

REVISION ROADMAP



Revision and editing are crucial for developing a strong piece of writing with a cohesive message and impactful style. Not sure where to begin? Each section of this handout addresses a stage of the revision process and contains actionable suggestions to address common writing challenges. It's your writing journey: choose the activities that best fit your project and goals.

GET A FRESH PERSPECTIVE ON YOUR WRITING

After extensive time writing, reading, and thinking about your text during the initial drafting process, it can be challenging to notice discrepancies between what you intended to say and what you actually put on the page. To overcome this challenge, you need to escape your “writer” mindset and view your draft through the eyes of a reader who is encountering the text for the first time. Here are some strategies that can help:

Take Some Time Off: Set your writing aside for at least a day, ideally more, before coming back to revise. Don't look at your writing. Try not to think about it. The longer you wait, the less in “writing mode” you'll be when you pick it up again.

Listen and Learn: Read your writing out loud or use a text-to-speech tool to hear it read to you to listen for sections that don't quite sound right. Sometimes hearing the text makes it easier to identify awkward sentences or ideas that don't clearly connect.

Change It Up: Print your paper out and annotate on the physical copy while you read. Changing the format from screen to print can help the text feel “new” again. If you don't want to print, try switching the layout or font for a similar effect.

Fine-Tune Your Schedule: Sometimes the environment in which you write best is not the same as where you revise best. Try rereading and revising at a different time of day or a different location than you usually write. Mixing things up can also help keep you out of the writer's mindset to stay focused on making changes to the text.

STRATEGIZE FOR SUCCESS

Effective, efficient revision is a systematic, iterative process. Set yourself up for success with revision habits that help you use your time effectively, prioritize high-impact changes, and document your process.

Check the Requirements: Whether you are writing for a specific journal or for a class assignment, double check the requirements and recommendations to ensure the overall style and focus of your piece fits. If possible, look at other writing published in the same place – is the scope of your writing similar to others selected for publication? Are there important requirements or stylistic features that you should investigate during revision?

Start Big: Rather than trying to fix everything in your writing all at once, gradually strengthen your draft through multiple focused revision cycles. Start by strengthening the broader structure and

meaning of your writing before targeting smaller sentence-level concerns. This approach prioritizes the changes with the greatest impact and minimizes the likelihood that you spend precious time perfecting a passage that will not make it into the final draft. The strategies later in this document are roughly organized by scope to help you move through this process.

One Step Back, Two Forward: Revision is not linear; to make your writing the best it can be, you might need to dismantle your draft, delete content, and test new writing approaches. Remember that this messy process *is* progress: by experimenting, refining, and restructuring your writing, you will not only create a stronger manuscript today, but also build your understanding of structure-function relationships in writing that will make you a stronger writer in the future. Stay alert – sometimes removing a few great sentences is necessary to address broader structural problems in your writing. Don't let local strengths deter you from making global improvements!

Save, Save, and Resave: Before making substantial changes to your writing, save a new copy of your draft so you can refer to the original as you go. If you expect to go through many rounds of revision, give each draft a descriptive name to help keep track of the process. Similarly, rather than simply deleting chunks of text from your paper, paste them into a separate “scrap” document while you work on revising. These strategies help make major changes feel less drastic and irreversible and allow you to easily compare versions.

Notice, Note, and Set Aside: Stay focused on your current revision step. If you notice something that you are not ready to address yet (such as a grammatically confusing sentence while you are organizing paragraphs), mark it with a comment or highlight and set it aside for later.

STEP ONE: START WITH STORY AND AUDIENCE

Before significantly changing your writing, evaluate the content. Make sure that you have a clear message and all the information your target audience needs to understand it. Take time to fill in missing sections or explore new ideas that come up while you reread your draft. Try not to get distracted by clunky sentences or not-quite-right word choice; instead, think about your writing as a series of idea building blocks adding up to an overall story or key takeaway for the reader. Do you have the right pieces to build the structure you intended?

