

14. REVISING AND EDITING

By Todd Migliaccio

“I've found the best way to revise your own work is to pretend that somebody else wrote it and then to rip the living shit out of it..”

–Don Roff, writer

REVISING AND EDITING ARE NOT FOUR LETTER WORDS

While many of us may feel as though we are being punished by having to revise or edit our paper or written work, and that “edit” is a bad word; it is not. We all have to do it. By using my own experiences revising my writing, I hope to convey in this chapter a personal experience that will help you to develop an affinity for the process of revising and editing. This process of revising and editing, by the way, includes all components of your paper—from the introduction (including the paper’s title) to the conclusion. For example, for this chapter, through my revising, I changed the quote presented at the beginning. I chose a quote that would be more likely to “grab” your attention (as discussed in Dr. Sarabia’s chapter on “The Importance of Introductions” in this Manual). In order to grab your attention, I decided to remove a quote by Stephen King, a much more established and famous author, for a quote from a writer not as well-known, but (and I think you can agree) a “catchier” quote.

The introduction, as Dr. Sarabia discusses in her chapter, does not end in a quote. Therefore, I had to make sure that I engaged you throughout, while clearly introducing the topic of the paper. So, I chose to break the “third wall” of prose and discuss the revision of this article.

In a sense, by using the engagement of a “personal anecdote” (see Sarabia in this Manual) that I hope to further explain the process of revising and editing. Initially, this is what I had written:

Revising your paper is an important part of writing. We all undergo it and experience it. It does not reflect on your writing ability overall. It is something that is simply part of the writing process.

As you can see, it changed from a direct, albeit clear statement about the focus of the paper, to what you are presently reading (a little meta, I get it, but hopefully you are seeing my point). What you should also know is that the introduction, a commonly revised section of a paper, is often revised when you finish the rest of the paper. This means you feel confident about the body and conclusion of the paper, so you revisit the introduction to make sure it matches, and many times it doesn’t because as you revise the main ideas and pieces of evidence of the paper, it can change. I share this just so you know that is normal and okay to do.

So I made some revisions (including after the rest of the paper was completed), and here you are, still reading. Essentially, I have been able to keep you interested, while also introducing two key issues pertaining to revision and editing:

A. We all do it (as you can see by my own example).

B. It makes for better writing (in the case of this chapter, it was about making it more engaging).

Revision helps to clarify ideas. It aids with identifying gaps in your logic. Your paper can become better pronounced and stronger. Ideas can be clearer, and hopefully as you can see above, more engaging. What is important to understand is that this chapter is not just about revising and editing, but about understanding that writing is a process. One that makes your ideas better, which, in turn can enhance your skills as a writer, and ultimately as a sociologist (and really beyond).

To help explain the importance of the process of revision and editing, I will first clarify the distinction between these concepts and when you engage each. I then expound on the idea that all of us have to revise and edit our writing, so you don't feel alone in doing this. This does not mean there is one way to revise; but I hope to make it clear that it is for you to develop your own process in writing, which includes editing and revising; so I introduce the topic of the process of writing. That is followed by an articulation of why revising and editing are important, i.e. the positive impact editing and revising have on you and your writing skills. Finally, I propose some options for revising you can consider that will hopefully get you started in further developing your own voice.

REVISING? EDITING? WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

First, let me clarify key concepts, since many of us (myself included) often use these terms interchangeably.

“Editing is a stage of the writing process in which a writer or editor strives to improve a draft (and sometimes prepare it for publication) by correcting errors and by making words and sentences clearer, more precise, and more effective” (Nordquist 2018). It often involves improving the grammar, as well as clarity of sentences, transitions between ideas and paragraphs, and making sure sentences and supporting points make sense. Editing occurs throughout the writing process. However, it is important to address apparent editing needs early in the writing if you are going to have someone read and comment on your paper before your final edition. Ideas that you feel are well developed may not be as clear to the reader because of the transitions or grammar. When a draft of your writing is complete, you should always conduct thorough editing, as you want to make sure all of your ideas are clear and concise. Sadly, for anything written—including for a class, a job, an interview, and even postings online—poor or no editing impacts the clarity of the ideas presented, which shapes the effectiveness, and ultimately the acceptance of the piece by the reader. Editing, in other words, is the process of changing your writing to eliminate errors, rework sentence structure, and/or add clarifying components that were missing.

