There is a common misconception, and not just among writing students, that only bad writers have to revise and edit their work. To the contrary, virtually all writing that ends up in print, as well as “A” papers of all stripes, need both revision and editing—sometimes several rounds of each. Many of the best writers in the world are obsessive revisers.

Ah, so revision and editing are not one in the same? In fact, they are quite different, but equally important, parts of the writing process.

Topics covered in this tutorial include:

- Revision Definition
- Editing Definition
- The Revision Process
- Post-Draft Outlining
- Paramedic Method of Revising
- Read Your Paper Aloud!
- Take a Break from Writing
- Your Readers and Thesis
- The Editing Process
- Read Aloud: Take 2
- Check for Redundancy
- Avoid Sexist Language

Revision

Revision is best thought of literally, as re-vision, seeing again. This implies looking at a text from a new perspective, which means re-thinking even its most fundamental precepts. This might involve reconsidering your position on a controversial topic, re-evaluating the quality of the evidence used to support your claims, or re-defining your audience and/or purpose.

How is revision different from editing?

Editing

Editing is a little bit like cleaning up the kitchen after cooking a big meal. Your essay’s “cleanliness” includes smooth transitions between paragraphs, logical organization of
your thoughts and presentation of information, overall clarity and sense, and proper citation format. And let’s not forget good grammar, punctuation, and spelling!

If revision and editing are so different, then why are they included together in this resource? Because they are inextricably connected. Think about this: The head and the tail of a cat are different parts of the cat, but both are parts of the same cat. This holds true for revision and editing as parts of the writing process. A text must be both revised and edited well in order to be successful. If an essay, for example, is revised extensively, but not edited, problems such as grammar errors that make the essay’s meaning difficult to comprehend will stand in the way of its success.

The reverse is also true. Consider the poor writer who tirelessly edits an essay whose ideas are not fully formed. The result is a very polished text—perfect grammar, logical organization, no spelling errors—that no one can comprehend, despite its orderliness, because its basic meaning is unclear, undeveloped, or unsubstantiated.

OK, now that we’ve defined the terms that are basic to this conversation, how do we go about actually revising and editing?

Right off the bat, decide which comes first. It doesn’t make sense to edit a passage that hasn’t been revised, as it will be subject to scrutiny at every level during the revision process. So, revise first! This will save you from having to edit the same passage multiple times.

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The Revision Process

Believe it or not, revising can actually be fun. You’ve already chosen your topic, defined its scope, conveyed your thesis, presented your information or position, supported your claims with evidence (which might have required a great deal of research), addressed potential counter-arguments, and arrived at a satisfying conclusion. Whew! That’s a lot of work, starting from scratch, getting over the terror of the blank page, and committing your thoughts to paper. You’ve already done the hard work! Now sit back, kick up your feet, hard copy of your paper in hand, and breathe. It’s time to read, re-read, review, reflect, and revise (See Figure 1).
Post Draft Outlining

This revision strategy requires you to outline a draft that you have already completed.

This strips down your essay and allows you to see if your organization is sound, if you have repeated your points, whether your introduction and/or conclusion need work, if there are points you need to make that you haven’t yet, etc.

A good way to set this up is to count the paragraphs in your draft and write that many numbers on a separate piece of paper like this:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
Then in one sentence, as briefly as possible, state the point of each paragraph. You are not looking for the topic sentence. You are trying to boil down what the paragraph is about. If your topic sentence actually reflects what the paragraph is about, that's fine. It should; just don't trust that it will. If it doesn't, you will want to revise it.

A possible outlined draft (this one for a paper on homeschooling) might look something like this:

1. Parents want what's best for their children: Is homeschooling best?
2. (Introduction)
3. Homeschooling is growing for many reasons (religious, etc.).
4. Homeschooling gives parents the freedom to set the educational environment
5. (activities, peers, etc.).
6. Not all children need to be homeschooled, but children should have that option
7. (Conclusion).

This is a clear outline, and so it indicates that the paper is strong in terms of organization. The reader can tell that distinct points are being made in the paper, that the paper is logically organized, and that there is a clear introduction and conclusion. This outline is for a very short paper (six paragraphs), but the same process can be applied to longer texts.

Now consider this outline, written for a different paper, also on homeschooling:

1. Two groups of homeschoolers: religious and other
2. Can't get religion in school
3. Parents want to pass on their faith to their kids
4. Homeschools put kids at disadvantage—no state/federal guidelines

- What do you think about the paper this outline was written from?
- What sense do you get from paragraphs two and three about the big point the author is trying to make?
- Is the author against homeschooling? For it?
- Can you identify a thesis here? What is the paper’s main point?
If you are struggling, you should be: This outline shows that the paper has several problems.

