

REVISING EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY

Because revision is a complex process that involves many steps, it can be tough to figure out where to get started. The most efficient strategy typically involves moving from broad elements that govern the construction of an entire essay to more local concerns that affect only a portion of its argument. After all, it is discouraging to spend time carefully revising the language in one part of your essay only to cut that section upon realizing that the argument needs reorganized. This handout can help you manage your approach to revision by guiding you through a series of argumentative levels that proceed from the most expansive components of your essay through increasingly narrower ones.

Level 1: Claim and Problem

The initial paragraph of an essay generally introduces a meaningful writing problem and then makes a claim about how that problem might be resolved. Given these tasks, some questions you might ask yourself during revision include:

- Does my essay clearly motivate my writing problem by demonstrating why my intended audience would be interested in discovering the answer?
- Does my essay's main claim (i.e. its thesis) straightforwardly resolve the writing problem I have proposed?
- Are the claim and problem I articulate at the beginning of my essay the same as the claim and problem I am engaging—possibly in an evolved form—at the end?

Level 2: Organization

An essay should be organized according to the evolving logic of its argument. Even the most sophisticated arguments are built on a series of simpler claims that progress toward greater complexity. Put differently, the earlier paragraphs of your essay should persuasively establish the ideas that will be essential components of later portions of your argument. To successfully execute this developmental structure, some questions you might ask during revision include:

- Does my essay proceed from simpler, more foundational claims to more complex arguments that build upon those earlier claims?
- Is every section of my essay clearly focused on pursuing a resolution to the problem I have articulated in my introduction?
- Are the sub-claims I articulate in my topic sentences logically related to my essay's main claim?
- Does each new step in my argument proceed logically from the ideas in the preceding section?

Level 3: Argument

Argument is the level at which local elements are linked to the whole of the essay. Since essays argue for different sub-claims at different moments, some portions of your argument will likely be more persuasive—and thus require less revision—than others. But because each sub-claim makes up a portion of your essay's larger argument, any revision of the parts will affect the persuasiveness of the argument as a whole. Often the most effective way to revise is to imagine a skeptical reader who is inclined to question each conclusion and the logic of the argument the produced it. Revision questions that can help you persuade such a skeptic include:

- Do my paragraphs begin by making a claim and then offer evidence for that claim followed by analysis of the evidence offered?
- Is each piece of evidence clearly attached to a specific claim?

- Does my analysis demonstrate *how* my evidence serves as proof for its corresponding claim, why I am warranted in drawing the conclusions that I do from the evidence I offer?
- Are there any reasonable counterarguments that my analysis has failed to account for?
- Are there moments in which I state my claims too strongly? How might I qualify my overstatements in these instances?

Level 4: Language

Though we may be accustomed to seeing language as subservient to the ideas in an essay, it is language that generates those ideas in the mind of the reader. As a result, even subtle linguistic changes can greatly influence how your argument is received. Like argument, language can often be revised effectively by imagining a skeptical reader, an individual inclined to question any logical connection that is not highlighted effectively or interpret every ambiguity in your language in a manner you did not intend. Revising your language with the following questions in mind can help you manage the reception of your argument:

- Does my language clarify for my reader how the different portions of my argument—on both the sentence level and the paragraph level—are logically related to one another?
- Are there places in which I can improve my clarity by replacing a passive construction or a form of “to be” with a more active verb or phrasing?
- Have I effectively defined the keyterms in my argument? Does the language I use to identify important concepts remain consistent throughout my argument?
- Does the structure of each sentence emphasize the logical flow and evolution of my argument by presenting old information—facts or concepts from earlier in the essay—before introducing new ideas?
- Can I cut any of my language without affecting the overall clarity or precision of my argument?

Level 5: Grammar and Punctuation

In some cases, mistakes in grammar and punctuation can obscure the clarity of your ideas. However, even errors that don’t affect your meaning still influence your reader’s perception of your credibility as a writer. An essay with grammar and punctuation errors makes you appear sloppy and can lead the reader to assume that your ideas are sloppy as well. A meticulously proofread and carefully formatted essay suggests a similarly diligent treatment of the essay’s argument. The following questions can help your writing project such diligence:

- Are there any lingering typos or punctuation errors that I haven’t caught during revision?
- Is my essay formatted according to the guidelines of my professor or my discipline?
- Have I read my essay aloud in order to fine tune its grammar, precision, and linguistic flow?