

Editing Your Paper: The Basics

When you are in the final stages of revising your paper, it can be difficult to figure out where to start. This handout aims to help provide structure when you reach this stage of writing.

Context: Triage

To triage is to assign degrees of urgency to something. It's most often used in the medical field, but it can also be applied to identifying issues in your writing. Triageing your work will help you identify what to tackle first and help you prioritize, especially when you are in a time crunch.

Major Issues vs. Minor Issues

Fixing major issues takes more time and effort than minor issues, and they may require involved changes. This includes addressing structural and organizational issues, needing more research, or having large gaps in reasoning. They are also referred to as “higher-order” concerns.

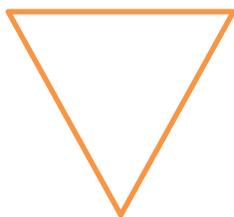
Though minor issues do not take as much time and effort to fix, revisions have to be much more precise. This can include remedying grammatical errors, weak transitions, and vague information. They are also referred to as “lower-order” concerns.

In general, resolve major issues first. It makes little sense to work on small problems like grammar if the content needs to be overhauled. The self-editing techniques outlined here will address higher-order concerns—related to structure and organization—and *not* lower-order concerns, like editing for grammar. (Such concerns are covered in our handout about [proofreading](#).) Each section will also cover common pitfalls and how to address them.

Structure

Structural problems can emerge whenever you are missing one or more parts that are vital to supporting whatever you are talking about. Fixing these issues often requires you to take a step back and look at your work as if you were a fresh reader with no background info whatsoever.

Introduction and Thesis



A common pitfall in weak introductions is getting **specific** too quickly, such as using evidence in your introduction, which confuses the reader. Recall the upside-down triangle structure covered in our handout about [introductions](#). Additionally, make sure that your **thesis** is present and clear. It states and summarizes your main argument and presents a roadmap of the ideas you'll be discussing; a strong thesis is the first step to a strong paper.

Ensure that your introduction starts broadly and gives appropriate context to your argument, which can be clearly understood from your thesis.

Body

A topic sentence summarizes and organizes the main idea of the paragraph it starts. Similar to the introduction pitfall outlined above, starting a new paragraph with evidence rather than a general topic sentence weakens it. Additionally, it is crucial to provide support to your claim. Ensure that the claim you make at the conclusion of a paragraph draws upon reasoning you have made within the paragraph itself.

Paragraphs may also seem like they do not flow well in the paper, or they may even seem out of place. This is typically because they aren't well-connected to the essay's purpose. Make sure you explain *why* your evidence and analysis is relevant and connected to what you are talking about.

If you determine that you have structural issues, make sure your content is relevant, relates to your purpose, and clearly connects back to your thesis. Also, make sure your line of thought and reasoning can be followed. Eliminate gaps in reasoning by considering how you intended to connect two ideas and making sure that logic is explicit in your writing.

Conclusion

Many writers struggle with conclusions. This issue is natural, especially when writers have been working on a piece for a long time. However, the conclusion is one of the most critical parts of your paper. It is the last thing a reader sees and your final chance to make sure your point is clear, supported, and understandable.

When writing a conclusion, make sure you are encompassing *everything* the conclusion should be referring to. If you are concluding an essay, make sure you refer back to every section of your essay—not just the final sections. If you happen to omit key details or large chunks of your paper from your conclusion, readers may consider whether those parts of your paper were necessary at all. Try to reflect the structure of your argument in the structure of your conclusion; by taking this step, you ensure that you cover every part of your paper. Your conclusion should also never present new ideas—if a new idea is present in the conclusion, you need to omit it or move it elsewhere in the body of the paper.

Organization

Organization differs from structure in that all of your content may be there, but it is simply in the wrong place for clarity and logical flow of ideas. Revising your organization requires you to move paragraphs and sentences around and re-order them.

General vs. Specific



Recall the upside-down triangle model. There is still another part to it: getting general again. This hourglass essay structure is why paragraphs start with topic sentences and end with concluding statements; by beginning and ending with general info, you connect the reader to your claim and remind them of why it is relevant to your overall purpose and thesis.

Within a body paragraph, consider how you have placed your evidence and analysis. Break down your sentences to their main points and compare them to see if any ideas seem out of place or can be reorganized for clarity.

Grouping of Information

Re-organization at the level of your entire essay requires you to take a step back. Evaluate your evidence in relation to your flow of logic and see if any of your details or claims are out of place.

If you have an outline, cross-reference it. Is there anything you added during writing that isn't relevant or doesn't fit with your original paragraph ideas? Do some details in one paragraph fit better elsewhere in the paper? When reading over your paper, see if you can trace your line of thought. If there is any information that seems out of place, note it and re-evaluate it later to see if it fits better somewhere else.

Additionally, [reverse outlining](#) is a good strategy to use when revising a paper on the organizational level. Ensure that your thesis is connected to claims that are clearly supported and understandable.

Cohesion

Cohesion covers many of the previous points that were listed throughout this handout, so the following list provides a recap to some of the information previously covered.

Overall cohesion of your essay can be improved by remembering to look at four key points.

- Make sure your paper's **purpose** is clear and that everything in your paper clearly connects back to it. This includes connections back to your thesis.
- Ensure that everything is **relevant**. When considering if you need a detail or not, ask yourself: What purpose is it serving? Do I need it? Why is it significant?
- Have a clear **structure**. Start off general, get more specific, then go general again to have smooth flow and transitions.
- Most of all, if you are writing for a particular **assignment** or specific set of **guidelines**, make sure you **address the prompt!** Ensure that your thesis satisfies the prompt as well as any other requirements from the assignment.