“Revision is the altering, changing and constant amending of the ideas, arguments and reflections being made in the paper. It is an ongoing process of rethinking the paper: reconsidering your arguments, reviewing your evidence, refining your purpose,... reviving stale prose” (UNC 2018). This may include adding to or removing ideas, sections or even whole paragraphs to make sure the argument makes sense and is supported by the evidence you present. There can be movement of sections or ideas to help with flow of the argument. Revisions, like editing, are also an ongoing process. This process should occur

prior to submitting your writing draft to another person for review. In fact, revise all you can on your own before asking someone else to review your paper. It is not helpful to get feedback on ideas and content that you can revise on your own. Instead, rely on others to address gaps and issues that may be more difficult to identify and assess. Finally, you would want to complete all of your revisions before doing your final edits. While revising and editing overlap at times, to simplify, editing is changing grammar and structure, while revision focuses on ideas.

FEEDBACK FEELS PERSONAL, BUT YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Many students often feel that having to revise or edit a paper equates with being a poor writer (Anderson and Holt 1990; Roberts 1993). But it doesn't. Everyone needs to edit and revise their writing, even experienced writers (Edwards 2002). We as academics do so on a regular basis. This is part of the process of publishing our articles or books, but also everything we write requires this process of editing and revising. I have learned throughout my life that I am not the greatest writer and that my writing necessitates multiple revisions before I am ready to share it with anyone, a friend or an editor of a journal. This safeguards that when another person evaluates my paper, they are able to evaluate all of the ideas and offer feedback on them. If I am not clear with the ideas, arguments and evidence in my writing, this means that someone else reads my writing, they will struggle to understand my ideas and argument. For example, on the first paper I wrote in graduate school, the professor who reviewed it offered the following introductory comments: "Very insightful ideas, but one of the worst papers I have ever read." I could have presented a stronger first impression had I revised the paper more thoroughly. Hard lesson to learn at that point, but I did learn it.

Revising and editing our own writing will help you develop your ideas, and getting feedback will also help in this process of presenting your ideas more clearly. Still, comments from others, even constructive, can hurt. This is because writing is a very personal experience (Muldoon 2009), as it is your ideas and skills on display that are being critiqued. Many of us respond defensively initially because we feel we have worked hard to develop the ideas, and they make sense to us (Muldoon 2009). Personally, after receiving comments by a reviewer, I have to set the comments aside for a few days to be able to accept the constructive ideas. Please know that all comments are helpful. It is about finding how the comments can help you to further develop and clarify your ideas. Receiving criticism is also part of the process of writing.

MAKE THE PROCESS YOUR OWN

Revising and editing is not just about getting to the goal of a final draft, but part of the experience of presenting an idea in writing. Writing is a process. Engaging the experience of writing as a process is to remind you that writing is truly never a completed task, which can alleviate some of the stress of writing. That is, a draft is never completed because it could always be revised and edited further. In fact, thinking of writing as a process has shown to help students be more successful as writers, because this perspective can help you see how the process of editing and revising will develop your writing skills (Cadwallader and Scarborough 1982; Roberts 1993). The process you undergo to complete a draft of your writing includes when and how you organize and then revise and edit the writing. This is something only you can develop. You have to personalize it. It may mean trying out different practices and then figuring out what works and does not work for your writing process.

This process of editing and revising might include designing an outline and then developing the ideas within each section to make sure that each section not only is clear but that there is also a clear connection to the ideas throughout the paper. Utilizing this method to revise often means returning to the outline to remind yourself of the planned organization, and the overall intention of the paper. The more precise an outline, the better it can be to see where gaps or overlap may be in a paper.

Other people may try to edit and revise as they go, organizing during the first draft. This process is not uncommon, but could be deceiving, because once you complete a draft of the paper, and you have added your final punctuation, it is only the first draft. It is a more refined draft, but a draft nonetheless. It will still need some revising and editing before it is read to be reviewed by another person, much less to be submitted as a final product.

