

Knowledge Article

Effective Revision Techniques

To write effectively, you must not only put useful or original ideas into words, but also make your words understandable and interesting to readers. Any serious attempt at writing involves successive rounds of improvements, or revisions, to ensure that the content is well organized and is easy for readers to follow. In this Knowledge Article, you will examine how you can revise your writing by improving the structure of your paragraphs (Section 1), and then look at some guidelines you can use to fine-tune your writing (Section 2).

Section 1: Paragraphs

Paragraphs are the building blocks of essays and many other forms of writing. To write and revise effectively, you need to be familiar with some general principles of arranging ideas in paragraphs. As you know, a paragraph groups related sentences that are focused on one topic. The key to a good paragraph is balancing it so that everything is unified around that central topic and, at the same time, enough details are provided to fully explore the topic.

Revising for Unity

When it comes time to revise a paragraph, it makes sense to look at the bigger issues before you try to refine the details. For example, it's not helpful to correct grammar and spelling in a sentence that you might end up completely rewriting. Perhaps the biggest issue at the paragraph level is achieving unity. Revising for unity in a paragraph means looking for elements or ideas that don't fit. If a sentence or idea does not closely relate to the topic of the paragraph, then it doesn't belong there, no matter how good it sounds on its own.

One way to revise for unity is by asking "so what?" of each sentence or idea. If you can't think of a purpose for a sentence or a detail in a paragraph, it's probably a good idea to omit it. Even if a sentence or idea is related to the topic, it may not, in the end, be important. Asking "so what?" helps you to identify those words, sentences, quotes, or ideas that have crept into your paragraph but just aren't important enough to keep. This method will help you weed out any information that is cluttering up your paragraph.

Read the following paragraph, and examine it for unity:

One difficulty with revision is letting go of sentences and ideas that, while perfectly lovely, just don't belong. Using an outside editor can improve a story because the outside editor has less attachment to each word and phrase than the writer who created them by "sit[ting] down at a typewriter and open[ing] a vein" (Walter Wellesley Smith). Such editors can often eliminate the redundant, the unnecessary, or the unimportant more easily than their creator. Writing is hard work. As Joseph

Heller said, "Every writer I know has trouble writing." Getting some help from an editor could make the writer's revision easier.

What is the topic of this paragraph? It's about the difficulty of cutting out parts of your writing during revision and how an outside editor can help. Does everything in the paragraph work with that topic? Look at the next to last sentence. It includes a great quote from Joseph Heller, but does it really have anything to with eliminating sentences during revision and how outside editors can help? No; it is about writing in the first place, rather than revising, so it has no place in this particular paragraph. The short sentence before it is off-topic as well and could also be deleted.

Now read this paragraph:

One indication that soccer is growing in popularity in the United States is the growth in the youth soccer program. Participation in the U.S. Youth Soccer Association, which includes kids ages 5 to 19, increased from 100,000 players in 1974 to over a million players annually in the early 1990s. Today, over 3.2 million youth play in the association, which is now the largest youth sports organization in the country. At soccer fields across the country, parking is sometimes nonexistent as more families participate than the fields have spots for.

This paragraph is about the growth of youth soccer in the United States. All of the sentences in the paragraph are about youth soccer, but the last sentence is not really important. When you read the last sentence, ask yourself "so what?" Would the argument the paragraph is making be weaker without the information about parking? Probably not. The statistics about the growth of participation in the program drive home the point of the paragraph clearly without the parking information. Removing that sentence makes the paragraph tighter and more unified.

Organization

It is far easier to understand ideas that are presented in a logical way than ones that are presented haphazardly. Once you are certain that all the content in a paragraph focuses on the main topic, you can review the paragraph's organization. When revising for organization, read the paragraph out loud, noting anything that doesn't seem to flow from one idea to the next. Using key words or synonyms in multiple sentences can help to increase the cohesiveness of the paragraph. Using pronouns to refer to people mentioned in the previous sentence can also help the sentences progress in a logical way.

Read the following paragraph out loud. The parenthetical numbers refer to the lines in William Shakespeare's Sonnet 130.

In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare writes an unusual love poem. Rather than comparing his mistress favorably to images such as the sun or the rose, he admits that she isn't ideal. Her lips are less red than even coral is (2), and music "hath a far more pleasing sound" (10) than her voice. Yet the poet does love his mistress. He describes her by saying "Black wires grow on her head" (4) and "her breasts are dun" (3). But he loves her for who she really is, rather than as an idealized version

of a woman, as evidenced by the last lines of the poem: "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare" (13, 14).