Activity 1: Reorganizing Evidence and Analysis

The following body paragraph contains evidence and analysis that is illogically interspersed. Evaluate the sentences and re-order them in a way that makes more sense.

Antibiotics destroy or inhibit the growth of microorganisms, including bacteria, and they were hailed as a revolutionary cure-all wonder drug when medical practitioners first began to start using them in the 1940s (Rogers & Kadner, 2019). This is due to the nature of Darwin's theory of natural selection; those bacteria susceptible to antibiotics were killed, while those bacteria that were not survived and went on to reproduce. However, these high expectations for antibiotics have led to a paradoxical situation where they have been so overused that many antibiotics have lost their potency (Evolution of Antibiotic Resistance, 2001). The rapid evolution of bacteria is best observed in the evolution of bacteria in response to the introduction of antibiotics.

Answer Key for Activity 1

The rapid evolution of bacteria is best observed in the evolution of bacteria in response to the introduction of antibiotics. Antibiotics destroy or inhibit the growth of microorganisms, including bacteria, and they were hailed as a revolutionary cure-all wonder drug when medical practitioners first began to start using them in the 1940s (Rogers & Kadner, 2019). However, these high expectations for antibiotics have led to a paradoxical situation where they have been so overused that many antibiotics have lost their potency (Evolution of Antibiotic Resistance, 2001). This is due to the nature of Darwin’s theory of natural selection; those bacteria susceptible to antibiotics were killed, while those bacteria that were not survived and went on to reproduce.

Comments:

In this revised paragraph, all evidence was moved to the middle of the paragraph so that the intro would not begin with specific details. After that, there are only two sentences remaining:

- (1) “This is due to the nature of Darwin’s theory of natural selection; those bacteria susceptible to antibiotics were killed, while those bacteria that were not survived and went on to reproduce” and
- (2) “The rapid evolution of bacteria is best observed in the evolution of bacteria in response to the introduction of antibiotics.”

Between these two, the second sentence is more general. The second sentence is introducing a subject, whereas the first sentence is clearly making a point. So, after taking this into account, the second sentence works effectively to start the paragraph, while the first sentence functions well as a thesis.

Activity 2: Examining Relevancy and Creating Connections

The following example contains a student’s thesis and planned body paragraphs for their essay. Some of the planned body paragraphs may not be relevant. First, remove body paragraphs that you think are irrelevant. Then, put the paragraphs that remain in a logical order. Note that answers can vary (and two possible answers are provided).

Thesis: With proper supplementation and personal health awareness, a vegan diet can be just as healthy (if not healthier) than a standard diet.

Body Paragraph 1: Elderly life-long vegans exist.

Body Paragraph 2: Plant-based foods help remedy low fiber intake problems.

Body Paragraph 3: Nutrient and vitamin deficiencies can be fixed with supplements.

Body Paragraph 4: Any improperly planned diet could have vitamin deficiencies.

Body Paragraph 5: Vegans tend to eat less saturated fat and cholesterol.

Answer Key for Activity 2

Option 1: Paragraphs to keep (and in revised order)

2: Plant-based foods help remedy low fiber intake problems. 5: Vegans tend to eat less saturated fat and cholesterol. 3: Nutrient and vitamin deficiencies can be fixed with supplements.

Comments:

In this answer, the body paragraph topics all focus on the value veganism has as a healthy diet. Elderly long-life vegans are omitted because that topic is not as nutrition-focused as the other topics that are included. Additionally, the point about other improperly planned diets has been omitted since it could end up being tangential if it doesn't focus enough on the health benefits of veganism.

In regard to the order, plant-based foods helping fiber problems comes first because it is my strongest evidence with the hardest facts. Vegans tending to eat less saturated fat comes second because it is defensible, but relies on ignoring vegans who *don't* eat less saturated fat. Vitamin deficiency supplements comes last because it is a solution to a vegan's possible problem, but it concedes that vegan diets may have vitamin deficiencies, which could weaken my argument if not properly addressed.

Option 2: Paragraphs to keep (and in revised order)

1: Elderly long-life vegans exist. 3: Nutrient and vitamin deficiencies can be fixed with supplements. 4: Any improperly planned diet could have vitamin deficiencies.

Comments:

With this possible organization, the essay has a more humanistic and persuasive perspective. The author will not discuss the specific nutritional aspects of veganism but will instead focus on hypothetically counter-attacking possible arguments against veganism.

The topic of elderly long-life vegans comes first because they are my main support defending how veganism is not unhealthy. The existence of these individuals concretely shows that it can be a healthy diet. Vitamin deficiency supplements come next because the topic is not as strong as the concrete evidence of elderly vegans, but it still addresses one of the main concerns people have when considering the health of vegans. Finally, saying that any improperly planned diet could have vitamin deficiencies comes last because it is based around a line of logical reasoning rather than hard, stand-alone facts. Veganism can be a healthy diet, and like any other diet, it can also be practiced in unhealthy ways. Therefore, unhealthy vegans should not be indicative of the entire diet as a whole.

References

Evolution of Antibiotic Resistance. PBS, 2001,

https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/library/10/4/1_104_03.html

Kadner, Robert J. and Kara Rogers. *Bacteria*. Britannica, 2019,

<https://www.britannica.com/science/bacteria/Evolution-of-bacteria>