

Steps to Successful Essay Writing

Writing essays in college can be daunting and intimidating for anyone. Most college students struggle with writing essays because they can feel overwhelmed and not know where to start. The Writing and Multiliteracy Center (WMC) at California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) has compiled this guide to help students get started by breaking down the essay writing process into easy and attainable steps.

To begin, let's start by defining this writing process. The writing process is a series of steps that allow a writer to come up with ideas (brainstorm), research and analyze, write drafts, and revise to create a thoroughly developed and edited complete text. Despite what you might think, these steps are not linear and are more of a circular process where you might revisit different steps multiple times. For clarity's sake, the steps are listed in a linear fashion below, but many of the steps will need to be revisited during the writing process.

The suggested seven steps are as follows:



Keep in mind that everybody's writing process is different and these steps may not work in this exact order for you. That's okay! Each of these steps was designed to be used individually should you feel stuck in any part of the writing process. Feel free to use the steps in whatever order works best for you. With that being said, **the most important steps are reading and understanding the prompt, outlining, drafting (or writing), and revising, as these elements will be the bulk of your assignment and will help your writing be the best it can be.**

We hope these tools are helpful for you in your independent writing. But remember, the WMC is always here to help you through each of these steps in the writing process. We have tutors who would love to meet with you whenever you need help or just another set of eyes to look at your paper.

Make an appointment with a tutor here: <https://www.csuci.edu/wmc/appointment.htm>.

Good luck, and happy writing!

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Step 1: Read the Prompt

In academic writing, starting with thoroughly reading over the prompt, assignment instructions, and rubric is key to writing a successful essay. Professors often have specific expectations for what your paper should look like and be addressing, so making sure you start with a clear understanding of their goals for you in the project will give you a good foundation and sense of direction.

One helpful tip students can use when reading or rereading prompts is to annotate them as you read. If possible, **consider printing out the prompt and rubric and highlighting important points**. This can also be done digitally on a screenshot of the prompt, or you could just take notes on a piece of paper or your phone as you read. The elements listed in the prompt and rubric will be key in making sure you are meeting the requirements of the assignment, so do whatever you can to keep those key points fresh in your mind.

As you are reading and annotating the prompt and rubric, here are four specific things to look for in addition to key deadlines and requirements that will help you succeed:



Identify the essay type

- Is this paper a research paper? Perhaps a literature review? Or maybe it's a personal essay, argumentative essay, literature analysis, journal entry, business memo, lab report, etc.?
- All of these writing styles are different and will require their own specific organization and focus.



Identify the purpose and audience

- Knowing the purpose of *why* you are writing this paper will help you develop the text clearly and fully.
- In addition, keeping in mind the intended audience of your paper will also shape how and what you write.
 - Are you writing to convince an audience of your peers to care about a problem you've researched? Or maybe you're telling a personal narrative to your family members? If you're ever in doubt of who your audience is, don't be afraid to ask your professor.

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Note any sources required

- Some types of essays require more research than others, so make sure you know how much research and additional sources are required for your specific paper.



Note what citation style and format is expected

- Citation styles differ depending on the discipline and the professor's preferences, but following a citation style guide is crucial in academic writing to properly credit your sources and avoid plagiarism.

If you've read the prompt and still find yourself confused on the expectations for the assignment or any of the elements listed above, first reach out to your professor for clarity or make an appointment with a WMC tutor to get some initial help.

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Step 2: Do Relevant Research When Applicable

Some types of essays require more research than others, so make sure you **know how much research and additional sources are required for your specific paper**. If your assignment is one that requires scholarly research or sources in addition to your own perspective, be sure to find a few sources that are timely and relevant and read through them before moving on to the next steps in writing so you have a good background knowledge of the topic first. This research should guide your thinking on the topic, and having a good amount of background knowledge on the topic before you jump into analysis and drafting will help ensure your paper is well-thought-out and has a clear, valid argument.