Then of course there are those who just “throw up” on the paper, which means to just write all of the ideas down without a plan. Then they go back and revise and edit, organizing the paper at that point. This would mean that the first draft is very rough, but it does allow the writer to introduce all possible ideas and to consider how they may be affiliated with one another. It is in the subsequent process of editing and revising that you should also determine how some of those ideas may not be related to the paper you are writing, no matter how amazing the point may be).

Many people involve reviewers throughout, whether it is a peer, a colleague, a co-worker or a professor (Schiff 1982). The key for including them is knowing what you want from them. Giving them direction prior to the evaluation will help them focus and offer feedback, and ultimately will assist you when you revise the paper based on their suggestions. Asking them

to read for clarity, or if you want to know if makes sense is still giving them direction. If you have a specific section with which you are struggling, but are not sure how to fix, or if there is a problem, ask the reviewer to focus on that area in particular. Again, revise the sections that you are able to do on your own so that the review by the other person will be helpful for you, and does not waste your time or that person's.

The time you take between revisions is also part of your process. You can take a few days off to help clear your head (or as I do when I receive reviews, remind myself it is not personal), or work on it a few hours every day (for larger papers).

Ultimately, embracing the idea of writing as being a process should also remind you that you will probably to go through multiple revisions to make sure the paper you produce fully conveys the ideas that you want to convey. How you go through that process is up to you.

EDITING AND REVISING REALLY HELPS

At this point, you may be asking yourself “Why should I take the time to edit and revise my paper? It just seems like a lot of work” (To note, if that is exactly what you were thinking, I am an amazing guesser.) First, revising your paper will positively impact your grade (Ciabattari 2013; Fathman and Whalley 1990; Ritter 2005). This has been found to be true for second language learners, who improve the presentation about content in a paper (Pei Leng 2013). This is not all though (wait for it). Students who revise actually further develop their writing skills and perform better on other written assignments (Bean 2011; Roberts 1993). And yet there is still more to gain. Working on revisions also has been shown to help students develop their critical thinking skills (Kolb, et al. 2013) and to assist them with

comprehension of key course concepts (Muldoon 2009). Yes, revising your papers helps beyond the assignment.

If that does not convince you, then just know, when you submit a paper to a professor and it is cleaner and clearer, it makes it easier to evaluate and it impacts the faculty member's perception of you. They now see you as someone who takes care of what you produce, which can only reflect better on your final grade. Please note, this is not to say you are not a person who does not care, but about how it can portray you. Finally, a better quality paper makes professors happier and that is always a good thing when grading.

A MULTITUDE OF WAYS TO EDIT AND REVISE

So, I am sure I have sold you on the importance of revising and editing papers (if I have not....maybe go back and read that section again....go ahead, I'll wait here).

So how do you do it? Well there are multiple ways you can accomplish this. You can go section by section, revising each, and then read the paper as a whole to make sure the ideas are consistent throughout. Or, you can read your paper out loud. This can help to identify problem areas that are missed when reading the paper silently. As discussed earlier, you can review the outline you originally created to make sure it is consistent. You can also choose instead to develop a new outline based on a well-developed draft to determine if it fits the original plan. If they do not, then determine if it is because you left information or ideas out. Or maybe that your paper deviated from your original ideas and the overall intention and focus of the paper. Evaluate consistency, such as reading the conclusion to determine if it conveys what was just discussed in the paper (this is actually a really good practice to integrate into any process you establish). There

may be ideas not included in the paper, or the conclusion does not reflect what was discussed throughout the paper. Once you have reviewed the conclusion, evaluate if the conclusion relates to your introduction. They should be describing similar ideas.

