

Helping Students Revise

"Your eloquence should be the servant of the ideas in your head. Your rule might be this: If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out." — Kurt Vonnegut

While experienced writers emphasize revision, research suggests that student writers don't revise much. Even if the first draft isn't the only draft, student rewriting often involves just a little proofreading. Proofreading, while important, can be mere lipstick on a pig if the underlying paper is poorly reasoned. In a short but useful article, Laura Saltz argues that revision involves figuring out what we want to say, rather than just tinkering with individual sentences. She offers writers concrete suggestions for stepping back and improving the text as a whole. They might be worth sharing with your students.

- **Get some distance from your draft.** Put it away for a day and then talk through the paper with someone else.
- **Create a backward outline.** List the main point(s) of each paragraph. Survey the list to identify your strongest ideas. Ask yourself if the current organization highlights the best ideas.
- **Rethink the thesis.** The backward outline may reveal that the paper's central point is different—and potentially more interesting—than originally planned. This is an opportunity to write a tighter or more nuanced thesis statement.
- **Reconsider the body of the article.** Writing the first draft likely taught you quite a bit about your topic, so you may want to add more examples or evidence. Also, make sure each paragraph has a topic sentence, contributes to the key idea, and is linked in some way to what went before.
- **Revisit the introduction and conclusion.** After all these changes in your text, you may find that the beginning and end also need adjustment.

To support the notion that revision means finding your ideas, Saltz presents two versions of a paragraph E.B. White wrote about the moon landing. White is a wonderful stylist, so both paragraphs are delightful reading and impeccable in their mechanics. But in the second version, White knows what he wants to say. He has pruned away some charming irrelevancies and emphasized his strongest idea.

Want to share the entire article with students?

"Revising the Draft," <https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/revising-draft>