

Keys to Writing College Essays

Revising and editing your first draft

The first draft of an essay is intended to be a work in progress. At this stage, your draft will contain more or less complete information, but it will also likely contain some errors. To correct these mistakes, you will have to closely read over your draft and make any changes necessary to improve the clarity and effectiveness of your paper. The revising and editing stage is essential to refining your draft because it will help you to ensure that the message you are delivering is clear and easy to understand.

Improving your rough draft has two steps: **revising** and **editing**. (See p. 3 for a checklist.)

Step one: Revising.

Revising allows you to make significant changes to the structure and organization of your paper. When revising, consider the purpose of your paper as well as your audience's needs and expectations. You may want to re-read the instructions for the assignment at this point, and use these to verify that you've fulfilled your instructor's expectations.

Make sure your essay has an introduction and conclusion (unless your instructor has told you otherwise), and that your thesis statement (or main topic) is clear to anyone who reads your introduction. The body paragraphs should all have focused main points, all of which clearly relate to your essay's overall point, and which are arranged in the best logical order. (If you need more help understanding this, read through the Learning Centre handout titled, "**Beginning to write an essay.**")

With these things in mind, revise your draft to make sure that your information is presented in a way that makes it easy for your audience to understand your paper.

- **Rearrange information.** Make sure that your essay is organized in a way that best presents the information. Move paragraphs or sentences to more effective places in order to ensure that the content of your paper is arranged in a clear and logical way.
- **Add information.** The main points of an essay should be thoroughly explained. Add any relevant information that you feel is necessary to getting your message accurately across to your reader.
- **Delete information.** It must always be clear to the reader how all of the information in an essay is relevant to the paper's topic and purpose. When revising, it is important to delete anything that is redundant or unnecessary. For every sentence, ask yourself: Have I said this already? Does this support the overall argument my essay is making?

Remember that you can always save multiple drafts of your essay. Label them by draft (1, 2, 3, etc.) when you save them. That way, if you change something but later decide you don't like your changes, you can always go back to a previous draft and retrieve the original version. *Just make sure that you hand in the final version to your instructor!*

Step two: Editing.

Editing focuses on examining your writing in further detail by finding and correcting any minor grammatical and mechanical errors. It's important to closely read over the entirety of your essay to locate any mistakes in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. It's also important to pay attention to each individual sentence and fix any confusing wording that may cloud your audience's understanding.

Keep in mind that using longer sentences won't necessarily make your writing sound "smarter." It's always better to write clearly, even if it means using shorter, simpler sentences.

Common grammar and spelling mistakes that students make include the following:

- **Mistakes in subject-verb agreement, especially in long or complex sentences.** Make sure that all verbs agree with sentence subjects in number. (For example, "Monica and her brother James, who is on the hockey team, ~~goes~~ go to this school.")
- **Mistakes in verb tense consistency.** Make sure that you stick to the same verb tense (present, past, etc.), unless the change is logically necessary.
- **Inappropriate or ambiguous pronouns.** Make sure your pronouns agree with their antecedents (nouns) in number and type (e.g. "Laura" is replaced with "she," not "they"). Additionally, make sure that pronouns are never ambiguous: you must always clearly indicate which noun they replace. (For example, given the sentence, "The dog is in the pond, and it is very dirty," the reader can't tell whether "it" refers to the dog or the pond.)
- **Inappropriate choice of homonyms.** Some words sound the same or nearly the same when spoken, but are spelled differently (for example, "except" and "accept"; "effect" and "affect"). Ask yourself if you've chosen the correct word in each case. Use a dictionary if necessary.

Final step: Proofread for formatting.

One of the last things you need to do before you hand in your essay is to make sure you've fulfilled all the formatting requirements indicated for your assignment. Make sure you understand what's required for APA or MLA formatting (or any other standard formatting your instructor might require): these have very strict rules, and mistakes in this area could cost you marks on an otherwise well-written assignment.

We haven't included the instructions for APA or MLA formatting in this handout, but if you need more help, the Learning Centre has lots of resources on formatting papers.

Tips for revising and editing

When reading over a draft, it can sometimes be difficult to identify errors. The following are a few tips to help you clear your mind and approach your writing with a different point of view.

