



“I ask for revisions and get back the same paper with the typos fixed.”

Reframe your thinking: Revising and editing are different acts, and students conflate them because, oftentimes, they truly don’t know the difference. Editing involves small, sentence-level fixes such as grammar, spelling, and smoother sentence structure. Revision is about reopening the argument, resequencing the structure, cutting what doesn’t work, and adding what’s missing. When you assign revision and get back a paper that has only fixed typos, the student didn’t ignore you; they did the version of “revision” that’s most comfortable and understandable to them. You can teach them the difference.

*This guide is adapted from Donald M. Murray’s article “Making Meaning Clear: The Logic of Revision” (1981), Nancy Sommers’ “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers” (1980), and John Bean and Dan Melzer’s book *Engaging Ideas* 3rd edition (2021).*

Name the difference between editing and revising out loud. When revision is encouraged as a natural process in the exploration of the text to *discover meaning*, many basic writers become motivated to revise. Usually, meaning is in its primitive form when a draft is shared with an instructor—students are wrapping their heads around complicated ideas and their expression suffers as a result of this process of discovery. There are a couple of actionable ways to have students grasp the purpose of revision in class:

- **Use an analogy of building a house.** Explain to your students: if you were building a house, you wouldn’t start with the paint or the curtains—you’d start with the foundation, then the frame, then the layout of the rooms and how people move between them (the flow). Only once the structure stands do you choose the finishes. Editing is the paint while revision is deciding whether the rooms are in the right places and whether the house is even standing where it should. A student who “revises” by swapping words is painting walls that may be about to come down. Murray describes the writer’s job as a workman who “moves in close, measuring, marking, sawing, fitting, standing back to examine the job, moving back in close to plane, chisel, mark and fit...” (40). Once students understand that good writing is built by craft, not conjured by magic, they can work back and forth between focus, form, and voice until the meaning comes clear.
- **Revise your own writing on the board in front of them.** Pick a question you can think about but haven’t fully worked out and draft a messy paragraph answering it live (on the board or projected), thinking aloud as you go. Allow yourself to let it be genuinely rough. Then, revise it in front of them, narrating the revision moves you’re working through: “This sentence is where I finally figured out what I meant, so it should probably go first. These two sentences are me warming up so I can cut them.” Writing in public demonstrates to your students that writing often isn’t very clear on the first try, and, in fact, syntax often breaks down at the point where a new or significant meaning is beginning to break out of its shell. It’s also heartening for students to see that a strong writer’s first draft can be a mess!

Make your feedback the revision plan. Students often can’t translate comments into action; they don’t know what to *do* with your comments, so build the translation step into a classroom activity. When academics get a ‘revise and resubmit’ we make a plan from the comments, deciding what to tackle and in what order. The same process can be useful for students who need to make a revision plan from your feedback. Providing students with a worksheet with three columns of ‘**Instructor Comment**’, ‘**How I’ll Address It**’, and ‘**Where (page)**’ can help students sift through your comments and make an actionable, ordered plan in their own words. For a deeper version, have students answer a few metacognitive questions that prime them to read their draft the way a reader does:

- Did I correctly identify what my instructor thinks my main argument is? If their version doesn’t match mine, my argument isn’t on the page clearly enough yet.
- Did they see how I support that argument? If not, what evidence needs to be stronger or clearer?
- Is my thesis a clear, decisive answer to the question? If not, how do I sharpen it?

Separate the passes so they don't collapse back into editing. In a study conducted by Nancy Sommers, students were reluctant to claim the word 'revision' at all. They liked to think of revision as 'reviewing' or 'redoing' and the questions they asked themselves were small, along the lines of: *Can I cut any waffling? Can I find a better word or phrase that's more impressive, less cliché, or less obvious?* They approached revision as a thesaurus exercise, making changes at the level of words but not meaning.

Counter that by explaining revision as a recursive process (i.e. a set of passes, each with only one job) so students stop trying to fix everything at once, become overwhelmed, and revert back to word-swapping. Assign the passes as separate, scaffolded tasks rather than one task instructing students to "revise":

- **Pass 1: Focus.** Students reread their work only for the main claim. Ask them to ONLY find their thesis, and if it's buried in the last paragraph (where it usually is in a first draft), move it to the front. Cut nothing else this pass. Here are some tips to help students find their thesis:
 - **Read the last paragraph first**—the real thesis is frequently hiding in the conclusion after a student has worked out what they want to say. Have them read their final paragraph and ask: did I say something here that I hadn't figured out yet when I started?
 - **Write the "so what" in one sentence, from memory**—close the draft and a single sentence, answer: what is this paper actually arguing, and why should anyone care? If they can't do it without looking, the argument isn't focused, but the sentence they just wrote is often a better thesis than the one on the page anyway.
 - **Underline every sentence that could be the thesis**—drafts often contain three or four competing claims; the student has to choose one and cut the rest.
- **Pass 2: Form.** Now, the student checks whether the structure serves the argument they locked in during Pass 1. This tool is called a reverse-outline: read what's actually on the page and write one phrase per paragraph capturing what that paragraph *does*, not what it's about, but its job in the grand scheme of things (e.g. "introduces the counterargument," "gives the second piece of evidence"). Interrogate the outline with these questions:
 - **Does every paragraph earn its place?** If a student can't write a clear purpose for a paragraph, or two paragraphs have the same job, cut or merge. If the reported purpose is along the lines of "Explaining more about the topic", it means the paragraph isn't doing work.
 - **Does the order build, or just accumulate?** Read the outline phrases in sequence. An argument should have a reason for its order; if you could shuffle the paragraphs with no loss, the draft is a data-dump, not an argument.
 - **Does every paragraph connect back to the thesis from Pass 1?** Any paragraph that doesn't advance the main claim is either off-topic (cut it) or evidence that the thesis is narrower than the paper needs to be (revise the thesis).
 - **What's missing?** Look at the gaps in the outline—a claim with no evidence paragraph, a missing conclusion. Name what needs to be added.
- **Pass 3: Voice and sentences.** Now, students can touch wording, flow, and clarity because it's only time-efficient to polish prose that's going to survive.

When you ask for "revision" as one undifferentiated task, students default to what they know best, and what they can easily fix—hunting for a better word or correcting typos. When you ask for three specific passes in order, students can't skip the structural thinking.

Visibly credit the structural change when grading. Students infer what you value from what you grade. If your rubric and your comments *only* reward a piece of writing limited in its surface-level errors, students learn that revision means proofreading. To combat this, make structural change visible in how you assess by building a criterion into your rubric like: *did the argument get sharper, did the organization change, did weak material get cut?* Ask students to submit a short paragraph with their final draft, just 3-5 sentences naming what they revised and why, so you can see the thinking behind the revision attempt, not just the result.