Just the Gist: Sometimes a stylized, jargon-heavy, or “academic” writing style can obscure poorly developed ideas. As you read, try to translate your text into everyday language, as if explaining to a friend outside of your field. If you were to exchange all the technical words for simple ones, would you still have something meaningful to say? Are any ideas vague or difficult to explain that could benefit from a little more research and refinement?



Use Your ABT: Set your paper aside and write an **ABT statement** to try to capture the core context-problem-solution story you intended to tell. Once you are happy with this 1-3 sentence summary, return to your text and ask yourself: does the longer text tell the same story as the summary? Are all the components easy to find? If the text seems to be telling a different story than your ABT or seems to have multiple stories, take time to evaluate why and work to focus your narrative.

Step Into Your Reader's Shoes: Consider your target audience's interests, goals, and knowledge about your topic. Did you include enough context for these readers to understand and engage with your ideas? What you and your reader want from your writing might not always line

up (for example, a grant reviewer might prioritize projects likely to generate a return on their investment, while you prioritize projects that enable you to explore exciting new research areas). When you are aware of friction between you and your reader's goals, make sure you quickly give the reader a reason to connect to your topic and stay interested until the last page.

Follow The Clues: Try working backward from your main message to figure out what information a reader needs to logically reach the same conclusion as you. Look out for new ideas and questions that emerge. Are there any gaps in your reasoning? Missing data or discussion that would support your conclusions? Potential concerns that need to be addressed? Extraneous information that could confuse or distract from the main message?

STEP TWO: EVALUATE YOUR ORGANIZATION

Once you are confident that you have all the content you need to convey your intended story to your specific audience, it's time to check that all this material follows a logical and reader-friendly organization.

Get a Bird's Eye View: Consider the structure of your paper as a whole. Is your content organized into appropriate sections? Would clustering related material in subsections make your paper easier to navigate? Is the purpose of each section clear from its heading? Does each section clearly advance the "plot" of the paper, or does the story lose momentum or get sidetracked?



Reverse Outlining: Extract the key ideas from each paragraph to build an outline based on your writing. Does the flow of ideas make sense? Is anything out of place or off-topic? Are there any paragraphs that are difficult to summarize in a phrase, or that contain multiple ideas that you can split up or revise for clarity?

Install Road Signs: Do appropriate transition words or phrases to clearly indicate relationships as you move from section to section and paragraph to paragraph? Do you tell readers where you are going next, or do you expect them to put the pieces together? If you anticipate a reader needing to make connections to content scattered across the paper, do you make it easy to do so through reminders and clear references to other sections?

STEP THREE: POWER UP YOUR PARAGRAPHS

Each paragraph should have a clear purpose and be organized to advance the reader's understanding of your paper's message.

Highlight Structure: Every sentence in a paragraph should have a job, whether it's to provide context, make an argument, support a claim with evidence, explain results, or present conclusions. As you read, use a color-coding system to highlight each sentence's purpose: do you see patterns in how you organize information? Is everything where you would expect (for example, evidence near the claim it supports)? Do any paragraphs seem unbalanced or incomplete? Do any sentences lack a purpose, or have too many?

Power Positions: Reader attention lingers on the first or last sentences of a paragraph, so check if you have important content in these places. Would a reader skimming the topic sentences of

your paragraphs get a sense of what the whole paper is about? Looking at where a paragraph starts and ends, does it feel like the paper's story has moved forward?

Add Artistry: Check that your paragraphs vary in structure and style to communicate your ideas in a way that feels natural to read. Sometimes a slow accumulation of information that builds up to a dramatic concluding sentence engages readers in thinking through evidence with you. In other cases, leading with the conclusion provides necessary context for the rest of the paragraph.

STEP FOUR: REFINE YOUR SENTENCES

Shift to improving your sentence structure once you are happy with the content and overall organization of your writing; there's no point in worrying over elegant turns of phrase until you're sure you won't delete the surrounding paragraph! At this stage, focus on the clarity and flow of your sentences to make your writing easy and enjoyable to read.

