8.1: A strategy for analyzing and revising a first draft

Here are some steps for re-reading and revising your essays in a reasonably objective way. These steps may seem formulaic and mechanical, but you need a way to diagnose your own prose so that you have some sense of how others will read it.

FINDING YOUR BEST POINT — AND MAKING SURE YOUR READERS CAN FIND IT

This first step is intended to ensure that the beginning and end of your paper cohere with each other, that they “frame” your paper is an appropriate way.

1. Find the beginning and the end.

Draw a line after the end of your introduction and just before the beginning of your conclusion.

2. Find candidates for your point.

Underline one sentence in both your introduction and conclusion that comes closest to expressing your main point, your claim, the thesis of your paper. In your introduction, that sentence is most likely to be the last one; in your conclusion, it might be anywhere.

3. Find the best candidate.

Read the introduction and conclusion together, particularly comparing those two most important sentences. They should at least not contradict one another.
From an introduction:

During this unprecedented period, African-American artists shared in the process of creating a black urban identity through their depictions of a culture’s experience.

From a conclusion:

While many were eager to slash the culture’s ties to its primitive history, Armstrong and Motley created art which included elements of the community’s history and which made this history a central part of African-American urban identity.

It is likely that the sentence in your conclusion will be more specific, more substantive, more thoughtful than the one in your introduction. Your introduction may merely announce a general intention to write about some topic. If so, your conclusion is more likely to make a more important claim, generalization, or point about that topic. In the example above, the sentence from the introduction describes only the fairly general idea that artists contributed to a culture’s identity by depicting its experience. An important idea, certainly, but one that your readers probably already hold. An essay that did no more than reiterate it would not be especially valuable. Contrast the sentence from the conclusion. Here, the writer is more specific in several important ways. First, she is specific about one element in African-American experience: its ties to its primitive history. She is specific about what the artists did: they included aspects of that history in their art. She also adds the suggestive information that some people opposed including primitive history in African-American culture (“While many eager to slash the cultures ties . . . “). This controversy is potentially enriching for the essay because it may prompt the reader (and the writer) to analyze the subject from a very different perspective.

4. Revise your introduction to match the best point.

If you find that the sentence from your conclusion is more insightful than the one from your introduction, then you have to revise your introduction to make it seem that you had this sentence in mind all along (even though when you started drafting the paper you may have had no idea how you were going to end it). You can do this in one of two ways:

- Insert at the end of your introduction some version of that sentence in your conclusion that comes closest to expressing your main point. You may have to revise the rest of the introduction to make it fit.
- If you don’t want to “give away” the point of your paper at the beginning, insert a sentence at the end of your introduction that at least anticipates your point by using some of its same language.

For example:

As African-American artists such as Louis Armstrong and Archibald Motley, Jr. shared in the collective process of creating a black urban identity, they reflected their community’s struggle to define the role of historical experience in modern culture.

Note that this sentence does not conclude that Armstrong and Motley did include primitive history in their art. But it does introduce some implicit questions that anticipate that conclusion: did these artists use their historical experience? If so,
How do you choose between stating your main point at the beginning of the essay or waiting to state it at the end? If you think you are a skilled writer, the second choice—the “point-last” strategy—is a possibility. You must be certain, though, that the rest of the paper plausibly takes your reader to your conclusion. (We’ll talk more about that in a minute.) Point-last writing, however, is always more difficult than point-first, and if you feel uncertain about your writing or more important, if you aren’t interested in spending the extra time it takes to write good point-last prose, then you should state your main point explicitly at the end of your introduction. If you’ve stated your main point at the beginning of your essay, your reader won’t lose track of your argument, won’t lose the sense of where you are headed. More important, it will focus your attention on where you are headed. Don’t worry that if you state your point first your professors will lose interest in your paper. If your point is interesting (or even if it’s not), they will read on to see how you support it. (That, after all, is what you’re paying them to do.)

There are, to be sure, some instructors, mostly but not exclusively in the humanities, who prefer point-last papers: papers that pose a problem in their introductions, then work toward a conclusion, demonstrating how the writer thought about the topic, wrestled with alternative answers, and finally discovered a solution. That kind of organization creates a dramatic tension that some instructors like, because they want to see the processes of your thinking.

