

Tackling Revisions

Revision strategies for your next big writing project.

By [Alexandra Gold](#) March 24, 2019

Alexandra (AJ) Gold recently completed her Ph.D. in English at Boston University. She currently teaches as a Preceptor in the Harvard College Writing Program. Follow her on Twitter [@agold258](#) or check out [her website](#).



It's no secret that we here at GradHacker headquarters love to talk about the writing process. In the past month or so alone we've offered tips for [getting started](#) on a big writing project and [increasing productivity](#) and took [a deep dive](#) into the writing routines of five grad students across disciplines. We've seemingly covered it all: [the good](#), [the bad](#), and [the ugly](#) (special shoutout to Megan for her recent and very thorough series on dissertation writing!).

Our attention to the writing process is perhaps not surprising: it's a cornerstone of every graduate student's experience. But while our coverage about the writing process has been more than extensive, fewer of our "hacks" have been devoted to the nerve-racking and often time-consuming process of revision.

I've been thinking a lot about revision lately. For one thing, the expository writing classes I teach require an extensive revision component that asks students to respond to feedback I provide both in [written comments](#) and individual [conferences](#). In class, we discuss the difference between superficial editing or proofreading and in-depth revising. Revision has also been top of mind when it comes to my own work. With my dissertation now firmly signed,

sealed, delivered (and embargoed!) and my post-defense slump (somewhat less firmly) behind me, I've found myself facing down the daunting process of starting to revise parts of my dissertation for my first book project.

I'm no expert on revising a dissertation into a book, though the internet and other resources have been illuminating about what that process entails. (Got tips? Send 'em my way!) And while not all revision processes are the same, I have, to date, tackled a fair number of "revise and resubmits" for journal articles as well as extensive revisions for my own dissertation chapters. **Along the way, I've honed the following "tried and true" revision strategies — ones that I often pass along to my students and want to share here, too!**

Cut The Intro

A common piece of advice, especially within the creative writing realms, is something like "cut the first paragraph" or cut the first line. I've adapted this idea almost as dogma when I've been faced with a "revise and resubmit" and now that I'm going all Edward Scissorhands on my dissertation (don't worry, it's glorious). Invariably, the introduction in my first draft is too long and rambling and either doesn't clearly articulate my claim or fails to offer any coherent sense of thesis or stakes at all (second shout-out to all the extremely patient reviewers of my article drafts! Yes, even the Reviewer 2s.)

I'm a writer who needs to do the intro first; I have a hard time writing out of order, though I know I would likely be wise to write the intro last. In doing so, I tend to favor story over argument. I admit, a bit shamefully, that I'm a fan of the anecdote; I find it to be a useful way in. It's fun, it gets me excited, and, perhaps most importantly, it's a start. It doesn't, however, always make for the most useful introduction and often leads me to bury the point. **Indeed, the most significant and successful revisions I've done have involved completely reworking or rewriting the intro to be more focused and to better reflect the paper's argument.** Of course, it's much easier to rework the second (or third or eighth) time around, once you know not only where the argument is going but where it ends up. Revising the intro is also one of the biggest pieces of advice I give my students, who often write excellent thesis statements that wind up in the conclusion or buried elsewhere in the body paragraphs. And what kind of teacher would I be if I didn't always take my own advice?

Game Plan

While cutting the intro is often my first go-to revision and typically affords me a stronger sense of direction for the rest of the essay or chapter, I find the mammoth task of revising body paragraphs and arguments more unnerving. In my experience, significant argument revision is daunting at best and paralyzing at worst. I open a document and absolute dread ensues: "Where do I even start?" This is especially true if I'm trying to respond not just to my own sense of the project but to another reviewer's or professor's comments.

Over at Chronicle Vitae, Teresa McPhil has a great series on revising and resubmitting. More recently, Cathy Davidson wrote about her own tips for addressing R & Rs on Inside Higher Ed. Advice abounds on how to respond to peer reviews. And while Davidson and McPhil disagree on some small points, both offer advice that I want to echo here: game plan.

