



# Revising Your Written Work

## 8 Tips for Clarity and Concision

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When you wrote your first draft, you focused on your ideas. The question in your mind was ‘what do I want to say?’

Revision requires you to imagine yourself as a reader of your own work. Now, you must focus on the expression of those same ideas and ask yourself, ‘does this say what I want it to?’

Sometimes you will find that you still don’t know—not precisely—what you want to say. Revision leads you to clarify your ideas and refine your arguments.

### 1. Read aloud

Reading aloud – slowly – will help you identify words that are unnecessary, sentences that don’t work, and paragraphs that don’t flow.

The aim is to take a step back from your writing brain and see your text as a reader does. You can get a friend or your computer to read aloud instead (in Word, click Review>Read Aloud). It often helps to print out your work and revise it on paper. Try changing the font so you can read it with new eyes.

### 2. Vary your sentence lengths. If in doubt, keep it short.

When reading aloud, you will notice long sentences because you’ll run out of breath! On the page, you can underline any sentences that run over more than about 2.5 lines. These sentences may work better split into two shorter ones. In fact, if you make your sentences simpler, many grammatical errors will disappear.

See our guide to [Perfect Sentences](#) for more explanation.

### 3. Search for ‘this’ – then decide whether you can change or clarify what ‘this’ is.

Often, we begin a sentence with ‘this’ to refer back to the previous sentence. But what is ‘this’? Have you named it, or are you just trying (as Inger Mewburn puts it) to sum up the ‘vibe’ of the previous sentence? Instead, turn the ‘vibe’ of the previous sentence into the topic of the next.

For example,

The Fall of Rome has been attributed to numerous causes, from barbarian invasion to the rise of Christianity, from corruption to lead poisoning. **This** reflects the changing nature of the Empire rather than a lack of evidence.

What is ‘this’? We could add a clarification...

**This diverse list of causes** reflects the changing nature of the Empire rather than a lack of evidence.

Or we could change the phrase for precision...

**Historians’ many attempts at explanation** reflect the changing nature of the Empire rather than a lack of evidence.

### 4. Create a reverse outline.

- Print out your writing and number every paragraph. Then, make a numbered list: for each paragraph, write a single phrase or sentence summing up the point. If you can’t identify the point, perhaps that paragraph needs changing – or removing. Put a star by it and come back to edit it when you finish the reverse outline.
- Once you have your outline, analyse it: which paragraphs need work? Are they in the most logical or effective order? Are there any sections that you should remove? What are you going to do with the starred paragraphs?
- Next, it’s time to edit your text so that it matches your new outline.

See more detailed guide to reverse outlining on the [Explorations of Style blog](#).

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### 5. Move unwanted passages to a 'Recycling' document.

It's painful to delete entire paragraphs, even if you know they aren't relevant or don't belong. Just move them to another document instead – then you can restore them if you change your mind (you won't). Alternatively, you may use these ideas in a future piece of work.

### 6. Start with the idea

Ask yourself: what is this paragraph/sentence *about*? Make sure that you have named that topic in a clear, succinct way. You probably want to introduce it in the first sentence of the paragraph – the 'topic sentence'.

How simply can you state the main thing you want to say? You will find that you can remove phrases that lead in to this idea, such as 'The first factor to discuss is'... These phrases were useful to you, the writer, in generating ideas. But your reader may not need them.

### 7. Remove unnecessary repetition.

When you read aloud, you will find it easier to identify repetition. Watch out for:

- Repeated words that can be replaced by a pronoun or other placeholder phrase (it, them, such ideas, their concepts – just watch out for ambiguity).
- Redundant words, especially pairs (hopes and dreams, basic and fundamental, true and accurate) and adjectives/adverbs (completely finished, unhappy tragedy).
- Places where you have said the same thing in two successive sentences.

However, some repetition is useful. For instance, when you have identified what the paragraph is about, you may want to refer to that topic in most sentences. You can still vary how you express this topic, if you vary your sentence structure.

### 8. Use meaningful verbs.

What is the important action in your sentence? Use that action as your verb, rather than phrasing it as a noun. In particular, you may want to replace phrasal verbs (think about>consider; make clear>clarify; talk about>discuss) and avoid overuse of 'to be' (is, was, are).

Instead of...	Try...
The police <b>conducted</b> an <i>investigation</i> into the matter.	The police <b>investigated</b> the matter.
There <b>is</b> a need for further <i>work</i> on this dissertation.	The student <b>must work</b> further on this dissertation.
Our <i>discussion</i> <b>concerned</b> a tax cut.	We <b>discussed</b> a tax cut.

(Adapted from Williams and Colomb, p. 31)

### Sources/further reading:

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 Mewburn, Inger, *How to unf\*ck your academic writing* (1 June 2022) <<https://thesiswhisperer.com/2022/06/01/how-to-unfuck-your-writing-a-check-list/>> [accessed 11 July 2022]  
 Mewburn, Inger, Katherine Firth and Shaun Lehmann, *How to Fix Your Academic Writing Trouble: A practical guide* (London, 2019)  
 Williams, Joseph M., with Gregory G. Colomb, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago/London, 1990; many editions available)