



NO. 23 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

The Final Touches: Revising Prose

You've written that huge research paper, that last essay for English, or that feature story for the newspaper. Now you want to go through and make sure that everything from sentence order to word choice is perfect. Here are some things to keep in mind when revising prose.

Strong verbs.

Saying something powerfully proves much more effective than simply saying it. Avoid excessive use of “to be” verbs (it is, this is, she was, etc.). Try to use a strong verb in the first paragraph of all your papers.

Example: “Heathcliff exudes mystery;” not “Heathcliff is mysterious.”

Action, action, action.

Always emphasize the object of the action, avoiding passive voice.

Example: “The book was checked out by Ann” would be more effective as “Ann checked out the book.”

Active voice makes sentences less wordy and also emphasizes key words.

Variety.

Do all your sentences follow the same form (i.e., all long or all short)? Do they all begin in the same way? Vary your sentence lengths and word choices. If your paper has a word or phrase that occurs numerous times, search for other ways of conveying it. Refer to Handouts No. 5 and 6 on sentence variety for more tips.

Less is more.

Long phrases and filler words that do not contribute to the overall meaning of your sentence should be kept to a minimum. Here are some specific things to avoid using in excess.

- Words that insist on instead of add to the proof (*truly, indeed, really*, etc.)
- Indirect ways of starting a sentence (*it is important to note that, we must consider*, etc.)
- Connectors (*thus, therefore, however*, etc.) — strong sentences will not need these words to convey meaning
- Words and phrases that make no contribution (*as it were, in other words*, etc.)
- Phrases where a word will do (*in spite of the fact that, the question as to whether*, etc.)

Creating emphasis.

You want your reader to easily recognize your strongest points of emphasis. Watch out for these mistakes:

- Sentences that merely list.
- Noun-heavy sentences — verbs are the strongest words in a sentence, not nouns.
- Negatives — a point stated in the positive form is usually stronger.
- Clichés and formulas — overused phrases take away power because your audience is already familiar with them.

Fine-tuning.

Before you turn your paper in, read over it and evaluate words, clauses, sentences, etc. Is this word or phrase necessary? Could it be said more expressively, more directly? Does it fit in with what comes before and after? Pay special attention to first and last sentences of paragraphs and first and last paragraphs of essays. These are the places in a text that have the most impact on a reader.

For more information on revising prose, see:

The Elements of Style, William Strunk and E.B. White

The Practical Stylist, Sheridan Baker

Right Words, Right Places, Scott Rice

The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed): 411-12, 96-105

<http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/writingcenter/web/revise.html>