

# Writing Center

## WOFFORD COLLEGE

### Revision and Editing Guide

#### GOOD WRITERS REVISE

The biggest difference between experienced and inexperienced writers is revision. The more you write, the more you realize that your first draft is mostly for yourself, and that better writing means more attention to the person on the other side of the page. In order to develop your revision process, you need to shift your perspective from thinking just about yourself (Have I expressed what I want?) to thinking about your reader (Can someone else understand what I said?).

The kinds of questions one asks in revision are questions that consider audience. What does my audience expect from me? What am I delivering? Is it clear? Do I want to surprise them or subvert their expectations? What information do they need? Have I connected the dots between my ideas in a way that someone else can follow?

Another thing that experienced writers know is that revising takes time – improving your writing means starting your process earlier so that you have time to shift into this audience-focused mode once you have words on the page.

#### WHERE SHOULD I START?

Students often think of revising and proofreading as the same thing – but revision is a larger process of re-imagining your ideas that is much bigger than simply fixing errors. When entering a revision process, we advise that you prioritize your work by moving from the *global* to the *local*. By *global* we mean issues in your writing that affect the entire piece. For instance, if you have a thesis statement that needs to be revised, that is a *global* problem because a shift in your thesis might affect every part of your paper. By *local* we mean issues that are specific to the details of some more isolated part of your writing. A local issue would be a confusing sentence structure. Revising that sentence might be important, but it doesn't make sense to iron out the phrasing of a confusing sentence before you revise your thesis, because a change in your thesis might mean rewriting or cutting that confusing sentence anyway.

When deciding what to prioritize as you begin a revision process, you should also consider seeking feedback from someone – remember, the purpose of your revision work is to think about your reader's experience. You don't have unlimited time to worry about revising everything in your draft, but you should make sure you are paying attention to the issues that stand out to other people when they read your draft. Your reader – whether they are a friend, family member, professor, or Writing Center consultant - may not be able to tell you exactly *how* to revise, but they can let you know what is unclear with a fresh pair of eyes!

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### HOW DO I TACKLE BIG IDEAS?

**Focus:** Our ideas change as we draft. Something important to do early in your revision process is to read through your essay and make sure your main idea is clear and carries through. This is especially true for thesis-based arguments, but most writing can benefit from a stronger sense of focus. Read through the whole paper, and then read your introduction again. Does the introduction really reflect the most important ideas that develop throughout the essay? If not, revising that first paragraph can do wonders for clarifying the focus of your writing.

**Appropriateness:** Beyond checking for consistency of message, you may want to also go back and re-read the directions in the assignment you are responding to – are you still answering the prompt? If not, how can you adjust to make your ideas respond more fully to the task?

**Structure:** Once you are sure that you are focused and on-task, think about whether the structure of your essay reflects and supports your central idea. If not, consider reorganizing things. Remember that revision is re-seeing. One useful strategy for revising your structure is to do a *reverse outline*. When you reverse outline, you write a very short summary in the margin of each paragraph of the main idea in that section, effectively creating a new outline – not of what you planned to write, but of what you actually wrote. Doing this can help you get a birds-eye view of your essay and consider potential ways you could add, delete, or rearrange your content.

Incorporating these revision techniques that address the big ideas in your essay can be scary, but revising in this way doesn't mean starting over. Once you've clarified these questions of focus and organization, it will be much easier to see how you should proceed, and very often you can make strategic changes to key sections such as your introduction, conclusion, thesis, and topic sentences that dramatically shift the direction of your argument without tossing whole paragraphs.

### HOW DO I TACKLE THE DETAILS? (*Well, which details?*)

**How do I sound more “academic”?** Let this one go – trust us! Your sentences don't have to sound like everyone else's or like the scholars who wrote your textbooks. *What* you're saying is most important, and your words don't need to be fancy for your ideas to be insightful and well-expressed.

**How do I deal with sentences that just aren't working?** Target areas of confusion and shoot for simplicity. Ask a reader where they get confused when they read your draft and try to make those sentences more direct and simple. Sometimes the easiest way to do this is to make a sentence shorter! If you don't have a reader to tell you which sentences aren't working, be your own – try reading your draft aloud. Speaking the words will help you notice which sentences don't sound quite right yet.

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**How do I improve my “flow”?** The “flow” of writing is all about making connections between what came before and what is coming next. If you’ve heard your writing is choppy, try to write sentences between that literally explain why you’re moving from one idea to the next.

**How do I deal with nitpicky rules?** If your professor wants you to focus on specific kinds of details (e.g., grammar or citation), have a style guide you are familiar with to consult (For instance, we like the [Purdue OWL](#)). Grammar rules are not always universal, and no one knows them all by heart. All we can do is look them up when we’re not sure – or come to the Writing Center and figure it out with a consultant!

The most important thing when trying to proofread for small errors is simply to set aside time for an editing pass or two *after* you’ve done your revisions on more global concerns. You can’t focus on the big picture and the details at the same time, and you will catch lots of weird stuff and silly errors if you read your paper looking *just* for the details at the end of your process, after you’ve done your bigger revisions and clarified your ideas.