

Strategies for Productive Revision

Revising is the act of “re-seeing” your work, and making adjustments as necessary in order to better achieve your goal. During that process (and know that revision **is** a process that doesn’t necessarily end with a second draft), consider the following:

Audience

It seems like this should be an easy one, but it really isn’t. You always have to decide to/for whom you are writing. As an academic writer, you have the difficult task of writing both for your professor and for a wider audience of academic readers. Ask yourself: what can you reasonably expect your audience to already know? What do you need to explain in more detail for them? How can you best grab their interest? What do you have to say that will make them want to read your words? What word choices will best reach this group of people? Writing for a particular audience will determine what tone you use (formal, informal, humorous, impassioned, etc.)

General Structure

Your paper should move smoothly from one idea to the next. Is there a logical sequence to your paragraphs? Using transition words will help to bring order to your work.

Paragraph Structure

Each paragraph is a new chance to convince the reader that you are right in whatever claim you are making. Therefore, each paragraph should have a **topic sentence** that convey the paragraph’s main idea, and several sentences that support that idea. If you read through your paragraph and more than one sentence could be the topic sentence, then you’re asking your paragraph, and your readers, to do too much. Make each topic sentence the basis for its own paragraph, and make sure that every sentence in the paragraph clearly relates to and supports the topic sentence.

Purpose

Ask yourself: Why am I writing this essay? What’s my goal? The easy answers, of course, are that you’re writing because someone gave you an assignment, and your goal is to get a high grade. These are not answers that will help you write the essay. Is the assignment asking you to compare, analyze, critique, or argue? When you finish comparing, analyzing, critiquing or arguing, what conclusion do you reach? That conclusion is your **thesis**, the central argument that your paper aims to prove.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric refers to the word choices you make. The words you choose will help establish tone in your essay. You’ll want to be careful with this; there are several traps you should try to avoid:

- Make sure that every word you use means exactly what you think it means. The thesaurus is not always your friend, because some synonyms are not exactly interchangeable. I can use “thin” or “slender” without changing the meaning of my sentence, but “create” and “invent” have different meanings, even though

they are listed as synonyms, and using one instead of the other will change the meaning of your sentence.

- Avoid using every word you learned in preparation for the SAT's. When you read a text in which every other word is obscure and multi-syllabic, first you try to understand, and then you get frustrated and/or lose interest. Your readers will do the same. It is always worth it to pull out the dictionary and look up the words you don't know, but if you feel like the author could just as easily have used simpler, more straightforward language, don't you feel a bit annoyed? This is not to say that you need to "dumb down" your rhetoric. It means that you should use language because it expresses exactly what you want to say, and not to impress readers with your massive vocabulary.
- Avoid using jargon. Jargon just means language that's specific to professionals in a field. Anyone who is not in that field will have difficulty understanding. For example, if I say that many secondary English instructors employ Socratic pedagogical methods in order to facilitate subject-empowered learning, you may not know or care what I mean by that. If I say that high-school English teachers ask a lot of questions to make you realize what you already know, you're more likely to understand. Jargon is useful when your target audience only includes people in your field.
- Avoid passive sentences. Passive sentences are like little children, in that they don't take any responsibility for the action. For example: "The vase got broken." That sentence neatly avoids telling us who did the breaking, who is responsible for what happened. Active sentences tell you in a straightforward way who did what: "I broke the vase." Passive sentences make the writer sound unsure, as though she lacks confidence in the claims she is making. Instead of "it was said in the essay", tell us "the author says . . ."

Thesis

Does every paragraph in your paper support your thesis? Are you sure that you *have* a thesis? If you don't, then you've written a report rather than an academic paper.