

#9) Revising Tips

Take time between drafting and revising your work. Take a break. Spend some time, even if only ten or twenty minutes, doing something completely unrelated to your writing in order to clear your head. If you revise your paper too soon after drafting, you are likely to read what you intended to write and not what you actually wrote.

Revising the Thesis

1. Is a clear thesis statement presented early in the draft? Read over your draft looking for sentences (perhaps in the conclusion) that may more clearly define the thesis. Consider whether any of these other sentences, or parts of them, should be moved to an earlier position in the draft.
2. Make sure that your thesis is specific. Compare the following examples of vague and specific thesis statements (from The Bedford Handbook).

Vague: The Sex Pistols were popular with young English audiences, and the singer and lyricist Johnny Rotten was very important to their success.

Specific: The Sex Pistols could not have succeeded without singer and lyricist Johnny Rotten, who provided the stage presence, poetry, and authentic working-class rage that galvanized the group's young English audiences.

Vague: This paper presents the results of my investigation into electronic surveillance in the workplace.

Specific: Though employers currently have a legal right to monitor workers' email and voice mail messages, this practice can have negative effects upon employee morale.

3. Make sure that your thesis is debatable, or that it can be argued from different points of view. In many fields, especially those associated with the humanities, statements of fact do not work as defensible thesis statements. In others, such as some fields related to the sciences, statements of fact are more acceptable. Be sure to follow the conventions of your writing community. Check the examples of thesis statements for the difference between an arguable thesis and a statement of fact.

Statement of Fact: The fast food industry is the greatest consumer of large agricultural conglomerates, such as ADM, who have vast lobbying power in congress.

This sentence leaves little room for debate. It would only take a quick reference of the facts to show that the fast food industry is the largest customer of ADM and that ADM is heavily involved in lobbying congress. Statements of fact don't work well as a thesis because they don't offer the writer a position to defend that merits the length of a paper.

Arguable Thesis: The fast food industry is not adequately regulated by the government because of the vast lobbying power of large agricultural conglomerates such as ADM.

You can check to see if a statement is debatable by trying to imagine an opposing point of view. In this example, it is possible to anticipate someone who believes that the fast food industry is adequately regulated.

Revising for Organization

1. Write a brief phrase that describes the topic of each paragraph in the margin next to that paragraph.
2. Are the paragraphs focused? Check each sentence against the topic phrase in the margin. Mark any sentences or groups of sentences that do not fit with the topic phrase, and write topic phrases in the margins for them as well. You may need to leave these sentences out of the paragraph, or perhaps they will work better in one of the other paragraphs in the paper. You may find that you need to add sentences to the paragraph that explain how these sentences relate to the topic phrase. Sometimes, a majority of the sentences in the paragraph will not fit with the topic phrase. In this case, perhaps the paragraph really addresses a slightly different topic than you intended and needs to be reworked so that the paragraph focuses on the new topic.
3. Do the paragraphs have clear topic sentences? You can now use the topic phrases to create topic sentences for each paragraph. You may also want to use these phrases to construct an essay map or plan statement in the introduction.
4. Do the paragraphs have clear transitions between the topics they address? You can use the topic phrases to build transition sentences for the beginning and end of paragraphs and to identify where the paper makes major shifts in topic.

Revising for Sufficient Evidence

Ask the following questions:

1. Does the paper include specific details and examples to support your assertions?
2. Does the paper include quotations and citations when necessary?
3. Are the quotations integrated smoothly into your sentences?

For example, in the following paragraph, a student writes a topic sentence and then proceeds to support that claim with specific details and examples, some of which call for quotations and citations (paragraph taken from the Bedford Handbook).

No one can deny that cell phones have caused traffic deaths and injuries. Cell phones were implicated in three fatal accidents in November 1999 alone. Early in November, two-year-old Morgan Pena was killed by a driver distracted by his cell phone. Morgan's mother, Patti Pena, reports that the driver "ran a stop sign at 45 mph, broadsided my vehicle and killed Morgan as she sat in her car seat" (Stockwell, B8). A week later, correction officer Shannon Smith, who was guarding a prisoner by the side of the road, was killed by a woman distracted by a phone call (Besthoff). On Thanksgiving weekend that same month, John and Carole Hall were killed when a Naval Academy midshipman crashed into their parked car. The driver said in court that when he looked up from the cell phone he was dialing, he was three feet from the car and had not time to stop.