While reading your source materials, be sure to **take notes, annotate the text, and copy and paste quotes/statistics that might be relevant to your topic** or ideas you have about the topic into a separate document (keeping track of the citations, of course!). This will not only help you build background knowledge on the topic, it will also help you flesh out a potential main idea and give you textual support to use in your paper later on. Also, **you will need to return to the research step throughout the entire writing process**, so having notes can help direct you to gaps in your research or areas where the paper might feel imbalanced.

Additionally, you can use post-it notes or an online whiteboard app to start taking notes on sources and visually organizing them into categories. These strategies can help you prepare for the next step of narrowing down your focus and picking a main idea. When you see repeated trends in what multiple sources are discussing or find common themes between different articles, you might start to get an idea of some potential areas to focus on in your paper.

If you feel stuck on this step or need help with search terms, databases, or using provided library services, make an appointment with a CSUCI librarian [here](https://www.csuci.edu/wmc/appointment.htm) to refine your research and get creative with where to look for evidence.

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Step 3: Decide on A Topic

If you've already read the prompt and gained a broad background knowledge on the topic of your paper, now is the time to start getting a little more specific and narrowing down a clear topic for your essay.

Make sure to keep this step simple and don't get ahead of yourself. For this step, just focus on:

- **Narrowing down a topic**
- **Creating a tentative thesis statement**

Once you've done some foundational research, you might have a lot of ideas for where you could go with writing your paper. One key element to helping you write successfully is keeping your paper's focus specific or narrowing down your topic. Don't make the work too hard by trying to tackle too many topics or arguments at once. Instead, **look at patterns in the research or ideas you may be the most interested in that align with the prompt and pick one that you think you can support in the allotted page limit.**

For help narrowing down your topic and practice with your own paper, see [this WMC resource](#).

Your thesis statement is one of the most important parts of your paper and will be the guiding force for the reader to follow your writing. **A thesis statement is typically one sentence that functions as your paper's main idea or argument.** Your thesis statement should be clear, concise, and give your paper a good sense of direction. A good thesis statement should be something that **can be supported by evidence** and broken down into sections to be examined more closely or from different angles.

Once you've started narrowing down your topic and you have an idea of what your main idea might be, feel free to check out [this Harvard College Writing Center resource](#) that has more details on how to form a thesis statement.

In addition, [this WMC resource](#) has more detailed information on the different styles of thesis statements you can use.

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Here is an example of a narrowed-down topic that led to a specific, arguable thesis:

I want to write my essay on Margaret Fuller's "The Great Lawsuit" because that was the reading from class I found the most interesting.

Potential Topic: Marriage

How do I connect Fuller's argument with the current world?

- Definition of marriage?
- Then vs. Now?

Thesis: Based on Margaret Fuller's "The Great Lawsuit," Fuller believed there was a clear beneficial type of marriage which I believe fits with our understandings of marriage today.

Example written by Sierra Leeper.

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Step 4: Brainstorm

Once you've decided on your direction and created a thesis statement, your next step is to start thinking about your subpoints and your paper as a whole. Before you actually get started writing your paper, it's a good idea to spend some time brainstorming and coming up with creative ideas for the sub-topics of your paper.

To get started with brainstorming, first think about the following things and maybe jot down some answers or ideas:

- **What is the focus of your thesis statement?** (Keep in mind that thesis statements can and should change and develop as you brainstorm – the brainstorming process is not static, it's a very dynamic process.)
- **What resources are the most relevant to your thesis?**
- **What do those resources have to say about the topic?** (Take notes on specific quotes you think might be helpful in addressing your thesis to use for later steps in writing your paper.)
- **What ideas do you have about the topic?** Try writing down all the issues you want to address in your paper.
- **How can you group ideas you have about the topic into themes?**
- **Is there any other information to consider or differing perspectives you could address?**

Also, through every step in the process, always keep in mind what the prompt is asking you to do.