Sentence Connectivity: Often a disjointed or choppy passage indicates that there is a problem with sentence connectivity. To make your sentences flow more smoothly, try using an "old to new" structure where the first half of a sentence refers to "old" information from the prior sentence and the second half of the sentence introduces new ideas.

Do Sentence Surgery: Scrutinize unusually long sentences and ask: would multiple sentences communicate this more clearly than one? Is it easy to keep track of the subject and action in the sentence? Sentences that contain multiple ideas should be split in two or reframed to clearly connect the concepts. In other cases, try combining sentences with similar ideas for a more concise, purposeful style.

Rhythm and Sound: Read your writing out loud, paying attention to how your writing sounds and how easy it is to read. Is there anywhere you trip over your words or verbally say something different than what's on the page? Do you hear repetition, choppy passages, or awkward phrases? Are any sentences so long that you run out of breath before you reach the end?

STEP FIVE: POLISH YOUR PROSE

Precise word choice can make your writing clear, compelling, and memorable for your readers.

Speak Your Reader's Language: Evaluate the tone of your writing: does the formality and persuasiveness match the purpose? For instance, a research proposal intended to convince readers to fund your project should sound confident and decisive, while a research paper may hedge strong claims to avoid over-interpreting findings. Both genres use a more formal and technical style than you might use while sharing your work with a friend or close colleague. Additionally, check that your word choice is appropriate for your audience. Do you define new terms and acronyms your reader might not know as they come up?

Minimize Noise, Maximize Signal: Look for sentences that use many words to say very little. Can you exchange a long phrase for a word or two? For example, try exchanging "It can be seen in the data that..." with "The data show that..." Keep an eye out for redundancy, such as in "mix together" ("mix") or "already existing," ("existing").

Energize Your Verbs: Choose specific verbs that best capture the action being described. Lean toward active voice over passive voice where appropriate for your style of writing. Substitute single words for phrases (for example, “data we *acquired* from the experiment” instead of “data we *got out of* the experiment”). Keep an eye out for excessive nominalization, turning adjectives or verbs into nouns, which often accompanies passive, weak verbs. See our [Scientific Storytelling](#) handout for examples.



Solidify Your Nouns: Prioritize concrete over abstract nouns by choosing words that create visuals for the reader and refer to specific, well-defined concepts. Turn prepositional phrases into compound nouns to reduce word count (for example, “enzyme kinetics” instead of “kinetics of enzymes”).

FINAL EDITS AND REFLECTION:

It's time to make the final changes to your writing. Check for typos, fix any stray grammatical errors, and make sure that no new problems emerged while revising sentences. Finally, give your paper one last read and reflect on how much progress you've made during revision!

Spell Check, Grammar Check: Final rounds of editing should also include a careful look for typos and grammatical issues to make sure your document is as polished as it can be. It can be helpful to ask another person to read your document to help catch small errors that are easy to gloss over after reading your paper many times

One Last Read: Finally take a step back and reread the whole piece one more time and reflect: does the final draft achieve your goals? Is there anything important you've overlooked? How has revising changed the way you think about your writing? What are you proud of in your writing, and what would you like to remember for the future?

GETTING STUCK? RESOURCES FOR REVISION:

Learning to revise your own writing effectively takes plenty of time and practice. If the process feels frustrating, slow, or confusing, don't lose hope! Seek out support, inspiration, and helpful tools to help you develop a revision process that feels efficient and effective.

Ask a Friend: Good writing is often collaborative. At any stage in the process, seeking another opinion can give you a fresh perspective. For best results, share your writing purpose, current goals, and areas of concern with your reader to help them give you relevant feedback.

Seek Specialist Support: Book an appointment at the Hixon Writing Center to discuss revision with a writing specialist. We can help you identify the highest priorities for revision in your manuscript, serve as test readers to get a new perspective on your work, or brainstorm strategies that help you improve your writing.

Do Some Reading: Many books about writing address revision strategies. While not every resource resonates with every writer, discovering new examples and ways of thinking about writing can help you determine what approaches work best for you.