



Revision

Overview

We continue to be influenced by the romantic notion of writing as a spontaneous, sudden, act of inspiration whereby our thought is immediately poured out onto the page in finished form. Think of Mozart and the popular image of him hearing the music, fully formed in his head and simply transcribing the notes onto paper. Some writers may write this way but, especially for academic purposes, it's better to conceive of writing as an act, not of mere transcription of thought, but of discovery and revision. We don't simply write what we think. We use writing as a way of thinking. And, in increments, we make discoveries through writing, and then revise according to our newly formed ideas, then write some more, discover more, and then revise again. And so on. So, we suggest that you see your academic writing as a process of writing drafts in which you make discoveries and, through the constant revision process, finally articulate precisely (or almost) what it is you actually want to say.

Think of the shaping of your writing as taking place in three successive phases:

1. Revision
2. Editing
3. Proofreading

Editing can be thought of as the last stage of revision during which you focus on the clarity and correctness of your sentences.

Proofreading can be thought of as the last stage of editing during which you focus on specific elements of grammar, usage, spelling and mechanics making sure that your writing is correct in these areas. Please refer to our handouts on these specific activities for more strategies.

Revising comes before these other two activities and is more subjective. Revision takes place throughout your writing process and involves a thoughtful second (or third, fourth) look at the content of your paper. The purpose of this second-look (re-visioning) includes the following questions:

- Are you saying what you mean to say?
- Does your essay build in some coherent sequence?
- Have you have provided all the necessary detail for your reader?

- Have you avoided the inclusion of unnecessary or irrelevant “fluff”?
- Are your arguments clear and logical?
- Have you addressed the assignment instructions?

Revision requires a focus on the big issues in your paper – a critical re-examination of what you are saying, making changes along the way as you make new discoveries and gain new insights. Chances are, you already do this to some degree with everything you write but you may not be consciously thinking of it as “revision”. So, become more aware of this as a central part of all writing and try these strategies:

- Revise as you go. Sometimes we make discoveries and gain insight simply by writing. So, see all of your writing as subject to change.
- Come back later. Revision is often best when we see our own writing with fresh eyes after some time has passed. Come back later and read your paper with a critical new perspective.
- Focus on your thesis. Or your central idea. Do you still feel the same way? Has your perspective changed as a result of doing research? Does your writing/thinking still support the central idea? Or do changes have to be made? Ask these questions.
- Look for balance. Does your paper have balance? Have you over-emphasized one section at the expense of another?
- Check for organization. If there are distinct sections to your paper, are they organized in a way that makes sense? Do the various parts of the paper do what they intend to do?
- Be ruthless. Some people find it very difficult to throw things away. And once you have spent time thinking hard and writing something down, it can be very difficult to part with it. But, if something no longer fits, have no hesitation to toss it out. It’s part of the process and your paper will be strengthened.
- Don’t be a perfectionist. Writing is messy and rarely “finished”. Your aim is to produce something interesting, not perfect. It’s just your attempt at an idea. Remember, the word “essay” comes from the French word meaning “to try”.

How We Can Help

Revision is a process of “seeing your paper again”. And there is no better way to do this than in conversation with another thoughtful reader who can give you feedback. SLS Writing Support consultants can help you to discover if what you intended in your writing is actually what is coming across to the reader. That’s the essence of revision.

Resources

Kate Messner of Revision (<http://youtu.be/GHWuIDm6QJU>)

One Person’s version of the writing process, including revision (<http://youtu.be/V1pnpL8295E>)