

Revision Isn't Editing — Here's the Difference (and How to Do It)

In school, most of us were only ever taught to edit (fixing grammar, spelling, and clunky sentences). So, when an instructor says “revise,” we default to proofreading. But revision is a totally different skill: it's a much bigger undertaking, and it's where your writing improves. Here are the key differences between editing and revision, at a glance:

Editing	Revision
Fixes the surface of the writing (e.g. errant commas, typos, word choice)	Re-sees the whole piece of work (e.g. focusing on improving the argument, structure, evidence)
Makes sentences smoother	Decides whether the sentences are even in the right place
Small, quick changes	Big changes involving moving, cutting, adding, and sometimes starting over in order to rebuild the paper
Usually the last thing you do	Where most of the real improvement happens

If you “revise” by swapping in better words, you're ignoring the fact that those sentences or paragraphs might need to be deleted or substantially re-written in order to communicate your ideas more effectively. Do the big structural work first. Feeling overwhelmed? That's okay! Breaking revision into three passes, each pass with a separate job, will help:

Pass 1 — FOCUS (What am I actually arguing?)

- Your main point or ‘thesis’ is often not where you think it is. In a first draft, you usually don't figure out what you really mean until the end.
- Read your last paragraph first. Did you say something there you hadn't figured out when you started? That might be your real argument.
- Close the draft and write your main point in one sentence, from memory. If you can't, it isn't focused yet. Consider that the sentence you just wrote might often be a better thesis than the one on the page.
- Lastly, move your main point to where it belongs (usually at the end of your introduction). Change nothing else this pass.

Pass 2 — FORM (Is my draft in the right order?)

- Reverse-outline your draft: write one sentence per paragraph saying what that paragraph does. Don't say what it's *about*, write its *job*. This might look like: “introduces the counterargument,” “introduces and explains my second piece of evidence.”
- Then check: Does every paragraph have a clear job? Are any paragraphs simply functioning as explaining more about your topic (cut)? Does the order build, or could you shuffle around the paragraphs with no loss? If the latter, your paragraphs need to be doing a stronger job to support your main point. What's missing?
- Now move, cut, and add paragraphs. Don't do any sentence-fixing this pass.

Pass 3 — VOICE (Now make the sentences good.)

- Only now, once the argument and structure are settled, should you polish. Think about flow, word choice, and grammar and spelling.