4. Does the paper address opposing points of view? Later in the same paper, the same student addresses an opposing point of view and again uses specific details and examples in addition to his or her own reasoning to counter this argument.

Some groups have argued that state traffic laws make legislation regulating cell phone use unnecessary. Sadly, this is not true. Laws on traffic safety vary from state to state, and drivers distracted by cell phones can get off with light punishment even when they cause fatal accidents. For example, although the midshipman mentioned earlier was charged with vehicular manslaughter for the deaths of John and Carole Hall, the judge was unable to issue a verdict of guilty. Under Maryland law, he could only find the defendant guilty of negligent driving and impose a \$500 fine (Layton C1) [...]. The families of the victims are understandably distressed by the laws that lead to such light sentences.

When certain kinds of driver behavior are shown to be especially dangerous, we wisely draft special laws making them illegal and imposing specific punishments. Running red lights, failing to stop for a school bus, and drunk driving are obvious examples; phoning in a moving vehicle should be no exception. Unlike more general laws covering negligent driving, specific laws leave little ambiguity for law officers and for judges and juries imposing punishments. Such laws have another important benefit: they leave no ambiguity for drivers. Currently, drivers can tease themselves into thinking they are using their car phones responsibly because the definition of "negligent driving" is vague.

Revising Language Choices

Read your paper out loud. You may feel silly, but this is a good way to identify awkward, confusing or incorrect passages of prose. Keep a pencil in hand to mark corrections. Also try reading your paper backwards (beginning with the last sentence of the paper). This process lets you focus on the sentences as sentences without being distracted by the content of the paper. As you read the paper, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do the sentences vary in length? It is better to have a combination of short, long, and mid-length sentences. Don't become intimidated by long sentences: remember that complex sentences are sometimes required to express complex thoughts. Yet you also need to include some succinct and affirming short statements to give your reader a break.

2. Do the sentences vary in structure? Try not to start all of your sentences the same way. Check to see if several sentences in a row begin with the same word or with similar phrases (such as "The author states" followed by "The author claims" and "The author says"). Reading your paper backwards, you can spot repetitive words or phrases more easily and mark them for revision.

3. Are transitional phrases and sentences used within paragraphs and between them? You may want to keep a list of transitional phrases nearby as you revise your paper. Become familiar with how transitional phrases communicate meaning. In the following selection, the student uses the word "sadly" to indicate a change in topic and her disagreement with the previous statement. Later she uses the phrase "for example" to introduce the evidence that supports her statement.

Some groups have argued that state traffic laws make legislation regulating cell phone use unnecessary. **Sadly**, this is not true. Laws on traffic safety vary from state to state, and drivers distracted by cell phones can get off with light punishment even when they cause fatal accidents. **For example**, although the midshipman mentioned earlier was charged with vehicular manslaughter for the deaths of John and Carole Hall, the judge was unable to issue a verdict of guilty.

Transitions can be accomplished by repeating a key word throughout the paragraph, keeping the main idea before the reader and carrying the thread of meaning throughout a passage. Instead of repeating a key word so that it becomes monotonous, you may use suitable synonyms that continue the same thought. You can also link the final sentence of one paragraph to the initial sentence in the next paragraph. The following sentences appear at the end and beginning of the previous example paragraphs on page 2.

. . . The families of the victims are understandably **distressed by laws that lead to such light sentences.**

When certain kinds of driver behavior are shown to be especially dangerous, we wisely **draft special laws making them illegal and imposing specific punishments. . .**

4. When your draft reaches its final stages, check your composition for grammar and punctuation. Consult a grammar handbook. Use your dictionary. Remember the Quality Writing Center has other helpful proofreading handouts on our Web site such as #33 Commas and #21 Independent Clause Errors.