

Five Strategies to Revise your Paper, Article or Blog

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Once you have written something, it is important to revise it a few times before submitting or posting. Depending on your writing style, you might write a whole first draft and then start revising, or keep revising as you go along. These strategies will help either way. What is important to remember is that revising requires different skills than writing - revising requires you to be more strategic, to keep moving between the forest and the trees, and maybe be a little more strict with your own work (e.g. if a paragraph that you think is beautifully written is in the last analysis unnecessary, it must be deleted).

For academic articles, you might also want to read 'How to write a research question' and 'How to write a lit review' elsewhere on my blog.

1. **For attention getting:** Be gentle on the reader in the introduction. Keep it simple, set the stage of what is to come. This is not where you introduce very complex or complicated ideas, but where you justify the topic, outline key questions or findings and assume the reader knows very little
2. **For readability:** Read aloud end edit as you go along – words sound differently spoken aloud, and the flow, poetry and rhythm (or lack thereof) comes through more clearly. Is a sentence too long? Divide it into two. Do you repeat the same word too often? Look for alternatives. On the contrary, do you use too many variations of an important word (e.g. institution, state, government, organization) – maybe stick to the word that is most precise and avoid needless variation.
3. **For structure:** Print it out - more specifically print it out as 11 point font, single spaced with an empty comment added. This gives you a document you can 'see' in an overview. Using a smaller font you will be able to see large paragraphs at once, with wide margins for

note taking. Such a print out is to help you revise overall structure. Note in the margins what each paragraph *does* and use these margin notes to see whether the flow makes sense. Do you need this paragraph? Have you included transitions between sections? Are there transitions between paragraphs? Between sentences? Transitions are important for readability.¹

4. **For structure:** Is the first sentence of each paragraph the topic sentence? Aim for a piece of writing where the first sentence of each paragraph provides the outline of the piece. Avoid repetition such as repeating the same complex word in a single sentence or too often in a paragraph. On the other hand, some repetition is helpful. Try to seed some important words or turns of phrase into the paper to build 'resonances' throughout. For example, repeat your key argument and research question (perhaps paraphrased just a little).
5. **For thinking like a reader:** Have someone read it for you. Having a reader offer you some feedback is invaluable. They can tell you what is most interesting, where there are logical holes, abrupt changes of tone and so on. Having a reader also switches your perspective to that of a consumer of the work. You will be better able to read your own work not as the jealous writer who doesn't want to throw away a single golden word, but as a reader with limited time, attention, and background knowledge who skips over filler or unwieldy sentences. Similarly, if you come back to your writing after a few days, it will help you take a more 'outsider' perspective, where you will be less attached to your own writing.

For more strategies, read Becker's *Writing for Social Scientists*, or Deirdre McCloskey's *Economical Writing*.

¹ A transition is a link or connection. If a new section is introduced too abruptly, you need to add a transition to guide the reader from one section to another. See how published articles that are well-written use transitions.