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Some new researchers think that once they have a draft, they're done. Thoughtful writers know better. They write a first draft not for their readers but for themselves, to see whether they can make the case they hoped to (or a better one). Then they revise their draft until they think it meets the needs and expectations of their readers. That's hard, because we all know our own work too well to read it as others will. To revise effectively, you must know what readers look for and whether your draft helps them find it. To that end, our advice may seem mechanical. But only when you can analyze your draft objectively can you avoid reading into it what you want your readers to get out of it.

We suggest revising from the top down: first the "outer frame" (introduction and conclusion), then overall organization, then sections, paragraphs, sentences, and finally stylistic issues such as spelling and punctuation (for guidance on these issues, see part 3). Of course no one revises so neatly. All of us fiddle with words as we move paragraphs around and reorganize as we revise a sentence. But you're likely to make the best revisions if you revise from whole to part, even if at the moment you're revising a part is the only whole you have.

Many experienced researchers find that they can edit hard copy more reliably than they can edit text on their computer screen. You might edit early drafts on the screen, but you may catch more errors and get a better sense of the overall structure of your report if you read at least one later version of it on paper, as your readers will.

9.1 Check for Blind Spots in Your Argument

Completing a draft is an accomplishment, but don't finish the first draft and then move immediately to fine-tuning sentences. After the first draft, parts of your argument will likely still not stand up to a robust challenge. If you invest a lot of time in polishing sentences, it can be hard to later accept that a section of your argument needs to be reframed, especially if you are new to research. Instead, check your argument's reasoning. Have you considered the strongest relevant counterarguments? Have you looked for evidence that challenges or complicates your reasons? Have you considered alternative interpretations of your evidence? If not, now is the time. If you find it difficult to think of significant alternatives to your argument, now that you have completed a draft, your professor might be willing to talk with you about where your argument overlooks likely objections.

9.2 Check Your Introduction, Conclusion, and Claim

Your readers must recognize three things quickly and unambiguously:

- where your introduction ends
- where your conclusion begins
- what sentences in one or both state your claim

To make the first two clearly visible, you might insert a subhead or extra space between your introduction and body and another between the body and conclusion. (Chapter 10 discusses revising your last draft introduction and conclusion in detail, particularly how and where you signal your claim.)

9.3 Make Sure the Body of Your Report Is Coherent

Once you frame your report clearly, check its body. Readers will think your report is coherent when they see the following:

- what key terms run through all sections of the report
- where each section and subsection ends and the next begins
- how each section relates to the one before it
- what role each section plays in the whole
- what sentence in each section and subsection states its point
- what distinctive key terms run through each section

To ensure that your readers will see those features, check for the following:

1. Do key terms run through your whole report?

- Circle key terms in the claim in your introduction and in your conclusion (review 7.3).
- Circle those same terms in the body of your report.
- Underline other words related to concepts named by those circled terms.

If readers don't see your key terms in most paragraphs, they may think your report wanders. Revise by working those terms into parts that lack them. If you underlined many more words than you circled, be sure that readers will recognize how the underlined words relate to the concepts named in your circled key terms. If readers might miss the connections, change some of those related words to the key terms. If you really did stray from your line of reasoning, you have some serious revising to do.

2. Is the beginning of each section and subsection clearly signaled?

You can use subheads to signal transitions from one major section to the next (review 6.2.4). In a long paper, you might add an extra space at the major joints. If you have a problem deciding what words to use in subheads or where to put them, your readers will have a bigger one, because they probably won't see your organization. (For styles of different levels of heads, see A.2.2.4.)

3. Does each major section begin with words that signal how that section relates to the one before it?

Readers must not only recognize where sections begin and end but also understand why they are ordered as they are (see 6.2.5–6.2.6). Signal the logic of your order with words such as *Consequently*, *In contrast*, *More importantly*, *Some have objected that*, and so on.

4. Is it clear how each section is relevant to the whole?

Of each section, ask *What question does this section answer?* If it doesn't help to answer one of the five questions whose answers constitute an argument (see 5.2), think about its *relevance*: does it create a context, explain a background concept or issue, or help readers in some other way? If you can't explain how a section relates to your claim, consider cutting it.

5. Is the point of each section stated in a sentence at the end of a brief introduction to that section (or at its end)?

If you have a choice, state the point of a section at the end of its introduction. Under no circumstances bury the point of a section in its middle. If a section is longer than four or five pages, you might restate the point at its end.

6. Do the specific terms that distinguish a section run through it?

Just as the key terms that unify your whole report distinguish it from other reports, so should the key terms that distinguish each section and subsection run through and unify that section. Repeat step 1 for each section: find the sentence that expresses its point and identify the key terms that distinguish that section from the others. Then check whether those terms run through that section. If you find no key terms, then your readers might not see what distinct ideas that section contributes to the whole.

9.4 Check Your Paragraphs

Each paragraph should be relevant to the point of its section. And like sections, each paragraph should have a sentence or two introducing it, usually stating its point and including the key concepts that the rest of the paragraph develops. If the opening sentences of a paragraph don't state its point, then its last one should. Order your sentences by some principle and make them relevant to the point of the paragraph (for principles of order, see 6.2.5).

Avoid strings of short paragraphs (fewer than five lines) and very long ones (for most fields, more than half a page). Reserve the use of two- or three-sentence paragraphs for lists, transitions, introductions and conclusions to sections, and statements that you want to emphasize. (We use short paragraphs here so that readers can more easily skim—rarely a consideration in report writing.)

9.5 Let Your Draft Cool, Then Paraphrase It

If you start your project early, you'll have time to let your revised draft cool. What seems good one day often looks different the next. When you return to your draft, don't read it straight through; skim its top-level parts: its introduction, the first paragraph of each major section, and the conclusion. Then, based on what you have read, paraphrase it for someone who hasn't read it. Does the paraphrase hang together? Does it fairly sum up your argument? Even better, ask someone else to skim your report by reading just its introduction and the introduction to each major section: how well that person summarizes your report will predict how well your readers will understand it.

Finally, always revise in light of a teacher's or advisor's advice. Not only would you annoy anyone who takes time to read a draft and make suggestions only to see you ignore them, but you would pass up an opportunity to improve your report. That doesn't mean you must follow every suggestion, but you should consider each one carefully.