First, as readers, we think that we will be reading a paper about two types of homeschoolers, religious and other, as described in the first paragraph. However, in the remainder of the paragraphs the author only discusses religious homeschoolers. As readers, we have to shift gears: now we think the paper is going to be about why religious parents might want to homeschool their kids.

And then, all of a sudden, we are hit with the idea that homeschooling harms kids (#4).

Quite likely, this author did not recognize the disorganization of the paper, or that s/he had changed the angle on the topic, the central focus, several times. When writers are too close to their own work (which is almost always), it is easy to overlook the fact that information is missing or misplaced. We've all started writing and ended up wandering, digressing beyond the point of no return. We can be forgiven for that—but outlining totally strips down the essay so we can see its bare bones, meaning that even though we are close to the work, we can readily identify its strengths and weaknesses.

You can also apply outlining to a single paragraph, rather than a whole paper. Let's look at this one:

Many people are unaware of a growing trend in American society. This trend is parents taking the initiative and dedication towards ensuring that their children are given a quality education. Although it may seem somewhat unorthodox to many, these families prefer to educate their children in their homes. These "homeschooled" children are growing in numbers every year. It's clear that there are many advantages to having your children learn at home.
This paragraph has five sentences, so your outline will have five points. When you summarize sentences, do it in as few words as possible:

1. Growing trend in U.S.
2. Trend = parents want good education for kids
3. Solution = homeschool
4. Homeschooled kids increasing in number each year
5. Why? Many advantages...

This outline shows a clear logical progression from point 1 to point 2 and so on. This outline demonstrates that the above is a well-constructed paragraph.

Now it’s your turn to practice. Below you will find a paragraph. Grab a piece of scrap paper and outline it sentence by sentence:

Homeschooling is often associated with two groups: religious and non-religious. Religious groups want their children to embrace their religion. To this end they take them to church on Sunday, involve them in church activities during the week, and teach them from the scripture. Religious homeschoolers want to be in charge of their children's education while emphasizing their belief in religion. Religion and education are mixed together to build the children's character, morals, and values. Religion is the faith that they hold above anything else. Religion is a subject that they can't receive at public schools.

Here is one possible outline of this paragraph:

1. Homeschooling = religious and non-religious groups
2. Want kids to have religion
3. Have religious activities all week
4. Parents in charge of education and religion
5. Both mixed is good for child
6. Religion very important
7. Can't get it in school
What do you think about this paragraph?
Is it structured like the last paragraph we looked at?
What are the similarities and differences between them?

It's repetitive (paragraphs two and six say roughly the same thing), and it uses the word religion/religious too often (nine times). Also, the topic sentence suggests that the paragraph is going to talk about two groups (religious and not), but it only talks about one.

How could this paragraph be revised?
Would reordering the sentences help?
What about changing the topic to just religious homeschooling?

There are countless ways to revise this paragraph; your choices will depend on the focus that you, the author, want to take.

Here's one attempt at revising this paragraph:

While parents choose to homeschool for several reasons, many do so to instill their religious beliefs in their children. By homeschooling, they are able to involve their children in church activities and teach them from the scripture throughout the week. This gives parents the opportunity to shape both their children's religious and academic education, thereby building in their children a strong moral character. Given that religion cannot be received in the public schools, homeschooling allows these parents the ability to pass on their faith.

Note how many of the “religion” words were removed, without changing the focus of the topic, which is a religious angle on homeschooling. This revision makes the paragraph less repetitive.

The focus has also been changed from two homeschooling groups (since the original didn't adequately address both groups) to just religious homeschooling. In other words, now the topic sentence fits the paragraph.
Paramedic Method of Revision

The Paramedic Method of Revision is a technique that targets wordiness and helps streamline your writing so it is clear and concise. It is, quite simply, a technique to help you massively overhaul your writing in a few simple steps.

To start, we will need to review some grammar. First off, what is a preposition? Can you think of an example? A good test that identifies most prepositions is whether they can fit into the following sentence:

The squirrel ran ___________ the tree (up, over, with, under, around, at, below, from, to).

<table>
<thead>
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<th>About</th>
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<th>Inside</th>
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<td>Beside</td>
<td>In</td>
<td>past</td>
<td>until</td>
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Source: (Hacker, 2004, p. 505)
Is "president" a preposition? What about "and" or "this"? Why not? "The squirrel ran this the tree" is not a possible sentence. Neither is "The squirrel ran president the tree" or "The squirrel ran and the tree." See how this test helps us to identify prepositions? "President," "this," and "and" do not fit into that blank, and so we know that they are not prepositions.