If writing notes or answering questions isn't the best route for you, or if you'd like some more visual ways to organize your thoughts, try creating a graphic organizer! The following pages include some to try:

- Venn Diagram
- Idea Mapping
- Post-It Mapping

One helpful online tool is Bubbl, which allows you to create and edit many different types of graphic organizers. Try Bubbl [here](#)!

For an exploration into more types of brainstorming activities and their benefits, check out [this brainstorming page](#) on UNC - Chapel Hill's Writing Center website.

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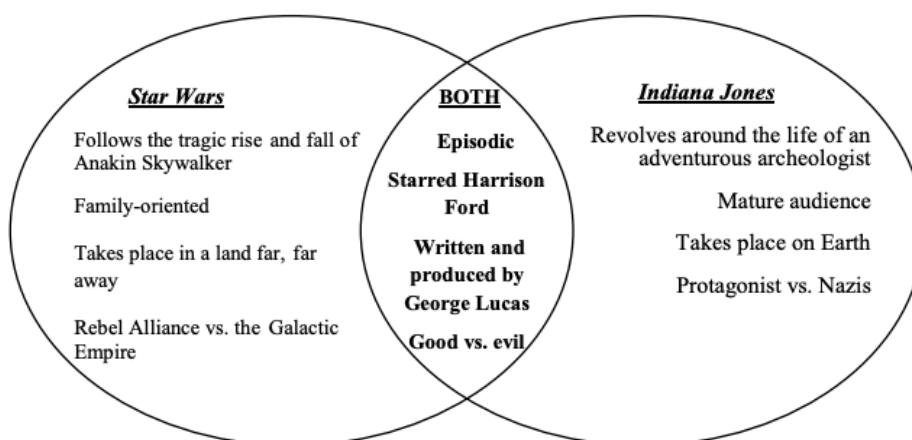


Venn Diagram:

San José State University Writing Center
www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter
Written by Emily Hamman

Comparing/Contrasting

Making a Venn diagram can help you quickly and efficiently compare and contrast two or more ideas or subjects. To make a Venn diagram, simply draw two overlapping circles, one circle for each subject you are comparing. In the central area where they overlap, list the traits the two items have in common. Below is a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the movies *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*.



Useful Words to Help Emphasize your Intentions

As you write a compare/contrast essay, consider using the following words to emphasize both your points of comparison and your points of contrast.

Comparing:

Like	Likewise
Still	Also
Again	Similarly
Similar to	In the same way
In like manner	Compared to
At the same time	

Contrasting:

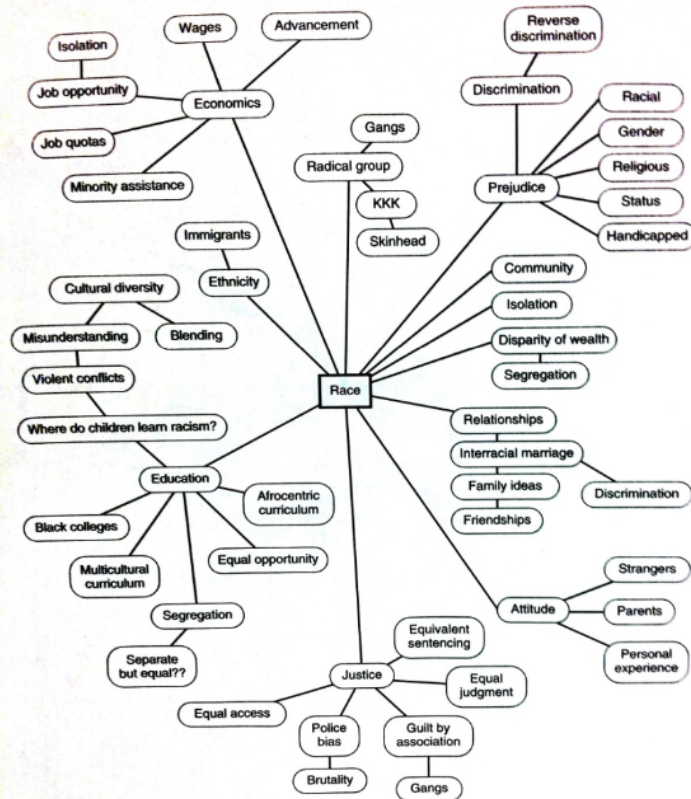
Unlike	Yet
Compared to	Even though
In contrast	But
Contrasted with	Nevertheless
On the contrary	Conversely
However	Regardless
Although	Despite
On the other hand	