While reading the paragraph out loud, you probably noticed that the flow was awkward in the last three places. The paragraph moves from talking about how the mistress is described to talking about how the poet loves her and back again.

Swapping the positions of the fourth and fifth sentences gives the paragraph a more logical structure and better cohesion:

In his Sonnet 130, Shakespeare writes an unusual love poem. Rather than comparing his mistress favorably to images such as the sun or the rose, he admits that she isn't ideal. Her lips are less red than even coral is (2), and music "hath a far more pleasing sound" (10) than her voice. He describes her by saying "Black wires grow on her head" (4) and "her breasts are dun" (3). Yet the poet does love his mistress. He loves her for who she really is, rather than as an idealized version of a woman, as evidenced by the last lines of the poem: "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare" (13, 14).

Now the paragraph is more cohesive and logical. First it discusses how the mistress is described unfavorably, and then it asserts that the poet loves her anyway. This structure is much easier for the reader to follow than jumping from one idea to the other and back again.

When you revise a paragraph for organization, you should also check for repetitions that you can eliminate. You're less likely to repeat yourself if you avoid jumping back and forth between two ideas. Conversely, if you see information repeated at widely separated places within a paragraph, it's a sign that the sequence of ideas still needs improvement.

Details

Now that you have seen how omitting and rearranging ideas can improve a paragraph, let's look at what needs to be added to make your paragraph more effective: details. Details can bring life to essays and arguments, just as they do in stories and poems. A paragraph without sufficient detail is unlikely to convince or interest a reader in your central point. One way to gauge whether your paragraph needs more detail is to ask "how so?" of each statement. If the answer isn't found in the paragraph, then you probably need to add detail.

Details can make or break your paragraph, so you need to choose them carefully. Always ensure that your statements are supported by relevant details. For instance, you may have a paragraph that goes something like this:

The North American gray wolf is an endangered species. It faces many threats that could drive it to extinction. Wildlife activists are struggling to protect this beautiful creature.

All that we come to know from this paragraph is that the wolf is endangered. To make the paragraph more informative you need to anticipate your reader's questions. One likely

question is, "How is the gray wolf endangered and what are the threats it faces?" When you answer with the relevant details, your paragraph becomes more effective:

The North American gray wolf is an endangered species. It faces many threats that could drive it to extinction. Gray wolves are often targeted by farmers and livestock owners because they are sometimes forced to feed on domestic animals when wild game is scarce. The most common methods used by communities targeting wolves are poisoning, trapping, and shooting. Wildlife activists are struggling to protect this beautiful creature.

Asking "how so?" at the end of each statement is a good way to determine what details will be most relevant to your paragraph.

Clarity in Literary Arguments

Asking "how so?" is an especially important tool in revising literary arguments because the question allows you to check for analysis as well as textual evidence. When you ask "how so?" in an essay about a piece of literature, you are asking not only if the appropriate detail is there, but also if its relevance to the paragraph's central point is explained.

Read this paragraph describing Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*:

Perhaps the heaviest guilt that Frankenstein has to bear is the death of Elizabeth at the monster's hands. His guilt comes not just from creating the monster in the first place, but from the many actions he has taken since then that have fueled the monster's hatred. Not only does he fail to destroy the monster when he has a chance, but he agrees to make a mate for it. His destruction of that mate ultimately leads to Elizabeth's murder on their wedding day.

The paragraph makes several statements that are not backed up with detail or evidence from the text. Reread the second sentence:

His guilt comes not just from creating the monster in the first place, but from the many actions he has taken since then that have fueled the monster's hatred.

Ask yourself "how so?": Is this statement actually backed up with any evidence in the paragraph? The paragraph includes one example from the novel, but no text reference is given for it.

Revision as a Cyclic Process

Although revision is more effective if it starts with the big picture and moves toward the smaller details, revision is more of a cycle than a linear exercise. Every time you make a change in a paragraph, that alteration might make another change necessary. When you add details, for example, you might find that your paragraph is getting crowded and should really be split into two. As you revise for organization, you might find that a sentence is no longer important. The steps in revision are something that you might have to step through a few times until you are satisfied with the result.

Section 2: Polishing Your Text

Once you have revised your writing at the paragraph level to take care of unity, organization, and detail, you can focus on polishing your writing. Revising to polish means focusing on the structures of sentences and the words that comprise them rather than looking at the paragraph as a whole. The goal in this stage of revision is to make each sentence and word the best it can be. Making sure you have selected just the right word, varying your sentence structures, and proofreading for common errors can take your essay from a good one to a great one.

