REVISING AND EDITING

Revising gives you the chance to preview your work on behalf of the eventual reader. Revision is much more than proofreading, though in the final editing stage it involves some checking of details. Good revision and editing can transform a mediocre first draft into an excellent final paper. It's more work, but leads to real satisfaction when you find you've said what you wanted.

Here are some steps to follow on your own. Writing centres can give you further guidance.

Start Large, End Small

Revision may mean changing the shape and reasoning in your paper. It often means adding or deleting sentences and paragraphs, shifting them around, and reshaping them as you go. Before dealing with details of style and language (editing), be sure you have presented ideas that are clear and forceful. Make notes as you go through these questions, and stop after each section to make the desired revisions.

1. First check whether you have fulfilled the intention of the **assignment**. Look again at the instruction sheet, and revise your work to be sure you can say *yes* to these questions:

   o Have you performed the kind of **thinking** the assignment sheet asked for (e.g., *analyse, argue, compare, explore*)?
   o Have you written the **genre** of document called for (e.g., book review, critique, personal response, field notes, research report, lab report, essay)?
   o Have you used **concepts and methods of reasoning** discussed in the course? Don't be shy of using theoretical terms from the course. Also beware of just retelling stories or listing information. Looking at your topic sentences in sequence will show what kinds of ideas you have emphasized. (See our handout on Developing Coherent Paragraphs.)
   o Have you given adequate **evidence** for your argument or interpretation? Be sure that the reader knows *why* and *how* your ideas are important. A quick way of checking is to note where your paragraphs go after their topic sentences. Watch out for repetitions of general ideas—look for progression into detailed reasoning, usually including source referencing.

2. Then look at overall **organization**. It's worthwhile to print out everything so that you can view the entire document. Then consider these questions, and revise to get the answers you want:

   o Does your **introduction** make clear where the rest of the paper is headed? If the paper is argument-based, you will likely use a thesis statement. Research papers often start with a statement of the research question. (Ask a clear-headed roommate or other friend to give you a prediction of what he or she expects after reading only the first few paragraphs of your paper. Don't accept a vague answer.)
   o Is each **section** in the right place to fulfil your purpose? (It might help to make a reverse outline: take the key idea from each paragraph or section and set it down in a list so you can see the logical structure of what you've written. Does it hang together? Is it all necessary? What's missing? Revise to fill in gaps and take out irrelevant material.)

- o Have you drawn **connections** between the sections? (Look again at your topic sentences to see if they link back to what has just been said as well as looking forward to the next point. Find ways to draw ideas together explicitly. Use logical statements, not just a sprinkling of connecting words.)
- o Would a person reading your **conclusion** know what question you had asked and how you had arrived at your answer? (Again, ask for a real paraphrase.)

3. Now **polish and edit your style** by moving to smaller matters such as word choice, sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. You may already have passages that you know need further work. This is where you can use computer programs (with care) and reference material such as handbooks and handouts. Here are some tips:

- o **Read passages aloud** to see if you have achieved the **emphasis** you want. Look for places to use short sentences to draw attention to key ideas, questions, or argumentative statements. If you can't read a sentence all the way through with expression, try cutting it into two or more.
- o **Be sure to use spell check.** It will help you catch most typos and many wrongly spelled words. But don't let it replace anything automatically, or you'll end up with nonsense words. You will still have to read through your piece and use a print dictionary or writer's handbook to look up words that you suspect are not right.
- o **Don't depend on a thesaurus.** It will supply you with lists of words in the same general category as the one you have tried—but most of them won't make sense. Use plain clear words instead. Use a print dictionary and look up synonyms given as part of definitions. Always look at the samples of usage too.
- o **Don't depend on a grammar checker**. The best ones still miss many errors, and they give a lot of bad advice. If you know that you overuse slang or the passive voice, you may find some of the "hits" useful, but be sure to make your own choice of replacement phrases. A few of the explanations may be useful. But nothing can substitute for your own judgement.

A Note on Appearance:

Looks do count. Give your instructor the pleasure of handling a handsome document—or at least of not getting annoyed or inconvenienced. These are the basic expectations for any type of assignment.

- o Include a **cover page** giving the title of your paper, the name of the course, your name, the date, and the instructor's name. Don't bother with coloured paper, fancy print, or decorations.
- o **Number your pages** in the top right-hand corner. Omit the number for the first page of your paper (since it will be headed by the title), starting in with 2 on the second page.
- o **Double-space** your text, including indented quotations, footnotes, and reference lists. Leave margins of one inch (2.5 cm) on all sides of the page.
- o Use a **standard font** in twelve-point size. For easier reading, don't right-justify your lines.
- o Put the **reference list** or bibliography on a separate page at the end. (See the handout on Standard Documentation Format: choose your format, then use the examples as guides.)
- o **Staple** your pages; don't use a bulky binding or cover.