

## Revising: Higher and Lower Order Concerns

You should divide revision and editing concerns into two kinds: higher order and lower order. Tackle higher order first. Once satisfied with those, move on to the lower order.

### What are Higher and Lower Order Concerns?

- Higher order concerns are thesis and focus, audience and purpose, development and organization. These come first.
- Lower order concerns are editing and proofreading. Deal with these later.
- In practical terms, it's true, you might find yourself contending with more than one concern at a time. For example, following a logical order of ideas can help refine a thesis; the right word can unlock the right order of words. But if you're stuck, take a step back, and work on one concern at a time, and separate your higher order concerns from your lower order concerns.

### Higher Order Concerns:

Try to work on higher order concerns in stages: focus on the main idea first; identify your audience; check your argument.

*Thesis:* Be sure that your paper contains a sentence stating its main point. Try looking for the sentence in your introduction and conclusion. There should be a main idea in there somewhere, preferably one that answers *the question "How?" or "Why?"* (For more tips on shaping a thesis, see handout #2—The First Draft, and #4—Introductions and Conclusions above.)

*Audience:* Is your paper appropriate for your audience? Knowing your audience helps determine whether you need to define terms or provide background, or how much analysis is required to explain your thinking. Unless the assignment identifies a specific reader, think of your professor and classmates as your ideal audience; they've read the texts, but do they see what you see? Explain yourself to them.

*Development and organization:* Does your argument need work? If paragraphs are undeveloped, you may need more evidence or analysis or both. Does your paper progress in a logical way? Don't hesitate to move paragraphs; you can always move them back. Try to strengthen the connections between points, which means improving your transitions. (For more tips on developing an argument, see handout #4—Introductions and Conclusions, and #5—Paragraphs and Transitions above.)

### Lower Order Concerns:

Now's the time to move on to lower order concerns. These, too, can be divided into stages: edit your prose first; then proofread.

*Sentences:* Take a close look at the shape and length of your sentences. A sentence that takes too long, or two sentences that say the same thing can create blocks of verbal concrete. Keep chipping away at that concrete, cutting away everything you don't need.

Read your paper aloud. If you run out of breath while reading, you might want to consider breaking up the sentence. Or you may hear too many sentences that are all the same length or constructed the same way. Edit for variety.

Reading aloud can help you catch run-ons and sentence fragments, too. It's important to repair these. They're more than cosmetic errors; they impede understanding. (For more tips on editing sentences, see handout #7—Style and #8—Fragments and Run-on Sentences below.)

*Word Choice:* Do your word choices suit the purpose of your paper and your audience?

Beware of fancy, pompous words. Do you really want to use “plethora” when “too many” will do? Simple, concrete words can achieve great power when placed in a strong, lean sentence.

Avoid vague words. A word such as “thing” isn't helpful, especially when you mean something more specific, a situation, an event, or a statement. Use words that tell us what you really mean, not words that obscure your meaning.

If you hear a phrase all the time (“the bottom line”), or see it again and again in newspapers and magazines or on the Web, it's probably a cliché. Come up with something more original. Consider it a challenge! (For more tips on choosing the right words, see handout #7—Style below.)

*Punctuation:* Once you're satisfied that the right words are in the right place, work on punctuation. (See handout #11—Punctuation below.) Why agonize over a comma if you're not satisfied with the sentence in the first place? Every revision requires re-punctuation, so don't start re-punctuating until you've finished revising.

*Spelling, Typos, etc.:* Now that you've worked down the list of concerns from the highest to the lowest order, you're ready to proofread. Spell Check is useful, but it's a good idea to consult that old standby, the dictionary, too. (For more tips on catching and correcting mistakes, see handout #13—Polishing and Proofing below.)

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