isn't good. This is why instructors and writing tutors insist that students seek help first with the broader issues in their essays, issues related to the argument (such as clarity, flow, structure); worrying about grammar without fixing the argument is like fretting over the topping when the cake itself needs more time in the oven.

Stage 2: Fixing the nitty-gritties

Once you're reasonably satisfied with the overall arguments, you can move toward fixing the smaller issues (such as grammar, spellings, word choice, etc.). Here are some general tips to keep in mind as you go along:

- Avoid wordiness. No reader wants to read long and convoluted prose. Sometimes non-native writers of English end up with grammatically incorrect or fragmented sentences in an effort to sound more sophisticated. It's best not to do that. Try and write simple, clear, and concise sentences. In order to do this, take every sentence and try to reduce it as much



as possible without changing the meaning. Employing the active voice is one easy way of doing this. Consider the sentence,

“It can be seen in Taylor’s writings that modern individualism is built on a strong moral foundation.”

The sentence is currently in the passive voice; it is not clear who the subject is (the subject is that which performs the action). The passive voice is putting too much distance between the reader and the meaning the writer wants to convey. Since it is “Taylor’s writings” which are responsible for showing that ‘modern individualism is built on a strong moral foundation,’ we should make them the subject. In fact, there’s another passive construction lurking in the second part of the sentence (“modern individualism is built on”). By changing both of these to active verbs, we get,

“Taylor’s writings show that modern individualism is built on a strong moral foundation.”

How different from the original!

- Pay close attention to your choice of verbs. Are they communicating the meaning that you wish to convey? For example, you could change the sentence,

“Decolonial theory *requires* that we think critically about colonialism,” to

“Decolonial theory *demand*s that we think...”

In this context, *demand*s is a much better option because it signals the absolute necessity for decolonial theory to think critically about colonialism, something that the much weaker verb, *requires*, doesn’t fully communicate.

- Use words that communicate what you want to say. Often, a single, well-chosen word works much better than a short phrase. For example,

“his writings make references now and then to Africa,” can be changed to

“his writings are *interspersed* with references to Africa.”

- Be consistent—with everything! If you’re using justified alignments in your essay, make sure that the *entire* essay (including footnotes and bibliography) uses justified alignments.
- If you’re unsure about a grammar rule, look it up. Should it be, “neither he nor she *likes* careless errors,” or “neither he nor she *like* careless errors”? (*Note: it is the former*). While the internet is useful to quickly look up a particular rule, in the long run you will save much



more time by understanding and memorizing the basic rules rather than looking them up each time a problem arises.

- Don't use words that you're not fully comfortable with just to make your essay sound more 'academic'. Don't say,

“The interpellation of the French aristocracy, as given by Derrida, allows us to argue for ...”

Over here the word “interpellation” is used in the sense of giving an explanation or an account of the French aristocracy, which is an incorrect usage of interpellation. Interpellation refers to a process by which certain individuals, or groups, come to internalize certain beliefs as given and natural.

Revision thus demands a high level of attention and a significant amount of time. Yet it is precisely the extra time and the extra energy invested in fixing an essay that does wonders for an essay. When in need of motivation, remind yourself: what is easy to read has been difficult to write.