Revising and Editing

Many writers think of revising and editing as the same thing. They write their paper, edit it, and submit it. For scholarly writers, it can be useful to understand revising and editing as two different stages of the writing process, each with its own focus and each with its own set of tasks. Generally, revision occurs before editing and may also occur within the drafting stage. For instance, you might draft a chapter, revise it, then rewrite it (or re-draft it) as a result of the revising. Editing generally occurs as the very last step before submitting a document, although you may do more than one pass through a document to edit it.

It can help to compare revision and editing to renovating a house. **Revision** is the big changes you might make, like tearing out the kitchen and putting in an entirely new one or removing a wall to combine your kitchen and dining room into a single, open-concept space. In contrast, **editing** is the little changes you make when the big changes are finished, like repainting a room or putting down new carpet. We don't put down new carpet in a bedroom, then tear it out to turn the bedroom into a bathroom a week later.

The material in this document can help clarify the differences between revising and editing and can help you think about various writing issues that you might want to check for as you work on your documents. It also offers strategies for how to go about proofreading. These lists are not meant to be comprehensive; you may need to focus on other areas of your writing when revising and editing. As you go through your academic career, keep track of your typical areas of weakness. What do reviewers generally tell you to fix? What do you normally have to go back to and revise later? Use this list of your writing habits as a first step when revising or editing.

Answers to the types of questions listed below often have a field-specific component to them. For instance, not all disciplines require the use of headers. If disciplinary requirements appear to conflict with anything suggested in these lists, follow the disciplinary conventions. For more on the editing/proofreading stage, check out the Purdue [OWL page for graduate writers](#).

Considerations for Revising

Document Level

- Is the document divided into the appropriate number of sections & subsections?
- Are sections & subsections titled appropriately?
- Do chapter lengths seem balanced?
- Does the document have an overall introduction and a conclusion?
- Does the order of the chapters or sections make sense within disciplinary conventions?
- Does the overall main idea relate to each chapter or section? Is that relationship clear?

Chapter Level

- Does each chapter have an introductory paragraph and a concluding paragraph?
- Does the order of sections within the chapter meet disciplinary requirements?
- Does the order of paragraphs within each section display appropriate logic?
- Does the chapter cover all the aspects of the topic that were promised in the thesis or main point of the chapter?

Paragraph Level

- Does each paragraph have a topic and transition sentence?
- Does the topic sentence match the content of the paragraph?
- Does the order of information within each paragraph display appropriate logic?
- Is the paragraph shorter than 4 sentences or longer than 7 sentences? (If so, consider expanding or splitting the paragraph.)
- Do transition words show the connection of ideas between sentences within a single paragraph?

Sentence Level

- Does the order of information within each sentence make sense? Would rearranging it increase clarity?
- Are there sentences that seem unclear or that a reader was unable to comprehend?
- Are the appropriate transition words used to show the relationship between two or more ideas within a sentence?

Other

- What are the common issues other people (like your advisor) point out in your writing? Isolate one problem at a time and check for that.

Considerations for Editing

Document Level

- Are all the appropriate pieces of the document present?
    - Title
    - Abstract
    - Table of contents
    - References list
    - Others?
- Is the document formatted correctly?
    - Font type
    - Font size
    - Spacing
    - Margin size
    - Page numbers/running head
    - Indentation at the beginning of each paragraph and/or a space between paragraphs
    - Citations and reference page
    - Other requirements for your field or from the journal to which you are submitting
- Are headings of various levels appropriately differentiated from other text & consistent throughout the document?
- Does every piece of scholarship on your reference page show up in the text somewhere? Does every citation in the text show up on your reference page?
- Are terms used consistently throughout the document? E.g., Do you call your human subjects writers, students, or both? If both, was it for a reason, or just accidental?

Chapter Level

- Has all relevant information (quotes, summaries, paraphrases) been cited in the appropriate citation format?
- Do all charts, tables, or diagrams have a title or description if appropriate?
- Are the relevant terms defined before they are used?
- Are all abbreviations or acronyms written out the first time they appear?

Paragraph Level

- Do the same words or phrases appear multiple times in the same paragraph? (e.g. "however," "in particular,")

- If you use terms like "first, second," are all the items that need to be numbered actually numbered? Are they numbered in order? Does any secondary numbering system intersect with the first set (i.e, this is a problem for readers)?
- Does each paragraph include a variety of sentence structures?

Sentence Level

- [Check for common errors](#)
- Does every sentence have a subject, an object, and a verb?
  - How many words separate the subject from the verb? Can this number be decreased?
- Does any sentence have an unclear subject (often due to a [dangling modifier](#))?
- Is the same word repeated more than once in a sentence?
- Are any particular words or phrases used very often throughout the document? Are they the best option for expressing meaning, or can word choice be varied?
- Does any sentence have a large number of prepositional phrases (this can make a sentence less clear)? Can unnecessary prepositions be deleted?
- Are there other [unnecessary words you can delete](#)?
- Are verbs conjugated correctly?
- Are verbs in the correct tense?
- Do pronouns have clear antecedents (i.e., can readers tell who the pronoun is referring to)?
- Are sentences correctly constructed for active or passive voice as appropriate?
- Are sentences with two or more equal parts parallel and balanced?
- Is [punctuation (commas, periods, colons, semi-colons, etc.) used correctly](#)?
- Do any sentences use lengthy compound nouns (nouns composed of multiple words)? Are any of the compound nouns not typical for your field? Could they be revised for clarity?

Other

- What are the common issues other people (like your advisor) point out in your writing? Isolate one problem at a time and check for that.

Strategies for Proofreading

Print and Read Out Loud

- Print the document and edit it on paper
- Read the document out loud, or have someone read it out loud while you follow along.
- Read backwards, one sentence at a time.
- Get to know your patterns and habits (e.g., overuse of a certain transition word or missing articles) and look for them or know how to ask for help with them (make a list).

Use Features in Word

- Turn the document into a list of sentences and deal with each sentence as you would in a language classroom exercise.
    - In Word: Use the "Replace" feature to find the periods and replace them with a period and 2 enters/paragraph marks (i.e., replace . with .^p^p).
    - If that doesn't work, expand the Find and Replace box and use the "Special" drop-down menu to find "paragraph marks." Insert that into the "Replace with" box.
- Use ctrl-f to do a search in order to check for a single problem throughout the whole document (e.g., search for every use of the word *and* to see if it needs a comma).
- When checking if sources you cite in-text are also in the bibliography, you can use the "split" feature in Microsoft Word to view two different areas of a document at the same time. Click "view" then "split."
- Use a spell checker, but don't assume the suggestions they make are correct or that they are the only word issues in the document (e.g., if you write *for* and mean *four*, spell checkers won't catch it).

Other

- Pay an editor. If the document is high stakes, it can be worth it to just hire someone for the final pass. For assignments, be sure this is acceptable to the professor.

Activity: Revising Your Own Document

Learning objective: To gain experience applying a revision strategy to your own writing.

Directions

Step 1: Choose a document you are currently working on. Look through the list of **revision strategies** earlier in this document. Pick one aspect of revising that you would like to focus on.

Step 2: Use the strategy you chose to revise your document.

Step 3: Post in the chat which strategy you tried and what you found out about your document. Did you find places you needed to revise, or did you find that everything related to that concern was perfect already?

Step 4: If you have time, pick another strategy and do the same thing.