Before you do anything, make a list/flow chart and timetable for your revision. Figure out which revisions you want to tackle first; number them. I typically prefer to do the "small-scale" revisions first, delving into things like proofreading and sentence-level style before moving on to larger scale/big-picture revisions, if only because the small-scale stuff tends to feel less intimidating and, again, offers a way in. I circle back to it later, of course, but there's something about just getting into the revision weeds that I find both comforting and encouraging. I can do this, one small step at a time. Most important, however, is to make a definitive revision plan and stick to it. If you go in aimless, you might never find your way out. If you veer off course, you might end up doing more harm than good or forget what it is you

need to address. Worse yet, you might neglect the work altogether (procrastination: it's fun and easy!).

Keep the Scraps

There's always that one dissertation chapter. You know the one: the outlier that, try as you might, just won't sit right. If you haven't begun the dissertation process, then trust me when I say, you'll have that one chapter — I can almost guarantee it. For me, it was Chapter 3. From the prospectus on, I knew it was going to be 'that chapter' and the drafting process proved me right. While I had a fairly good handle on the rest of my chapters and their contributions to my overall argument, I could not, for the life of me, figure out how to make the third chapter work. My advisor agreed.

I ended up deciding to move on and write the next chapter. I'm glad I did. Not only did the time away from Chapter 3 afford me the necessary perspective to figure out what was going wrong (more on that in a minute) but it helped me crystallize what I was trying to argue in the larger "story arc" of my dissertation. It led to an eventual breakthrough, but one that meant I had, in essence, to scrap almost the entirety of the third chapter and start again with the exception of a few paragraphs. It was a crushing but ultimately worthwhile decision.

When I conferred with my advisor about the new and better direction for the chapter, she gave me an excellent piece of revision advice: "There's no such thing as wasted writing." She was right for several reasons. First, drafting is an important and necessary step in clarifying your thinking. Second, as she pointed out, you never know when that early writing might come in handy. Is it the seed of another article, essay, or project? A self-contained conference paper? Will you want to return to it later? Does it actually fit a different section of the project? Following my advisor's recommendation, I've made a habit of starting "dummy" documents when I revise. Any piece of the argument that's not working or that I need to cut, I copy and paste to a different document and put it in its own folder. I don't delete it. **DO NOT DELETE YOUR EARLY WORK.** Save it for a rainy day. I now have scores of half-baked thoughts and/or discarded ideas that I can develop or return later, if I want — ideas I like but that either need more work or don't suit a particular project. If nothing else, I sometimes think it would be hilarious, enjoyable, and really illuminating to start a blog full of my and others' decontextualized "scrap" writings from intros to body paragraphs. Who wants in?

Defamiliarize Your Work

The last and best strategy I can offer for revision is likely not new, but it's this: find a way to defamiliarize your work, whether it's writing and revising in **different fonts** or simply walking away for a little bit or starting a new project and coming back with fresh eyes. I speak from experience: you cannot start revising immediately after you have finished writing; you're too close to the project. You won't catch mistakes and you won't always be able to discern what's working well and not. No meaningful revisions come immediately.

There are many ways to "defamiliarize" your own work (and I hope others will weigh in below), but here are ones that have either worked well for me or that have landed with my students:

1) **Use the "Read Aloud" Feature:** I may be incredibly late to the party on this one (revision parties are a thing, yes?), but I recently discovered Word's "Read Aloud" feature and it has been a game-changer. I've long been in the habit of reading my own work aloud and suggesting to my students that they do so, but it's never been especially effective for catching typos or weird-sounding sentences because my eyes inevitably see what they want to see. Hearing the work in someone else's voice, though, has really helped me catch things that I couldn't even after multiple rounds of proofreading and revision. It can be a bit slow, especially for a long project, so perhaps making a habit of it as you go along is a smart approach.

2) **Reverse Outline:** This was a go-to strategy that I employed in my tutoring days and one I always teach my classes, but outlining the main points of the body paragraphs in revision and then visually being able to see the

progression of the argument can be incredibly useful for addressing big-picture issues like structure and organization as well as fine-tuning topic sentences and transitions.

3) **Cut-Ups:** One of the most successful revision meetings I've ever had with a student involved us tearing her paper into paragraphs and playing around with them until we figured out the most effective order. I've now made it a practice of doing in-class "cut-up" activities for things like paragraph and sentence organization; it's an instant, hands-on act of writing and revision. It's useful because it literally forces you to decontextualize the work and see each piece of the argument on its own in order to figure out where it would be most effective.

And remember, if all else fails: steel yourself for revision with an exceedingly generous amount of coffee or something harder. It hasn't let me down yet.

What are your best revision strategies? Tell us in the comments below!

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