1. **Mentally distance yourself from your draft.** If you have the time, leave your draft for a few days before revising and editing. If you return to a piece of writing with fresh eyes, you will be more likely to recognize any errors in the mechanics, grammar, and reasoning of your paper.
2. **Read your draft aloud.** Reading your draft aloud and listening to the content of your paper will help you to hear how your paper actually sounds as opposed to how you think it sounds.
3. **Have a friend read your draft aloud.** If someone else reads your draft aloud, they're more likely to stumble over awkward sentences and typos. You might not notice these, since you might read what you *think* you wrote, rather than what you actually wrote. Listen carefully to a friend reading your essay, and pay attention to when they look or sound confused.
4. **Read your paper backwards.** Start editing your essay by reading the last sentence first, then moving upward through the paper one sentence at a time. This will force you to slow down and pay attention to how each sentence sounds on its own.

Revising and editing checklist

** Please note:* Depending on your instructor's requirements, the items on this checklist may not all apply to your essay.

Revising:

- ☐ Re-read the instructions for the assignment to verify that you fulfilled your instructor's expectations.
- ☐ Identify your essay's thesis statement. Make sure it's clearly stated in the introduction, and that it accurately reflects the subject of your entire essay.
- ☐ Identify the topic sentence of each body paragraph, and make sure that each one relates to (and supports) your thesis statement.
 - ☐ If any topic sentences do not clearly relate to your essay's thesis, decide which of the following options is more appropriate: 1) If the paragraph itself isn't necessary to your essay's overall point, delete the entire paragraph; 2) If the paragraph is necessary, but the relationship between the paragraph and your thesis statement isn't clear, re-write the paragraph, beginning with the topic sentence.
- ☐ Re-arrange the order of your body paragraphs as needed: find the most logical order.
- ☐ Re-arrange the order of sentences in paragraphs as needed: make sure the topic sentence is clear, and that the order of sentences makes sense.
- ☐ If you need to add information, add it.
- ☐ If you need to delete information, delete it.
- ☐ Verify that your essay has a concluding paragraph.

- ☐ Verify that your introduction has a strong opening sentence (not one that is too vague or general), and that this sentence and the one or two that follow it provide your reader with the context needed to understand your thesis.
 - ☐ If you began with a statement that is too vague or general, see if your second sentence is better. Often simply deleting the first sentence will help you see that your second sentence makes a better opening.

Editing:

- ☐ Ensure that you've used transition words and phrases, when needed, to show the relationship between sentences and paragraphs and to make your writing "flow" logically.
- ☐ Do a first read-through of your essay to check for grammar and clarity. Correct any mistakes you notice.
- ☐ Read your entire essay aloud. Pay attention to any moments when you stumble or become confused: this likely indicates an awkward sentence or grammatical error. Correct any mistakes you notice.
- ☐ Have another person read your essay aloud while you listen. Once again, pay attention to any moments when the reader stumbles or becomes confused: this likely indicates an awkward sentence or grammatical error. Correct any mistakes you notice.
- ☐ Do a last, careful read-through for grammar mistakes, spelling errors, and typos. (Consider reading through the essay backwards, starting with the last sentence.) Remember that SpellCheck will not find all the errors!
 - ☐ Look out for homonyms (words that sound the same but are spelled differently) – your SpellCheck won't identify these as misspelled if you use them inappropriately.
 - ☐ Verify that your subjects and verbs always agree in number, especially in long or complex sentences.
 - ☐ Verify that your verb tenses remain consistent.
 - ☐ Verify that your pronouns agree with their antecedents in number and type, and that they are never ambiguous.
 - ☐ Make sure that you haven't typed words or phrases twice in a row without realizing it. (Reading aloud should help you catch this, but be sure to check.)
- ☐ Proofread for formatting. Follow the guidelines given by your instructor, or by the standard formatting your class uses (e.g. APA, MLA).
 - ☐ Make sure that your references are all included.
 - ☐ Check for page numbering and header requirements.
 - ☐ Check font and spacing requirements.
 - ☐ Check that margins are the correct width.
 - ☐ Verify whether you need a title page.
 - ☐ Add to/modify this list as needed for the formatting your class uses.

Look for other Learning Centre handouts on Keys to Writing College Essays.

- Beginning to write an essay
- Writing excellent introductions
- What instructors look for in essays