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Idea Mapping:

09/2011



(By Eric West, Patricia Pulido, Ruby Chan, and Sharon Young. Used with permission.)

Figure 3.3 A Map That Answers the Question, What Are the Issues Related to Race? Use this map to discover specific related issues for paper topics.

Figure 1. Example of an idea map from Nancy Wood's *Perspectives of Argument*.

Benefits of Idea Mapping (4 Ds)

1. **Draw** connections that exist among ideas
2. **Discover** new directions for research
3. **Develop** major points.
4. **Define** boundaries to narrow the subject down to suit the length and objective of the writing project.

How to Create an Idea Map:

- Place the "topic" or issue at the center.
- Free associate / brainstorm ideas related to your central topic (try to keep it to one word).
- Link as many ideas as you can with a particular branch. When you run out of ideas, go back to the center.
- Keep going! Objective is to generate as many ideas as possible.

Created by Dr. Sohui Lee.

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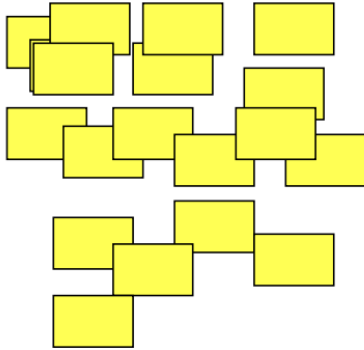


Post-It Mapping:

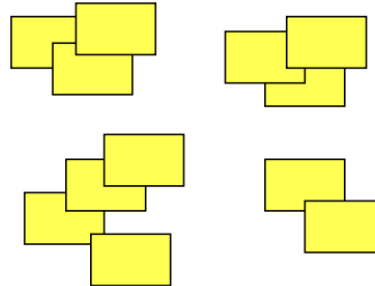
Activity 2: Post-It Brainstorm

Using Post-Its to brainstorm ideas. (individual work) 45 min.

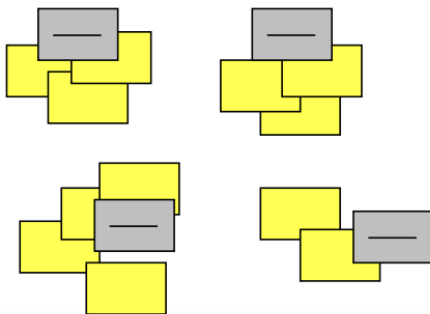
1. Develop new ideas (Generate new ideas)



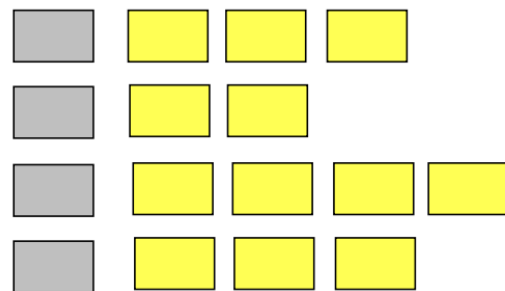
2. Make connections or cluster



3. Create "topics" around clusters



4. Arrange order of message and add points



Created by Dr. Sohui Lee.

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Step 5: Outline

Outlining is one of the most overlooked steps in the writing process, but it can make a huge difference in the coherence of the project and its organization as well as the ease of writing the paper (and meeting required page counts).