One note: There are a few prepositions that sound a bit odd in this sentence (for example, of), but they are prepositions just the same.

The next thing we need to identify are forms of the verbs, “to be” and “to have”. These verbs are really common and have many forms. For instance, “being” and “is,” “had” and “having”—can you think of other forms of these verbs?

Here are some more:
BE: was, were, wasn't, am, are, been, be
HAVE: has, hasn't, hadn't, have

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With our memories jogged about prepositions and the verb forms of “to be” and “to have,” we can now look at the Paramedic Method of Revision, which involves a series of steps:

**Step 1: Paramedic Method of Revision**

Highlight in blue all the forms of "to be" and "to have" (is, were, being, to be, had, having, hasn't, etc...):

The little girl was found safe at the mall down the street after having been declared missing for ten days.

Now you try: The dog was having too much fun when his owners were away from home.
Here's the answer: The dog was having too much fun when his owners were away from home.

Next, highlight in yellow all the prepositions, like this:

The dog with the black spots on his back lives over the tracks from my house.

Now you try one. Use your mouse to select and highlight all the prepositions:

Go over the bridge, down Main Street, up Markham Blvd, and turn into the third driveway.

Here's the answer:

Go over the bridge, down Main Street, up Markham Blvd, and turn into the third driveway.

So at this point in the revision strategy, we've marked all the versions of “to be” (was, were, am, be,...), “to have” (have, had, having, has, ....) and the prepositions (from, to, over, under, around, below,...), like this:

The latest book of the month is a fascinating gem which will be cherished for years.

Step 2: Paramedic Method of Revision

Try to delete the highlighted words. How? First, insert verbs that actually do something:

"I am a race-car driver" → "I drive race cars."

Often, you will find the verb you need (in this case "drive") posing as an adjective or noun (in this case "driver") somewhere in the sentence. Find it and make it a verb.
How do you get rid of prepositions? Well, often, they are acting as adjectives, so make them into one. How would you change this: "The boy with the blue hair"?

"The boy with the blue hair" → "The blue-haired boy."

The result is junk-free writing, real words carrying real meaning. There's an added bonus here too. It has been proven in psychological tests that the clearer the writing (i.e. the fewer unnecessary words), the more people understand it. By using this technique, your point will be clearer.

There's nothing wrong with prepositions, or the verb form of BE and HAVE. The problem is that most writing is packed full of them! Give some other words a chance!

Let's go back to one of our earlier examples. Try to re-write this sentence, getting rid of as many of the marked words as possible:

The little girl was found safe at the mall down the street after being declared missing for ten days.

What's the problem? For starters, there are lots of prepositional phrases. Did you notice a waltzing rhythm as you were reading? At the mall, down the street, ... It's also a passive sentence, meaning that there's no real subject. There's nothing wrong with passive sentences, except that they are also overused. Who found her? We don't know from this sentence because it is passive, but when you're the author, you should make sure this information is known. For this example, let's say the police found the girl.

Here's one revision:

Police discovered the little girl safe ten days later at the local mall.

Solution: active verb, no more distracting rhythm.
Let's look at another example. First identify the BE/HAVE forms and the prepositions:

They had an argument at the house of their neighbor.

Here's the marked-up version:

They **had** an argument **at** the house **of** their neighbor.

- Is there a hidden verb lurking somewhere that could replace "had"?
- How about "argument"?
- Couldn't we change this to “argued”?

Here's our first revision:

They argued at the house of their neighbor.

Now, can we do anything about those prepositions? We may not be able to get rid of both, but we can get rid of one:

They argued at their neighbor's house.

We started with a ten-word sentence and revised it to a clean six words. How's that for eliminating wordiness?

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**Read your paper aloud!**

This idea sounds so simple, it’s silly. Well, simple it is, but silly it’s not! Reading your essay aloud is perhaps the single-most effective way to revise it. It’s an especially effective method for those writers who fear they don’t have good command of basic writing principles, because all you have to do is listen and hear what the sentence sounds like. This technique encourages you to revise the sentence as you would speak it. Since most of us speak well, even if we have writing problems, reading aloud is a way of addressing problems that we might not otherwise identify or know how to correct.
Now the twist: Read your paper backwards, starting with the last sentence first, then the next-to-last, etc. This seemingly odd suggestion is a useful one, because reading your essay backwards dissociates each sentence from the larger meaning of the text, enabling you to focus just on the sentence and whether or not it makes sense on its own. Because the basic unit of each paragraph is the sentence, you want to make sure that each sentence you write is capable of standing on its own in terms of meaning and clarity. If you discover a sentence that doesn’t make sense on its own, in isolation from its context, then chances are it won’t make sense in the context of your paragraph (and, hence, your paper) either.

