

From First Draft to Final Draft: How to Revise an Essay

After you finish the first draft of an essay, a sense of calm settles over your body. “At last,” you say, “I’m done.” We all write to various stages of “done-ness” in our first drafts, but no one is ever truly finished after the first draft of an essay. So, after you complete your first draft of an essay (in this class you will turn them in, in others you may not), here are the steps you should follow to work toward a more polished essay:

Take some time away from your essay and have a friend or colleague read it and offer feedback. We all need some distance from our work in order to be better critics. Having someone else read your writing can help. In this class, your classmates will read your work all of the time. We are building a community of writers as a means to improve your writing. You also will receive comments back from your instructor that you will use as you begin the rewriting process.

Start with the Big Stuff. Unfortunately, successfully revising an essay does not entail changing a couple of commas and fixing one or two spelling mistakes. After you’ve written your first draft, think radically about how you can improve your essay. This may involve rewriting part or all of that draft. Taking comments from your peers and your instructor, begin revising, paying particular attention to the following items:

Content: Did you respond properly to the assignment? Did you understand the assignment and the directions you were given? Can you rewrite your introduction or other parts of your paper to make your essay respond more directly to the assignment? Perhaps in writing your first draft, you now understand better what it is that you want to argue.

Essay Organization: Does your paper have a clear structure, or do you wander from point to point? Did you organize your paragraphs in a logical way?

Paragraph Organization: Do your essays have a clear pattern of organization? Do you have a “topic sentence” that states the main idea of your paragraph?

Clarity and Style. Do you have too many “to be” verbs in your essay? Do you write in the passive voice too often? Do you have too many words like: “very” and “extremely”? Read your paper out-loud and mark any places where your language sounds awkward or unclear.

Finish with the Details. Proofread your essay. This is quite different than step two above. *Proofreading* is the work you do as you pay attention to punctuation, grammar, and mechanics. Do you use commas correctly? Did you spell everything right? Too many writers confuse this step with step two. Of the two, the “big stuff” is far more important to your instructor. However, having an essay that is clean of errors lets your reader know that you are a careful and thoughtful writer. Here are some suggestions to help you proofread:

Don’t merely rely on spell-check or grammar check. These tools can be helpful, but they also can miss some glaring mistakes.

Read each word of your essay. Don't simply glance through your essay when proofreading. Read each word carefully to be sure you aren't missing anything. To help you read each word carefully, separate your essay into a series of sentences. Instead of reading your essay like someone who actually wants to understand your argument, read each sentence twice as you read your essay. This will make it nearly impossible for you to glide over your mistakes. You can also divide your paper into single sentences by hitting the return key after each sentence, like this:

In Star Wars, storm troopers are symbols of both good and evil.

They wear white, the color typically associated with purity, goodness, and virtue.

Yet, they are also the henchmen of the vile Darth Vader, the epitome of malice and evil.