

# Strategies for Radical Revision

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When we are revising and pressed for time, we often focus on making minor, surface-level changes to a text— substituting words or phrases, correcting grammar—instead of reconsidering our draft as a whole. “Radical revision” presumes that even a strong first draft can benefit from being deeply reconsidered or restructured.

Below, we offer several strategies for radical revision—to help you add information your reader needs, to rewrite (from scratch) parts of your essay that are not yet doing the work you need them to do, and to cut anything that isn’t working. Don’t be afraid to make big changes. Try out one of the below strategies and watch your essay transform.

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## To write a new section:

Take out a blank sheet of paper or open up a new document on your computer. Next, look through your existing draft to find a sentence that you want to expand on: one where you still have something to figure out, or that doesn't quite seem to match your current thesis statement. Copy that sentence into your new document and use this sentence as a starting point to write a new paragraph.

## To see if the order of your paragraphs makes sense: *(reverse outline)*

Go through your draft, paragraph by paragraph, and ask yourself: "What is the main idea of this paragraph?" (Identify what you actually wrote, not just what you meant to write!) Write out these main ideas on a new page to create a "reverse outline" of your essay. Examine this reverse outline to see whether your organization makes sense, or whether there are gaps in your argument or unnecessary repetitions, for example. Go back to your paper and cut or rearrange paragraphs as needed.

## To address your reader's concerns: *(after you've received feedback)*

Examine your reader's comments and figure out what types of changes they are asking for—Changes to your argument? Structure? Grammar? Be specific: if the

bulk of comments focus on your use of sources, for example, you might make one of your categories “Paraphrasing” or “Interpreting quotes.” Write three of your revision priorities on a separate sheet of paper. Decide which of these are most and least important, and number them in order, leaving plenty of space below each heading. Starting with the most important, make a list of the revisions you would have to make to address this category. Once you have a working list of action items, begin to tackle each task.

## **To strengthen your argument: *(working in pairs)***

Find a partner. Without looking at your draft, say out loud to your partner what you think your paper argues; have them take notes, recording what you’ve said. Do the same for your partner, taking notes while they explain what their draft is about. Next, return to your essay to see if your paper matches your partner’s notes about your argument, or whether you further explained something out loud that you didn’t write down. Work to revise your paper so that it matches your description.

## **To restructure your essay and discover new ideas in the process: *(requires blank printer paper, scissors, and tape/glue)***

Print out and cut up your draft into sections (you can define ‘section’ as a paragraph, half-paragraph, two paragraphs—any time you see a new unit of thought emerging, make a cut!). Try moving the parts around, considering how your argument changes when one section comes earlier or later in the sequence. Once

you find an order that feels closer to working, tape or glue these sections of your draft into this order on a page of printer paper. Read through your newly structured essay, and fill in what's missing between sections. The idea is to move paragraphs into a new order that sparks new transitions and expansion of ideas, or reveals redundancies/problems.

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