

CHECKLIST: HOW TO REVISE AN ESSAY

Review the rubric: Before you begin to write, let alone revise, make sure you review the rubric to know what is to be expected by your reader. The same can be said if you want to get an article published. You review the style of the journal, to know what they expect and the kind of things they like to publish. The first step in writing is being rhetorically aware. The only way to persuade your reader that you are right, worthy of getting an A, etc. is knowing who you are writing for. Know thy reader is the first commandment of rhetoric. Know any rhetorical expectations.

Thesis/Argument: Does your paper have an overarching “argument”? In other words, is it making some sort of point consistently throughout the essay? Check and make sure.

Introduction: Introductions are used to *introduce* the text and your arguments to the reader generally. They also lay out the writer’s plan of attack or supply a road map for what will come. That’s why they are often written last or at least revised last because then the writer has a complete idea about where the paper has gone and what it is intending to do. It is quite professional to describe the problem you see and then tell the reader directly what you will do (“In this paper I will argue that...”). With that said, is your opening introduction relevant and to the point, or is it burdened with universal or general claims based on clichés about philosophy, world history, wisdom or psychology (“People,” “Life,” “Throughout history,” etc.)? If so, then cut those claims out or focus them to the specifics of the text and not your “observations” of life or history. Instead of “Man is...” try “In *Songs and Sonnets*, John Donne explores the many ways men and women in the seventeenth-century...” etc.). Keep the focus on the text or author’s claims of universal knowledge, then make an argument. This is where the thesis is introduced. Also, beware of huge historical claims about the period you are writing about. Do you have sources or are they prejudices you think happened? If you do not know, either research it or avoid it. Again, give the reader a road map on what you will be doing in the paper (“However, I will argue that...”). It may not be pretty, but it is totally professional and being professional is your goal.

Topic sentences: Does every paragraph have a topic sentence? They better. The topic sentence guides the paragraph. Without clear topic sentences, the paragraph will wander into list making. Note: The topic sentence is not a plot point nor is it a quote. It is an idea driven argument for the paragraph. Make sure the topic sentences “gesture” towards this larger “argument” or point you are trying to make. You should be able to figure out your entire argument for the paper just by reading topic sentences (and the transition sentences at the end of the paragraph). The paragraphs are there just to supply the details and evidence.

Paragraphs: Do your paragraphs have only one main theme related to your topic sentence? Check each paragraph. Sometimes your paragraphs may contain multiple themes that deviate from your topic sentence. In those cases, you have to split up your paragraph into two, each with their own topic sentence. But wait! What if the paragraphs are now too short? It's probably because you relied on summary and not analysis. Put in some quotes and see where the analysis takes you. Remember: A paragraph has only one main idea and if you have a new idea, transition to the next paragraph.

Quotes: Make sure you use quoted passages. I do not want to see long summaries of your ideas or plots. Plot summaries should be short and have a purpose: to contextualize your argument or a quote. With that said, when you use a quote, make sure you contextualize the passage (that means you cannot use a quote without some introduction to it). However, listing a page or line is insufficient. I do not want to see the formula "on page 31" or "on lines 357-45" and then a summary because it presumes the reader has the book at hand and makes them do all your work. Make sure as well that the quotes you have chosen are relevant and the best evidence for your larger argument. When you use indented quotes (4 lines or longer), you tab in twice and do not use quotation marks. Quotation marks are used for short imbedded quotes inside a sentence in the paragraph (1-4 lines tops). When indented, lines of poetry are always separated by "/" at the end of a line break. For good effect, you may also use short imbedded quotes for "color." Make sure every quote is given the proper MLA citation following the tradition of old books (see below).

Analysis: Make sure you analyze your quotes. Remember, you analyze a quote by first introducing the quote, then quoting it, then analyzing it. Say something interesting about the quote (that's why you choose good ones). Avoid formula like "This shows" or "I interpret this" or "Thus" etc. Just analyze it.

Structure: Are your paragraphs in the right order? There are two ways of finding that out. Reverse-outline your paper to see if it is structured correctly. Read the paper and accurately and honestly note down the "themes" of each paragraph. Is that the right order? Another approach is to cut up your paragraphs (or print each paragraph separately on a separate piece of paper), scramble them and have a friend put the paper back in the order they think it should be. This determines if your structure is correct. But sometimes, the reader may have a better order. Analysis of a poem's form works better if it is either integrated into a larger reading (ex. the rhyme scheme reflects an argument you just made) or follows a reading of the work's content as further evidence.

Transitions: Review your paragraph transitions (the last sentence in a paragraph). They're important. They make each paragraph relevant to the next one. You don't want your paper to read like a disconnected list.

Diction: Did you choose the right word? If you used a thesaurus, did you check and see if the word is actually the correct one? The problem with using synonyms is that they are never exact, they're always an approximation. Be precise. Do not use any word you are unfamiliar with. Word search "and" to see if you fell into the vice of synonymy. If you use the [adjective/noun/verb] "and" [a different adjective/noun/verb] formula, get rid of it! Choose one of the adjectives/nouns/verbs. The "and" formula (also see it with "or") is a sign that the writer can't decide which word is the right one. It makes the sentence and its paragraph indecisive. Again, be precise.

Syntax: Are your sentences too wordy? Are they too long because each sentence really hides two or even three different sentences or ideas? Often, too many ideas in one sentence reveals a problem of "subordination." A sentence has to be in charge of one idea. Simplify. Turn semicolons (;) into periods and create a second sentence (semicolons are rare in academic writing). Cut out excess words to make the sentence shorter and clearer? ex. Turn this clunky sentence "The first story Chaucer writes is on the knight, while the main purpose of the story is to entertain the reader and give some information on the effects of love" into "The purpose of Chaucer's first story is to entertain the reader and describe the effects of love." Cleaner. Better. Sometimes wordy sentences are written in the passive voice. Make them active and they'll suddenly become concise. ex. Turn this passive sentence "Palamoun was slashed by the knight, and then an uppercut was dodged by him" to the more active and concise "The fighter slashed Palamoun who then dodged an uppercut."

Professionalism: Your paper better be spellchecked, in the correct font, size, etc. Make sure the margins are correct. There should be no spaces between the paragraphs (undo the default for "Paragraph Spacing") and the right margin is never flush but jagged (that's for printing). If you imbeded a quote into a paragraph, did you make sure to add line breaks (/)? If you inset the quotes, don't forget to tab in twice and to not use quotation marks. Did you make a proper "works cited" page in the correct MLA format (that means you might have to learn the proper format), or did you just cut and paste something off a random website. Don't do that. Did you follow the correct rules of citation for older literature (that is, never author's name and page)? For example, for a poem by, say Chaucer, the citation "(Chaucer 35)" is totally incorrect and will be docked points. Why? Because there are too many editions to make page numbers workable. Instead, you give line numbers: "(Lines 675-78)" or simply "(675-78)." For plays, you don't say "(Shakespeare 1125)" since there are thousands of Shakespeare editions. Instead, you note the act, scene, and lines: "(3.5.74-78)." For older books made up of books and chapters, don't say "(Malory 274)," but rather "(2.8)."