Of course, it never hurts to get assistance. Some professors offer an opportunity to submit a paper to them to review (either as part of the class or outside of the class requirements) and give feedback to help you focus on your next revision, and ultimately your final paper, as it has been found to be impactful on student development (Ferris and Bitchener 2012). In particular, students who are second language learners have found faculty review to be very important (Ferris 2009). Consider, when doing this, there will be multiple drafts you revise before submitting to your professor. Use the expertise of the faculty member when they review the paper. If they are having to offer multiple comments about grammar or punctuation, this limits the resource you are getting an opportunity to use. They may not be able to comment on the content if there is a lot of editing that could have been completed. Make sure you use their feedback. Nothing is worse than offering a student suggestions for a paper and then not seeing them implemented. If you don't understand the feedback, ask for clarification. I am sure there are many times I have offered the most amazing feedback to a student (at least I think it is) and it is not clear, and thus useless to the student. They want to help, which is why they took the time to offer the suggestions, so feel free to ask them clarify the points.

Peer reviews have been found to be especially effective and impactful on student writing. First, a fellow student often struggles with similar writing issues and can offer easier solutions. It is also easier to receive feedback from a fellow student than from a professor. I am not trying to

claim that it is easy to be critiqued by anyone but a peer is often a review that will be easier to hear. They could also read it out loud, so you can both check to see if it is clear throughout. You could also have a fellow student read the paper and design an outline of the paper, including the main thesis. This should match the intention (and outline) you had for your paper. It is also a great idea to use the Writing Center on campus, as they offer great suggestions to integrate throughout your paper.

While fellow students in classes are great, individuals, whether friends, family, co-workers, your local banker, whomever is willing to review your paper, can always help you to revise to determine clarity. For example, I had my sister review my book to make sure that all of the ideas were clear throughout. She is not a sociologist, but was able to identify when ideas were not clear and revisions were needed (she also helped with the editing, so I got a two-for-one).

Regardless of what method you utilize, even an amalgamation of several ways, the goal of the process of editing and revising is to create a process that supports you and helps you improve your writing.

SO THAT'S ABOUT IT

Ultimately, revising and editing your writing enhances the positions you are trying to convey, and developing a process of editing and revising will help you learn to become a better and more critical writer, which will serve you well beyond your degree. The more you engage in this process of editing and revising, the better you will be at it. It will always take effort but the more you do it, the easier it will become as you will see how it helps you move closer to your intended goals. Ultimately, personalize your editing and revising process so

that it makes sense to you and your writing, as you know what works best for you.

WORKS CITED

- Bean, John. 2011. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cadwallader, Mervyn L., and C. Allen Scarborough. 1982. "Teaching Writing within a Sociology Course: A Case Study in Writing across the Curriculum." *Teaching Sociology* 9(4):359-82.
- Ciabattari, Teresa. 2013. "Creating a Culture of Good Writing: A Cumulative Model for Teaching Writing in the Sociology Major." *Teaching Sociology* 41(1):60-69.
- Edwards, Mark Evan. 2002. "Writing before Students: A Model for Teaching Sociological Writing." *Teaching Sociology* 30(2):254-59.
- Fathman, A. K., & Whalley, E. 1990. "Teacher Response to Student Writing: Focus on Form versus Content." Pp. 178-190 in *Second Language Writing: Research Insights for the Classroom* edited by B. Kroll. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferris, Dana. 2009. *Teaching College Writing to Diverse Student Populations*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Ferris, Dana and Bitchener, John. 2012. *Written Corrective Feedback in Second Language Acquisition and Writing*. Routledge.
- Kolb, Kenneth, Kyle Longest, and Mollie Jensen. 2013. "Assessing the Writing Process: Do Writing intensive First-year Seminars

- Change How Students Write?" *Teaching Sociology* 41:20-31.
- Muldoon, Andrea. 2009. "A Case for Critical Revision: Debunking the Myth of the Enlightened Teacher versus the Resistant Student Writer." *College Teaching* 57:67-72.
- Nordquist, Richard. 2018. "How do you edit an essay?" Retrieved June 7, 2019 (<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-editing-1690631>).
- Pei Leng, Kelly Tee. 2013. "An Analysis of Written Feedback on ESL Students' Writing." *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences* 123: 389-397.
- Ritter, R. M. 2005. *New Hart's Rules*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- UNC Writing Center. 2018. "Revising Drafts." Retrieved June 7, 2019 (<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/revising-drafts/>).