After you’ve made changes to sentences that need revision, read your paper aloud again, this time straight through from top to bottom. Listen to the sentences as if you were listening to music. Does anything sound clunky? Monotonous? Redundant? This method will give you a chance not only to revise individual words, but also to revise for sound. This technique is also a very good way to improve sentence variety. For example, if you have three sentences in a row that are roughly the same length (which sounds monotonous when you read them aloud), try combining two of them to make one longer sentence. The result is two sentences of different lengths, which will make for a more pleasant reading experience for your audience.

Let your paper rest (and you, too!)

This idea sounds like yet another easy assignment. It is, but only if you haven’t procrastinated much and have left enough time between writing your draft and submitting your final essay to take a break from your paper.

What is the value in taking a break from your work? As mentioned above, most writers are too close to what they have written to effectively revise it, and putting your work aside for several days gives you a chance to create some distance from what you’ve written, allowing you to return to it, even a few short days later, with fresh eyes.
Have you kept your promises to your reader?

A thesis is a lot like a promise, a promise you make to your readers about the journey your essay will take them on. You likely started thinking about your thesis long before you began drafting your essay, and at that point it was tentative. As you gathered information, researched your topic, and crafted a compelling angle, your thesis changed according to the direction your draft was taking at every stage.

Then came the time to commit. In your rough draft, you had to stake your claim. The next step was to get comments from your instructor and peer reviewers in your class. Their critical commentary helped you think about ways to improve your essay.

You’ve diligently applied the above revision methods to your paper. But did your thesis get the full attention it deserves?

The thesis is one of the most important parts of any text. It is a one- or two-sentence passage that describes your essay’s main point, as well as its purpose. Your thesis answers the question that is implied by your desire to write the paper. Hence, the above analogy to a promise made to your readers. Your thesis lets readers know what your paper will discuss, and why—and if it’s a persuasive essay, your thesis also lets your readers know by what means you’ve come to the conclusions you have, i.e., why you hold the position you do/the evidence that has led you there.

The Editing Process

Now that you’ve revised your work, you have a collection of ideas you’re proud of, in a form that seems logical. What could possibly be left to do? Oh, yes, the aforementioned “clean-up.”

Don’t let your best ideas become obscured by sloppy writing. Editing is the last act you will perform on your essay before you submit it for evaluation. Take your time,
and don’t underestimate the importance of this part of the process! Leave at least one whole work session (an hour or two at least, depending on the length of your essay).

Running spell-check and grammar-check does not constitute editing. You can do these things, but be aware that there are likely a number of spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors that the automated programs will not catch.

Here are some ways to make sure you turn in your paper in the best shape possible:

**Read your essay aloud: Take 2**

Wait, wasn’t this recommended in the Revision section as well? Yes! Reading your essay aloud, whether to a specific person or just to yourself, is useful for both revision and editing. The value this gesture potentially brings to editing is that it allows you to hear, literally, all kinds of problems with language. You might not know, for example, that the subject and verb of a sentence disagree, but you can hear if something sounds awry. Take this simple example:

One of the doors are open.

Reading this sentence aloud, you can tell immediately that it doesn’t sound right. Why? You probably thought, perhaps unconsciously that “doors” is the subject of the sentence, so you wrote “doors are open.” But, in fact, “one” is the subject of the sentence, and it’s singular, so the verb must follow:

One of the doors is open.

Chances are you could correct this sentence without even naming the problem.

The other aspect of your essay that reading aloud can help with is identifying unnecessary and vague words and phrases. If your sentence sounds like a mouthful it probably is! Can you say what you’re trying to say in fewer words? Try re-working an especially long sentence to see if you can communicate your intended meaning more succinctly.
If you notice that some of your sentences use “I” or “in my view,” be especially careful to make sure that what you are offering is more than just your opinion. In an informative piece, this might be a fact; in a persuasive piece, this might be an argument that is supported with evidence gathered in your research.

Vague language is one of the most common problems with rough drafts. After all, you know what you mean! Read aloud for overly general, non-specific language. Here’s an example, taken from a thesis statement:

My essay will explain my views on capital punishment.

This is vague because it says nothing about what your views are, or why you hold them.

Consider this revised statement:

Capital punishment is unjust because it fails to deter crime.

