

Revision: How to Edit

What does it mean to edit?

The purpose of editing is to improve writing quality and clarity. There are two parts of the editing process: identifying unclear or weak areas and then deciding how to revise those areas. This handout is long but worth the read. Keep the ideas you find here in mind as you write your first draft and then as you revise it.

Clarity

Why it matters: Writing is communication. If your reader cannot understand what you are saying in your writing, then your writing has not fulfilled its purpose.

Identifying unclear areas: Unclear areas are any places in your paper where your reader gets confused or uncertain. The easiest way to find confusing areas of your paper is to have someone else read it and let them tell you. You can also read your paper yourself, thinking about it as a reader would see it, but being this objective is challenging. And, of course, you may always bring your paper into the writing center, where a tutor can tell you where she gets confused in your paper.

To read your paper objectively:

- read critically; *look* for problems
- American writing caters to the **reader**, so you must never let your reader feel stupid or confused; do not assume that your reader will understand what you mean without you explaining it
- interrogate every sentence and every point; ask, “Would an outside reader understand what I mean?”
- interrogate the relationships between sentences; it should be clear why each sentence follows the one before it

***Practice reading critically by reading articles and books. Pay attention to when you get confused—chances are that you are confused not because you are stupid but because the writer wasn’t clear. Noticing problems in other writing will help you see them in your own.

Revising unclear areas: There is no one way to revise confusing areas because the solution depends on the problem. Maybe you need a different word; maybe you need to switch the order of two sentences; maybe you need to cross out a sentence and re-write it completely. Often, simplifying will help. If you aren’t sure how to make something clearer, ask your instructor or a tutor at the WRC or research your problem online.

Conciseness

In first drafts, it is natural for the writer to “write long”—that is, use more words than are necessary. The first draft is where the writer is thinking and laying out his ideas. To get his point across, often he keeps adding to it, trying to achieve clarity. However, this

process often makes a paper feel cluttered and hard to follow. So, when we go over a first draft, there are many words and phrases that we can take out.

Cues to look for:

doubling and tripling: using two or three verbs, adjectives, or nouns when one will do

Example: “Characters not only **speak** and **comment** on moving lines, but also **contemplate** and **act** on the different passions that define life.” Does this sentence really need four verbs? Absolutely not. The extra verbs are not saying anything significant. But which verbs should we cut? The more active the verb, the more impact it will have on a reader, so let’s keep *speak* and *act*.

Edited sentence: Characters not only **speak** moving lines, but also **act** on the different passions that define life.

piled adjectives: using too many adjectives

Example: “The **gently flowing** river ran **smoothly** beneath the bridge as we watched the **warm yellow** sun slip beneath the **jagged, mountainous** horizon.” This sentence isn’t terrible, but it’s overwhelmed with adjectives. Moreover, some of the adjectives mean nearly the same thing (gently flowing=smoothly, jagged=mountainous). The writer should decide which descriptors are most important and keep those but cut the others. The writer could also turn the adjective “flow” into a verb, which is more active than “ran.”

Edited sentence: “The river **flowed smoothly** beneath the bridge as we watched the **warm** sun slip beneath the **jagged** horizon.”

phrases in place of words: using a whole string of words when one would do

Example: “**My experience with coordination of** many people that I had as a volunteer team leader has helped me impress prospective employers.” The highlighted words in this sentence are a long, unwieldy phrase that can easily be cut down. Watch out for –tion words that could be written as verbs instead. Also watch out for “opportunity to” and “experience of/with”, which often start off unnecessarily long phrases.

“**Coordinating** many people as a volunteer team leader has helped me impress prospective employers.”

repeated words: the same word used more than once may mean the writer is over-explaining it

Example: “The **symbol** of the **cat** that appears throughout the book **symbolizes** how the narrator must focus on his true **motives** only when the **cat** is around because the **cat symbolizes motivations** of desired independence, which is what the narrator longs for.” The repetition of the main words in this long, unclear sentence shows that the writer was struggling to state his ideas clearly. To revise, think about what is significant about each word and what you actually want to say.

Edited sentence: “The cat symbolizes the independence desired by the narrator, so every time the cat appears, the reader knows that the narrator is feeling an urge to break out on his own.”

Flow

A paper “flows” when the reader easily transitions from one point to the next. There are several revision techniques that will improve your paper’s flow.

Chunking refers to grouping similar points or parts of the same point together.

When writing your first draft, you may think of an idea 4 pages in and write your idea there, which is fine. But when you go over your draft, you may find that that idea relates more strongly to the ideas you have on page 1, so you move that idea up to page 1. This process is called chunking.

Go through your paper and look for points that don't fit well where they are. Say you're writing a paper about how tea became popular in Great Britain. First you talk about how the Brits discovered tea in India, and then for two pages you talk about how easy it was to grow tea in America and ship it back over to England. If you think of another important point about India, it *probably* belongs back in the earlier part of your paper.

Transitions & Relationships

A very easy way to help your reader follow your reasoning is to include transitions. Transitions tell readers the relationship between what you have just said and what you are about to say.

Consider the following paragraph:

Though Rodin falls into the Post-Impressionist category, Impressionism clearly influenced his methods. He took keen interest in the play of light and atmosphere on and around his pieces.¹ Rodin sought to capture a specific moment in time, a snapshot that caught his subject in mid-motion. Many Impressionist painters hurriedly dabbed paint onto their canvases in an effort to seize an outdoor scene before the sun changed position and the new light altered the entire image; their focus was not on rendering small details realistically but on creating a representation that allowed the viewer to synthesize and see the moment as the artist experienced it. Rodin often made quick sketches of his models without lifting his pencil from the page and would then move to make clay models in a comparable method.²

Where would you put transitions?

Consider the new paragraph:

Though Rodin falls into the Post-Impressionist category, Impressionism clearly influenced his methods. He took keen interest in the play of light and atmosphere on and around his pieces.³ Also like the Impressionists, Rodin sought to capture a specific moment in time, a snapshot that caught his subject in mid-motion. Many Impressionist painters hurriedly dabbed paint onto their canvases in an effort to seize an outdoor scene before the sun changed position and the new light altered the entire image; their focus was not on rendering small details realistically but on creating a representation that allowed the viewer to synthesize and see the moment as the artist experienced it. Similarly, Rodin often made quick sketches of his models

¹ Flaccus, Louis W. *The Spirit and Substance of Art*. New York, 1926, p. 370.

² Ludovici, Anthony M. *Personal Reminiscences or Auguste Rodin*. Philadelphia, 1926, p. 131.

³ Flaccus, Louis W. *The Spirit and Substance of Art*. New York, 1926, p. 370.

without lifting his pencil from the page and would then move to make clay models in a comparable method.⁴

The writer added only two transitions, but they improve the paragraph and the reader's understanding. What relationship do these transitions communicate?

⁴ Ludovici, Anthony M. *Personal Reminiscences of Auguste Rodin*. Philadelphia, 1926, p. 131.