

Revision

“How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” (E. M. Forster)

Oftentimes, when students hear the word “revise,” they assume they should fix their typos, spelling errors and grammar, make their essay look good, and hand it in. Actually, though, the word “revision” comes from either the French term, *réviser*, which means “to look,” or the Latin word, *revisere*: “to look again” or “re-see,” and revising an essay involves more than editing: it also means **rethinking**, re-imagining, and rearranging a composition.



In fact, the entire writing process, in the words of composition and rhetoric scholar Bruce Ballenger, “isn’t a linear trajectory, but a looping, recursive process, one that encourages **thinking**, not simply recording the thoughts [we] already have” (24). In other words, revision is the process of clarifying our **thinking**, which necessarily also helps us improve our writing and **communicating** more effectively.

Once students understand that writing isn’t, in the words of compositionist Mark Richardson, simply “a container” for their thoughts but a **mode of thinking** itself, they are more likely to abandon ineffectual habits—like waiting until the last minute to write or turning in a *first* draft—that interfere with producing the best possible work.

Experienced writers like Ballenger and Richardson understand that writing an article, an essay, or a report involves multiple steps such as brainstorming, researching, drafting, revising, outlining, revising, and editing, and the order of these steps may vary according to an individual writer’s style of composing or the particular needs of a writing task.

For student writers this means that it’s important to commit to producing a first draft early in the essay process, even if the first draft isn’t as effective as it could be. Often students believe that they have to wait until they have a perfect understanding of their entire essay before they can start writing. However, that belief often leads to writer’s block and makes the process more challenging. Students should know that it’s okay to start writing before they’ve figured out everything they will have to say or explain. This is because first drafts typically reflect a writer’s initial **thinking**, and as a writer’s **reasoning** about a topic or argument becomes more nuanced and complex, her or his writing will also develop and progress. Students should embrace their ineffective or incomplete first drafts since they are necessary first steps on a journey towards a **successful text**.

Part of the process is not simply stopping at that ineffective first draft, but of committing to deep and substantive revision. Writing teachers frequently tell students, “editing is not revising,” and “editing should happen much later in the writing process; revise first.” This highlights the fact that revision involves **rethinking** a paper: re-ordering paragraphs, developing evidence and ideas, refining **logic** and **thinking**, excising unnecessary sections, reconsidering appeals to **audience**, and refining **tone**. Essentially, revision means that a student can look at a draft with a critical eye and can see both its limitations and its possibilities.

The writing process is not necessarily easy: it takes time and effort and offers no shortcuts nor easy formulas. A student’s reward, though, of trusting and investing in the process, is a successful paper and the development into a flexible and capable writer.