Outlining is effective because it helps you **construct and organize ideas and sources, avoid writer's block, maintain a clear direction throughout the whole paper, stay on schedule, and not feel intimidated by trying to tackle a whole multi-page paper in one sitting**. In other words, although outlining may seem like extra work now, it can make all the difference in ensuring your paper is clear, organized, and balanced, meeting all the requirements on the rubric.

Effective outlines can look different for every person, so feel free to use whatever system works best for you. A basic outline should include the following details:

- **Introduction with thesis statement**
- **Sections for each body paragraph**
- **Idea fragments supporting each body paragraph**
- **Any quotes or information from sources supporting each section**
- **Conclusion**

Think about the outline as a skeleton with just the bare bones (it'll start as just the headings for each section), and you can input little bits and pieces of information, even sentence fragments and half-thought ideas, at your own pace. It is just a tool to break down the paper into smaller sections to help you stay organized and chip away at chunks. Additionally, it is important to know as you work on your outline that many professors ask writers to **bring sources into conversation with each other**, often within a single paragraph. Noticing when different sources discuss similar ideas or topics can help you organize your body paragraphs. Don't be afraid to use multiple sources in each paragraph – that can make your writing even more thorough!

On the following page is an example of a sample outline you can use as a starting point for your own work. Use this template as the bare-bones version of an outline and fill in each section with information for your own specific topic.

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Outline Template:

INTRO

- Thesis:

BODY 1: Topic Sentence/Idea

- Idea
- Quote
- Analysis

BODY 2: Topic Sentence/Idea

- Idea
- Quote
- Analysis

BODY 3: Topic Sentence/Idea

- Idea
- Quote
- Analysis

CONCL

Template created by Sierra Leeper.

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Step 6: Draft

Drafting is the part of the writing process where you do the most actual *writing*. Here's where you get to the bulk of the content and start forming ideas into coherent sentences and paragraphs.

If you've started with an outline, you can **pick any body paragraph to begin drafting, starting with a topic sentence, adding on sentences that expand upon your point, and connecting your thoughts and interpretations to the evidence** you've chosen from your research (if applicable). Paragraphs should be organized by topic and should traditionally be at least 3-5 sentences but not exceed $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page; however, paragraph length really just depends on what information best develops your thesis with supporting ideas, examples, details, and integration of relevant sources.

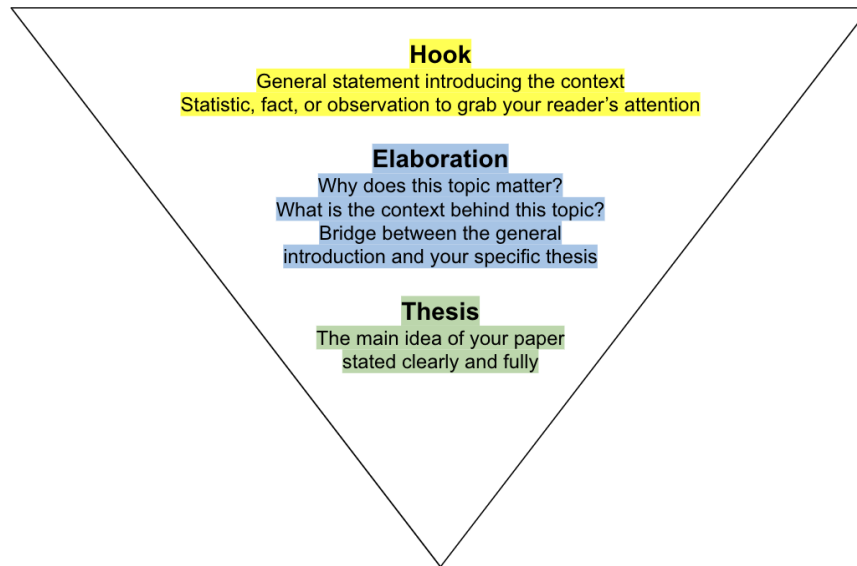
Saving the introduction and conclusion until the end can help your writing by allowing you to first understand fully what you discuss in the bulk of your paper before introducing or concluding it. When writing an introduction and conclusion, one method that can be very beneficial to use the "funnel" and "reverse funnel" method, where the introduction paragraph starts broad and funnels down to be more specific in your thesis while the conclusion paragraph starts by restating the thesis specifically and gets broader as it goes on. On the following page is an example of what the "funnel" and "reverse funnel" look like.