As author Robert Cormier says, "The beautiful part of writing is that you don't have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon. You can always do it better, find the exact word, the apt phrase, the leaping simile."

Word Choice

Often, the key to communicating an idea effectively is to use a word that precisely conveys a certain meaning.

When you write your first draft of an essay, you might frequently use a generic or common word when a more specific or more apt word would communicate your meaning more clearly. For example, you might say a story was great, when what you really mean is that it was clever and thought-provoking. The word *great* can mean a lot of things. Maybe the story was great because it was funny or because the language was powerful or because it moved you emotionally. Your reader won't know. Using a more specific word lets your reader know immediately what you mean, while a generic word can reduce the impact of your writing.

If you can't think of a single word that exactly conveys the meaning you have in mind, it's a good idea to consult a thesaurus. Look up an entry for a word whose meaning is *roughly* the same as the one you're looking for. The thesaurus will list many words corresponding to the rough meaning; one of the words in the list will likely match the meaning you want to convey.

Another point to consider as you polish your word choice is to avoid repetition. Repeating the same word over and over is not only boring to readers, but it also robs them of other chances to understand your meaning.

A third important aspect of word choice is to avoid using long words if shorter words can convey the same meaning equally well. Some long words may be unfamiliar to readers and will make your text harder for readers to understand. However, you may occasionally need to use a long word to convey your meaning precisely. You may also use a longer synonym for a word to avoid repeating the shorter word too many times.

Sentence Variety

Another way to bring out the best in your writing is to use a variety of different sentence lengths and structures within each paragraph. Start some sentences with a subject and others with a clause. To build a rhythm and flow in your writing, use long sentences linked

with conjunctions or combined with clauses as well as short sentences. There are endless ways to combine sentences to adjust sentence variety and communicate just the right meaning.

Look at the sentences below and the different ways in which they can be combined:

Using two sentences:

Winning is intoxicating. It can sometimes go to your head.

Using a conjunction:

Winning is intoxicating, and it can sometimes go to your head.

Using a relative pronoun:

Winning, which is intoxicating, can sometimes go to your head.

Winning, which can sometimes go to your head, is intoxicating.

Using a prepositional phrase:

Winning can be intoxicating, with a chance of it going to your head.

Proofing for Spelling and Typographical Errors

Although many people associate revisions with fixing errors like spelling, typos, and grammar, the truth is that by the time you get that far, most of the real work of revision is done. Fixing errors in spelling and grammar doesn't require the kind of thinking that other revisions do, but they do require close attention to detail.

One way to make sure that you catch any errors is to read the paragraph out loud while following along with your finger or a pencil under each word. This combination can help you to find errors that you might miss in a more casual reading. Another key is following through on anything you are unsure of. This means looking up a word in the dictionary if you aren't confident of its spelling or looking up a grammar rule if you aren't sure you applied it correctly.

Common Errors

One area where errors commonly occur is in combining sentences. A run-on sentence is one that contains two or more independent clauses that are not separated by the appropriate punctuation. Run-ons are considered grammatically incorrect. For example:

I went to the doctor and he gave me medicine.

I went to the doctor, he gave me medicine.

These sentences contain two independent clauses: "I went to the doctor" and "He gave me medicine," but they're not joined correctly. One way of combining the sentences correctly is to add a comma before the word *and*.

I went to the doctor, and he gave me medicine.

Independent clauses can also be combined using a semicolon. Here is another correct version of our sentence, this time using a semicolon:

I went to the doctor; he gave me medicine.

Using a semicolon in this way implies a strong connection between the independent clauses. In most cases, however, separating them with a period is a better choice.

What if the doctor declined to give any medicine? With a conjunction, the sentence could look like this:

I went to the doctor, but he didn't give me any medicine.

If you want to emphasize the doctor's choice not to give any medicine, you could use the word *however* to combine the sentences. *However*—along with words like *consequently*, *moreover*, and *nevertheless*—is a conjunctive adverb. You can use these adverbs after a semicolon and followed by a comma to combine two independent clauses. A correct version of the sentence using a conjunctive adverb could look like this:

I went to the doctor; however, he didn't give me any medicine.

Avoid run-on sentences by combining independent clauses with the correct combination of comma and conjunction, semicolon alone, or semicolon and conjunctive adverb.

Other common errors include the lack of subject-verb agreement, the lack of pronoun agreement, flawed parallel structures, and incorrectly used apostrophes. When revising a paragraph or a longer work, use your knowledge of common errors like a checklist in order to make certain that your writing is error free. Even if you can't remember at first the correct grammar rule, being aware that there may be a problem allows you to check with a grammar resource to confirm your choice.