

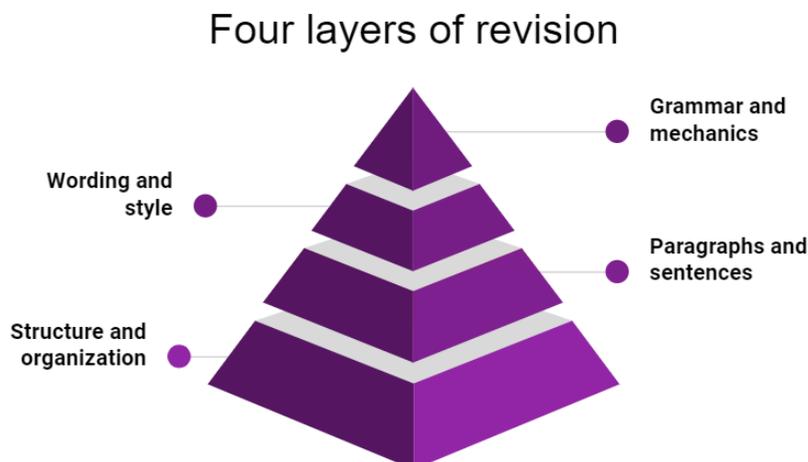
Revise and edit

It's an old saying that all writing is rewriting. Graduate school's hectic pace may force you to rush sometimes, but whenever possible, it's best to give yourself ample time for paper assignments. Professional writers in every field go through multiple rounds of revision, and so should you – it's too difficult to change everything all at once. The process looks different for every writer, but we recommend a few general tips:

- **Start with the big picture.** Don't get bogged down in editing details at the beginning; instead, focus on your content. Look carefully at your thesis. Is it clear and specific? Your argument, structure, and main points should be sound before you worry about grammar and punctuation.
- **Engage readers and seek feedback.** Ask a classmate, writing group, Writing TF, or friend to read your paper. Another set of eyes can identify problems you are too close to see.
- **Revise in stages.** Instead of trying to catch all problems at once, read through your paper multiple times, looking for different issues. This eases the cognitive load of editing and helps your brain catch more errors.

Test out different strategies to figure out what works. You may need more or fewer separate rounds of revision. Knowing your strengths and problems as a writer helps you revise. Have you shown your readers why your argument matters? When you present evidence, do you analyze it? If you habitually overuse hyphens or parentheses, do one complete revision looking only for those punctuation marks. If you find it more effective to revise sentences and wording together, combine them. The key is finding a strategy that serves *you* well.

The four stages of revision



Most types of edits fall into one of the above four categories. As you revise, see if using these distinctions helps to focus your thoughts.

Structure and organization

At this broad level of revision, you want to ensure your writing meets your professor's expectations for content, ideas, and structure.

Try this: Reverse outlines

Outlines are a useful tool to focus and structure your ideas before writing a first draft. They can also be helpful during revision. To evaluate the organization and logic of your draft, use a separate document to arrange your topic sentences in order by themselves. You should be able to read the list and still understand the argument without missing any important points. Temporarily removing all the extra words will illuminate when you're missing a transition or need to rearrange ideas.

Assignment. Have you answered the question that was asked? Have you met all of the assignment criteria described?

Argument. Is your paper logically organized? Is your thesis debatable, specific, and clearly connected to the rest of your paper? Sometimes writers discover a new interpretation or notice that their position has shifted in the process of writing and need to revise their thesis accordingly.

Flow. Check that the introduction and conclusion flow smoothly, and that the main idea of each paragraph transitions well into the next.

Paragraphs and sentences

Once the general shape of the paper seems solid, review it again, this time focusing on the paragraphs and sentences as a whole. Do your paragraphs cohere well? Do you have appropriate supporting details and smooth transitions? Is there a good balance of sentence structures, with no run-ons or fragments?

Try this: Read aloud!

It may feel silly, but reading aloud can be a great tool for catching awkward transitions, grammatical errors, run-on sentences, repetition, and confusing language. After reading and rereading a text, the brain starts to skip some of these details, and switching modalities helps you notice different things.

Wording and style

When writing an academic paper you want to present your ideas in a professional manner, adhering to scholarly conventions.

- **Remove jargon and clichés.** Given your prospective audience, are there terms you need to simplify, define, remove, or explain further? For example, the phrase 'statistically significant' has a certain definition among academics, but means something much less specific to the general population. You always want to be

accurate in what you write, but be aware of how your audience is likely to understand your wording, and make sure that is what you intend to communicate.

- **Clarify ambiguities and reduce wordiness.** Using too many words obscures your point. On the other hand, too little explanation or vague terms are equally confusing. Look for patterns in your writing, such as:
 - Repeated sentence structures, terms, or punctuation marks
 - Long or run-on sentences
 - Multiple verbs or adjectives in a row
 - Vague terms like "things" or "stuff"
 - Passive voice ("It was concluded that"), which is often wordier and less clear than active voice ("We concluded").

A word on passive voice

Many students are advised never to use the passive voice, but it isn't always a bad thing. Your use of active or passive voice depends on the focus of the idea. "The test was taken by the students" (passive voice) makes the sentence about the test, whereas "The students took the test" (active voice) focuses on the students. If the active voice isn't the best way to communicate the idea, you can use the passive voice.

Grammar and mechanics

Once you've determined the paper is organized and the ideas flow from one paragraph to the next, check each sentence for clarity and correctness.

- Spelling
- Punctuation
- Consistent verb tense (see "Tips")
- Number agreement
- Headings and table formatting
- Citations and references

Tips on verb tense

When referring to a source, use the *present tense*.

"In his 2009 essay, Mullins argues..."

When describing events in the past, you still use the past tense:

"In 2009, Mullins wrote an essay arguing that..."

The difference is slight, but the second sentence puts more emphasis on chronology, while the first focuses solely on the argument.