Keep in mind, though, that you don't want your conclusion to just be a restatement of your introduction. **Conclusions are places where you can say some last thoughts to your audience that you couldn't have said at the beginning** because the audience didn't have the context to understand yet. The conclusion is a great place to tie all the small pieces of your paper together to demonstrate why the topic is important and what it means for the world, the future, the research, or whatever the purpose of the paper may be.

For more detailed information on writing an effective introduction, as well as practice writing your own introduction, see [this WMC Introduction Workshop Handout](https://www.csuci.edu/wmc/introduction-workshop-handout).

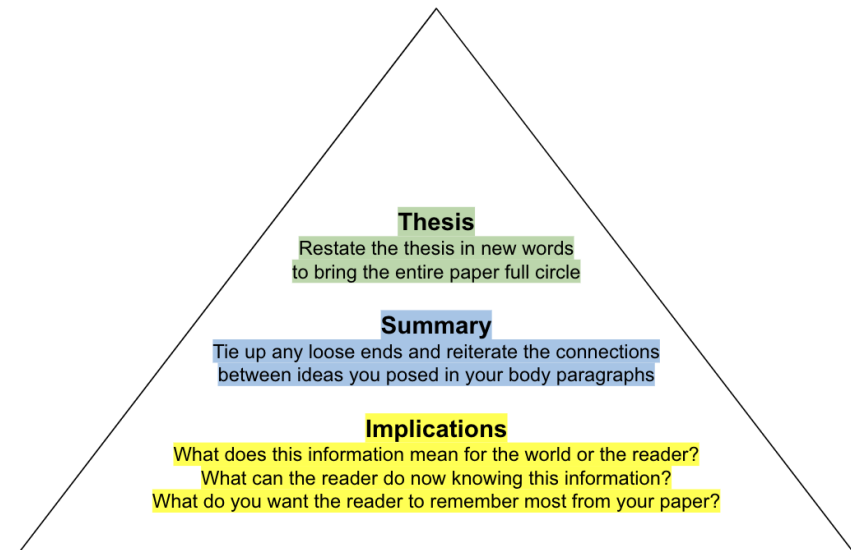
Introduction Paragraph (Funnel):

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Notice how the information starts off broad and general and slowly funnels into a more specific argument. In a reverse funnel conclusion, the opposite will happen: the information will start more specific and slowly return to a broad, general view of the issue and the paper as a whole.

Conclusion Paragraph (Reverse Funnel):



Graphic created by Sierra Leeper.

Introduction and Conclusion Example:

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Marriage has been a crucial part of society for as long as humans have existed. Partnerships both romantically and economically influence not just the individuals involved, but also the society as a whole. In recent times, much analysis has been done on the benefits of marriage, the downsides of marriage defined by a culture, and the necessity of the institution itself. Ideas of what marriage should be vary depending on the time and place you look. But, based on Margaret Fuller's "The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men. Woman versus Women," Fuller believed there was a clear beneficial type of marriage which I believe fits with our understandings of marriage today.

Notice how the introduction paragraph starts off broadly, gives context for the reader about the topic, and then funnels into a specific thesis giving direction to the paper.