Your reader will know your position and why you hold it. What follows is the (correct) assumption that your paper will be an argument against capital punishment.

Many writers also want to add that there are pros and cons to their arguments, advantages and disadvantages, and while this impulse is understandable (and may be helpful to you in the draft stage), it doesn’t typically advance your thesis—and because you are taking a position on a controversial topic, readers will assume there are inherent pros and cons. The best strategy is to name, very specifically, the chief positions being debated. An example using the above topic, capital punishment, might look like this:

Some lawmakers have argued that capital punishment deters crime, while other stakeholders, including victims’ families, hold that incarceration is just as effective at deterrence as is the death penalty.

When you are editing your essay, make sure that your words are as precise as they can be. Don’t say “people” when you mean “residents of Delaware County who pay
taxes.” Don’t hesitate to use a thesaurus if you think your word choice could use improvement, but you can’t think of the most precise word.

**Check for redundant sentence structure**

As you are reading aloud, be aware of any passages that sound monotonous or repetitive. This redundancy is a sign that you are on your way to lulling your readers to sleep with repetitive sentence patterns. An easy way to correct monotony is to combine shorter sentences to make one longer sentence, as well as to break up long sentences into two shorter sentences. Sentence combining allows you to combine sentences that are closely related in order to enhance clarity, underscore connections among ideas, and reduce choppiness. Look through your draft for sentences that need explanation or connection.

Remember: Punctuation changes always change the rhythm of a sentence—just make sure that new punctuation doesn’t get in the way of what you’re trying to say!

**Here’s an example of several sentences that could be improved by this method:**

Olin loves to play tennis. He doesn’t like wearing traditional “tennis whites.” He prefers tournaments that allow players to wear bright colors on the court.

**Edited version:**

Olin loves to play tennis, but he doesn’t like wearing traditional “tennis whites;” he prefers tournaments that allow players to wear bright colors on the court.

Check out the APA Style’s [tips on avoiding redundancy too](#).

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Avoid clichés

Writers often resort to clichés as a kind of short-cut to meaning, especially if they think the reader will “get” the intended meaning. For example, “It’s raining cats and dogs” is a popular cliche in American culture. It means that it is raining a lot, or it has been raining for a long time. While this image is delightful, it does not belong in a scholarly essay. Try instead to communicate your meaning directly; do not assume that your reader knows the cultural slang.

Take a look at a short list of common clichés below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cold as ice</th>
<th>Let sleeping dogs lie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Come hell or high</td>
<td>Life is like a bowl full</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water</td>
<td>of cherries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crocodile tears</td>
<td>Little did I know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity killed</td>
<td>Moment of truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the cat</td>
<td>More than one way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut to the chase</td>
<td>to skin a cat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down and out</td>
<td>Never look a gift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few and far</td>
<td>horse in the mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>between</td>
<td>No spring chicken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit as a fiddle</td>
<td>On my last nerve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give 110 percent</td>
<td>Over a barrel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home is where</td>
<td>Pearls of wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the heart is</td>
<td>Push the envelope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty is the</td>
<td>Quiet as a mouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>best policy</td>
<td>Raise the bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had the time of</td>
<td>Scared to death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my life</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6- “A bowlful of cherries” © Jupiter Images 2011
Avoid sexist language

Few people any longer use “he” and “him” to mean “everyone, both males and females.” Most people recognize that “mankind” is not gender-neutral. But it’s complicated to write in such a way that sexist language is avoided, especially if you don’t want your essay filled with “s/he” and “his or her.” A popular answer seems to be “their.” For example, “Each student sharpens their pencils.” But wait, this is not grammatically correct! The word “their” is gender-neutral, but it is also plural, whereas the subject of the sentence is singular. Try instead: “Students sharpen their pencils.” This is both grammatically correct and gender-neutral. It’s also OK to switch back and forth from he to she within the same essay.

Here are some supplemental tutorials on using unbiased language from the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Sixth Edition:

**Chapter 3: Writing Clearly and Concisely**

- Guidelines for Unbiased Language (PDF table)
- 3.12 Gender (PDF)
- 3.13 Sexual Orientation (PDF)
- 3.15 Disabilities (PDF)
- 3.19 Agreement of Subject and Verb (PDF)

Avoid over-quoting

Quoting experts makes you look smart, right? So, the more quotes the better? Well, no, not exactly. You should think of direct quotes (and paraphrases) as support for your own original thoughts, not vice versa. If your essay is one long string of quotations, it appears that your work isn’t very original, even if you’ve properly cited all your sources.
References