

EDITING VERSUS REVISING

In General:

When you **edit** your work, you make superficial changes to improve word choice, to correct punctuation, to re-order sentences or rearrange paragraphs, or to correct spelling. It involves polishing what is already on the page. It deals with the bits and pieces of the writing.

But when you **revise** your work, you change it substantively. “Revise” means literally “to see it again,” that is, to re-conceive it and change what you say rather than simply how you say it. **Revision** entails thinking about the whole paper.

If you are expected to revise your essay and merely correct the proofing marks your reader has inserted, you have simply “**proof-edited**” the writing and have not performed the task of rethinking, revising, and rewriting it.

Specifically:

Revision involves refining your thesis statement and importing additional evidence to support it. It can entail

- changing the passive voice of a paragraph to the active voice
- reorganizing your paper to establish a coherent structure throughout
- introducing counter-arguments (opposing viewpoints) to deepen your own claims and give your paper more meaning and resonance
- deleting entire paragraphs or sections that do not support your central theme.

In other words, you think about your paper in a new way.

A fiction writer will revise a short story more than a dozen times. Most instructors wish students would do the same with essays.

If you wish to revise a draft of a paper effectively, you must see it from a different perspective—often, from the reader’s point of view. Because the ideas you write about are your own, the paper may be perfectly clear to you. But while you may know what you mean, the reader may not. What you actually wrote may not convey your message to the reader. You may not have explained as fully as you could. Your transitions from point to point may not be clear. Your examples may not be adequate.

Put yourself in the reader’s position and try to imagine what the weak spots of your paper are, and then work at clarifying your argument, adding needed material, taking out things that don’t belong. Think your paper through again.

Oddly enough, you may not know what you’re really writing about until you’ve finished your paper. Sometimes, when you’ve gotten to the end of your draft, you really see the point you were making. To revise, you often need to wait for your conclusion and put that point at the beginning. Then you need to make sure that argument is followed all the way through. Some sections may have to go, even though they were well-written.

Don’t be discouraged about this. A novelist once wrote: “How do I know what I mean until I see what I say?” Fiction writers often don’t really know what their story is about until they’ve finished it. Then it becomes clear, and they rewrite it. They re-shape it around what they now see as the theme. Writing an essay is no different.

Keep in mind that your first draft is the initial shape of your thinking. It's your thinking that changes. That's what counts. Then you write up the change in your thoughts. It's not about the writing: it's about your understanding—your deepening understanding—of the subject matter.

Remember, **editing** is the final stage of revision; it's when you make changes to your sentences to make them read better. Again, **revision** requires thinking about your whole paper, but you **edit** your paper sentence by sentence, focusing on the clarity of each sentence. When you edit, you correct spelling errors, add or change punctuation, and change wording. It's a clean-up operation. Your paper will remain pretty much the same after you've edited it, but it will be smoother and clearer.

Proofreading is the last stage of editing. By now, you don't intend to change any words; you're looking for grammar and spelling errors, or wrong words that may have slipped past the editing process. When everything else is done, you proofread to find mistakes. It's a good idea to have someone else proof your paper because it's sometimes hard to find your own mistakes: your eyes see what your brain expects to be there on the page.

Some people read their work backwards to catch these mistakes.

Then you hand the paper in.