In conclusion, Fuller had very specific opinions on household partnerships and intellectual companionships at the time she wrote "The Great Lawsuit." Now, 180 years later, those ideas still apply to our modern culture and demonstrate how Fuller was ahead of her time in many ways. As time goes on and society advances, more focus is put on what is really beneficial to people and society, and what aspects of culture and tradition are no longer necessary. In Fuller's head and as we see today, people are wanting to marry for love and equal partnership more than for fulfilling roles and cultural expectations. This is an issue that has been deeply studied and discussed in the last several decades, and I believe it will just continue to be so in the future.

Paragraphs written by Sierra Leeper.

In this conclusion paragraph, notice how the structure is reversed and the paragraph begins with a restatement of the thesis before summarizing the main points of the body paragraphs and tying everything together. Additionally, although this example is not perfect, it does demonstrate how the information gets more broad and universal as the paragraph progresses, showing not only how the main points are related to each other but also how they apply to a broader world view or research need.

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Step 7: Revise

One of the most important but typically underused steps of the writing process is revising. Often in college, students have so many assignments and papers to write, they get overwhelmed, write a draft of something, and then turn it in without even glancing over it, hoping for the best. But **revising is a crucial part of the writing process and can (and should) be utilized at every step.** Revising once at the end of your drafting stage is great, but successful writers make multiple revisions as part of their process.

Not only can revising papers make you a better writer, it can also make a difference in the grades you receive for the papers you write. And revising doesn't have to be difficult. Oftentimes a good first step can be just to **read the paper out loud to yourself** and take note of any grammar, structure, or organization issues that you find that you might not have been able to catch from reading in your head.

One key aspect to revising academic work is to make sure to **double-check the prompt and rubric** so you know exactly what your professor will be looking for when grading. Make sure your paper answers any questions posed by the prompt, fits the format for the class, and checks each box mentioned in the rubric. One suggestion to ensure you're meeting all the expectations is to read the prompt and rubric before reading your paper, and then read the prompt and rubric again after reading your paper to keep everything fresh in your mind as you revise.

Revising can go further than just editing, however. Revising takes the concept of the paper in its entirety and asks the questions:

- Is the structure of my paper clear and effective?
- Do any sections or thoughts need to be cut?
- Are there any sections that are off balance? (Do some sections have more focus and information than others? Are my uses of citations balanced?)
- Are there any things missing from my paper? Another subpoint? More evidence? A counterargument?

When revising, keep in mind that revisions can be large, structural or content issues that need to be addressed (we call these *macro* revisions because they impact the overall effectiveness of communication of the paper) or they can be smaller

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inconsistencies such as citation errors or punctuation mistakes (we call these *micro* revisions because they don't impede communication of ideas as much). It is important to address both macro and micro revisions as both can enhance the quality of your paper, however, macro revisions should generally be prioritized as they usually influence the readability and purpose of your paper. Below is a chart listing some examples of macro and micro revisions that can be used as a checklist. However, keep in mind that professor preference and what is mentioned in the rubric and prompt will probably need to be pushed to the macro side of the list as this is what your professor will be looking for in grading criteria.

Macro Revisions	Micro Revisions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear, specific, arguable thesis statement • Structure and organization • Argument and analysis • Evidence • Addressing the prompt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citations • Minor or one-off grammar mistakes • Punctuation errors • Formatting • Spelling

For more detailed examples and guidance on macro and micro revisions, see [this Purdue University resource](#).

Additionally, **reader-response feedback can be incredibly valuable in your writing. If you'd like to have a second set of eyes look at your paper to help you improve your writing or come up with new ideas, make an appointment with a tutor at the Writing and Multiliteracy Center!** Tutors are trained in helping students revise their writing and check grammar, citations, structure, organization, and content needs, as well as whatever you feel needs support. Students who come in for help revising their work at the WMC grow in their writing abilities, enhance their papers, and feel more confident in their writing and academics. Most professors are also happy to talk about drafts in real time and give on the spot feedback if students take the initiative to show up to student hours, so don't be afraid to reach out to your professor for help!

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