

Revising is Not Editing

By Jacob Lauritzen

Let me tell you a story. When I first completed graduate school, I was writing a cover letter to a prospective employer. I had just earned a degree in English and I was excited to become a teacher. I had also just become a father and I was in desperate need of a better job. Needless to say, I was feeling the pressure to impress the principal of the school I was applying to. Sadly, I wasn't paying close enough attention to editing my work. When I accidentally misspelled a word, I automatically selected the word that the program's spellchecker suggested and I continued to write. Fortunately, my wife was reading my work over my shoulder and noticed the mistake. She asked, "Can I make fun of you for a bit?" She then explained to me that I had used the wrong word. Instead of writing "Preparatory," which was one of the words in the school's title, I had chosen "Predatory." Now think for a moment. If you were hiring a teacher to work with impressionable youth, what would you think if he had mistakenly written "Predatory" in his cover letter? Freudian slip? This mistake was minor, but it could have given the wrong impression. Fortunately, my wife noticed the mistake and I got the job.

This mistake did not affect the overall content of my letter, but it was important that I correct it. This type of mistake, a spelling error, is a lower-order concern. It's called a lower-order concern because it is one of the last things you need to worry about when writing a paper. Higher-order concerns, on the other hand, are issues concerning the organization and content of your writing. These should be the first concerns that you address as you begin to revise your work.

Revising and Editing as a Process

Revising your work is not the same as editing it. Students and even teachers may use these terms interchangeably, but they are not the same. Revision is the process of fixing higher-order concerns such as the focus and clarity of your thesis and supporting details or the organization of your paper. Editing is when you address lower-order concerns such as mistakes with grammar, punctuation, or spelling. When I was writing my cover letter, I was only focused on the higher-order concerns. They were the things, I thought, that would determine whether I got the job or not. I needed to address all concerns by revising and editing.

So why is it important to distinguish the difference between these two terms? Because they are two different processes and they may not merit an equal amount of attention. Consider it this way. When you have completed a draft of a paper, if you are like me, you want to turn it in as soon as possible. So you do a quick scan on your computer and when it says you've fixed all the mistakes, you're done, right? Wrong. Once you've finished a complete draft of your work, it is important that you revise AND edit your work.

There are many different processes you can use when revising and editing your work. This short essay can't begin to address them all. Let me offer a few examples though. Walt Whitman, for instance, is famous primarily for writing one book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*. He published the first edition of the book in 1855. He then revised and edited it the following year. He went through the process again in 1860, 1867, and three more times over the next twenty years. The story goes that as *Leaves of Grass* was being printed, Whitman was still making changes. This made it so that copies printed during the same edition were different. This is an extreme example, but it stands to prove that even after years of revision and editing, your work can still be improved.

Not all authors are the same though. In his memoir, *On Writing*, Stephen King explains that he typically will write two complete drafts of his work, before doing a thorough edit. He then turns his manuscript into his publisher and starts on the next book.

Finding a process that works for you is just that—a process. It takes time to figure out how to write your best. I wrote and directed my first play when I was seventeen. Years later, I wish that I could rewrite it. Unfortunately, when you are writing a paper for a class, you don't have the luxury of time. You have requirements and deadlines to meet. That doesn't mean you can't take the time to correct your work.

Revising Higher-Order Concerns

So what should you look for when you revise? Look for opportunities to improve the clarity of your thesis, the organization of your arguments, and the strength of your evidence. Remember that every aspect of your paper should ensure that your paper is accomplishing its purpose.

Here are a few questions you may consider as you revise:

- Does your paper meet all the requirements given you by your professor?
- Is your thesis clear?
- Is your thesis specific enough?
- Is your paper long enough?
- Does your paper satisfy your professor's requirements for sources and/or citation style?
- Does your paper transition well from one idea to the next?
- Is there anything missing?
- Is your paper clear enough?
- Can you make the same points in fewer words?
- Do your paragraphs effectively
- Is your tone too casual?
- Are you using subject specific terminology?

If possible, ask a friend or a writing tutor to look over your work. Sometimes another pair of eyes will be able to notice a mistake that you wouldn't have. My wife noticed how my work could be improved; you may have someone you trust to help you as well.

If you come to the point that you feel you have addressed all of your higher-order concerns, you may be done revising. Now, you can begin to address lower-order concerns. If you haven't already fixed spelling errors, do so. Make sure that you aren't writing in the passive voice too often and that all verbs agree with

their subjects. Remove comma splices and look for sentence fragments. Again, if you have access to a writing lab, use it. Many universities and colleges provide these resources, but so few students take advantage of them.

Editing Lower-Order Concerns

Though they are called lower-order concerns, don't be fooled into thinking that they aren't important. As stated previously, it is important that you revise and edit your work. Grammatical errors are a distraction, they cause confusion, and they make it more difficult to accomplish the purpose of your writing. The error I made in my cover letter was simple as substituting the wrong word, but it impeded my ability to accomplish the purpose of my letter—to get a job. You may have a well-executed essay, but if your paper is full of grammatical errors, you may still receive a failing grade. In fact, as a teacher, I tell my students that if they have too many mistakes I can't pass them. Your teacher may have a similar policy.

Above all, your responsibility as a student writer is to accomplish the purpose of your assignment. Revision and editing are both processes to help you accomplish those purposes. Revise higher order concerns to improve the clarity and content of your writing, and edit lower-order concerns to correct any mistakes that may detract from you getting your point across to your reader. It may take one draft. It may take seven, but do whatever it takes to do it right.