

More strategies for revision

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Deducing readers' needs

Are you a mathematician who'll be submitting to a journal read mostly by biologists? Or are you a genomics researcher hoping to publish in an education journal? In the interdisciplinary world of BACTER, we often find ourselves writing for audiences that have very different perspectives and goals from our own. **So, if the goal of revision is to produce prose that serves these diverse readers, how do we decide what readers need?**

- Choose your target journal before you start writing. Then, read the guidelines for authors and/or analyze the writing of some papers from the journal (preferably well written ones!) to get a feel for how authors frame their work, the background they include, and the language they use.
- As Paul Halmos says in *How to Write Mathematics*, ask yourself whom you want to reach and then write to that person. That is, picture a smart, interested reader who has very little background in your field and is skeptical of your approach. Then ask yourself: What extra information might he or she need to grasp the significance of my research? What hard questions might this person ask about my methods or results? Or, more generally, what difficulties might this person have understanding my work, and how can I phrase things to avoid these difficulties?
- Ask a general reader to review your writing before you revise. Your advisor and co-authors are excellent reviewers of the scientific content of your paper. But because they're just as familiar with the research as you are, they may miss places where you aren't being clear, are making leaps in logic, or using too much jargon. That's where a general reader – your spouse, a graduate student friend in another field – can really help.

Think globally, then locally

It's always preferable when revising to focus on "global" issues first – those concerned with the overall message, argument and organization of a piece – before addressing "local" problems, such as grammar, word choice, sentence structure and so on. Nevertheless, less experienced writers and reviewers often won't local issues go; their tendency is to polish, polish, polish as they write, or to correct grammar compulsively as they review someone else's work.

What's wrong with this? The main problem is that it can be very inefficient. Often we spend a lot of time refining a sentence, paragraph or section only to throw it out later because it doesn't fit. What's more, focusing on local issues too early can interrupt our train of thought, so that we end up forgetting where we're going overall, or fail to capture key insights on paper.

The logo for BACTER features the word "BACTER" in a bold, sans-serif font. The letters "B", "A", "C", "T", and "E" are black, while the letters "R", "E", and "R" are red. The red letters have a slight shadow effect, giving the logo a three-dimensional appearance.

Doing *some* polishing as we write is inevitable. But during the early stages of drafting and revising, try to stay focused on the big picture by asking yourself these kinds of questions:

- What am I trying to say? Have I discovered my main point or “bottom line” yet?
- How is my overall argument or message taking shape? Where am I including too much information – or not enough? Are there any leaps in my logic?
- Is the content organized in support of my main point or message?
- Am I serving the needs of the reader? (See the discussion above and the handout “Turning writer-based prose into reader-based prose.”)

I just can’t see what’s wrong...

Putting “fresh eyes” on a piece of our own writing, so that we see the problems and can fix them, is tough. If you count yourself among those who struggle with this (and you’re not alone), here are a few strategies to help you:

- Put your work aside for a time. At least a week is good, longer if you can spare the time. Try it, and you’ll likely find yourself saying, “I wrote *that*? It doesn’t make any sense!”
- Ask a friend or colleague to read a passage from your work, and then explain out loud what she thinks you were trying to say. This should not only give you a sense of how clear your main points are, but it should also help keep the reviewer from picking on grammar, word choice and other “local” issues (see above).
- Read your writing aloud to yourself. Nothing reveals convoluted, wordy and confusing prose faster than hearing it spoken aloud.
- Get a good critique. Although we can all learn to evaluate our own work, nobody in the end can do without a good editor or reviewer. Just make sure you pick yours carefully: Someone who’ll focus on larger issues rather than local ones; who’ll give specific feedback (Comments like, “I get lost in this section,” or “This is great!” don’t cut it); someone, in short, who is exacting and honest but kind, whose feedback *encourages* rather than *discourages* you from revising. Note that you may need to explain what you’re looking for in a critique.

References

N Sommers (1980) Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers. *College Composition and Communication* 31(4): 378-88