The risk is that you might do exactly that! For nearly all of us, the process of our thinking is messy, inefficient, and hard to follow. If you write a paper that in fact tracks what you thought about at 1 AM, then 3 AM, the 6 AM, you’re likely to write a messy, inefficient and hard to follow paper. Few instructors want to see that. They want to see a coherent, ordered, analytical account of your thinking that may seem to be a narrative, but in fact is always an artful invention, something that requires writing skills of a high order.

So when you go through this first phase of your analysis, you have to make a thoughtful choice about where you want to locate your point—in your introduction and your conclusion, or just in your conclusion, with an “anticipatory” point in your introduction. The default choice for both writer and reader is the first: point-first.

CREATING COHERENT SECTIONS

Now you need to determine whether the parts of your paper hang together to form a coherent argument and whether the parts are in an order that will seem to make sense to your reader.

1. Find the paper's major sections.

Draw a line between every major section in your paper. A four or five page paper should have at least two and probably not more than three or four.

Now, analyze and revise each section as you did your whole paper:

2. Find each section's introduction and conclusion

Put a slash mark after the introduction to each section. The introduction to a section may be only one sentence or it may be a complete paragraph. Each section needs a sentence that tells your readers that they have finished one segment of your argument and are moving on to another.
Put a slash mark before the conclusion to each major section. If your sections are short—only a couple of paragraphs or less—that section might not need a separate conclusion.

3. Identify the major point in each section.

Just as your whole paper has to have a point, so should each section have a sentence that offers some generalization, some point, some claim that that section is intended to support.

If most of your points seem to be at the beginnings of your sections, fine. If most of them are at the ends of your sections as conclusions, you have to . . .

4. Think hard about whether you want any particular section to be point-last.

If you can think of no good reason, revise so that that section is point first. If you decide that you want the section to be point-last, then you'll have to repeat for the section the process we described for a point-last essay. You'll need to write an introductory sentence for the section that uses some of the key words that will appear in the point sentence that concludes the section. This principle simply reflects the needs of readers to know where they are and where they are going. Nothing confuses a reader more than moving from paragraph to paragraph with no sense of the logical progression of your argument. Such an essay feels like pudding with an occasional raisin to chew on, but not in any particular order.

5. Ordering the sections.

Try to explain to yourself why you put the parts of the paper in the order you did. If you arranged the parts of your paper in the order you did because that's the order in which they occurred to you, your readers are likely not to see any rationale for moving through your paper in the order they do.

• If you have three (or four, or whatever) reasons for something, why are the reasons in the order they are in? (By the way, beware of organization-by-number: “... for three reasons. First... Second... Third...” If the only relationship you can demonstrate among your arguments is “first-second-third,” your essay will probably be perceived as unsophisticated. Most significant arguments have substantive relationships: they are related not merely by number but by content.)

• If you have ordered the parts of your paper from cause-to-effect, why did you do that? Why not effect-to-cause?

• If you organized your paper to echo the organization of the text you are writing about, why have you done that? If you did, you risk having written a mere summary.

• If you organized your paper to match the terms of the assignment, is that what your instructor wanted, or did your instructor want something more original from you?

• If you organized your paper around major topics in your assignment (“Compare and contrast Freud and Jung in terms of the role of society in the development of their theories”) did you write about, say, Freud first and Jung second simply because that was the order in the assignment?

There are so many principles of order that we cannot list them all here. We can only urge you to identify the one you chose and then to justify it as the best one from among the many possible.
ENSURING YOUR EVIDENCE FITS YOUR CLAIMS

The most common evidence you will offer to support your claims will be quotations from the texts you read and references to passages in them. Without such evidence, your claims are merely statements of opinion. As we said, you are entitled to your opinions but you’re not entitled to having your readers agree with them. In fact, your readers generally will not highly value your opinions unless you provide some evidence to support them. When you provide evidence, you turn your opinions into arguments.

But before readers can value your claim as supported with evidence, they must first understand how your evidence counts as evidence for that claim. No flaw more afflicts the papers of less experienced writers than to make some sort of claim, or to offer a quotation from the text, and assume that the reader understands how the quotations speaks to the claim. Here is an example:

Lincoln believed that the Founders would have supported the North, because as he said, this country was “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

The writer may be correct that Lincoln believed that the Founders would have supported the North, but what in that quotation would cause a reader to agree? In other words, how does the quotation count as evidence of the claim? The evidence says something about the views of the founders in 1776. How does that support a claim about what the founders would think about 1863? When pressed, the writer explained: “Since the Founders dedicated the country to the proposition that all men are created equal and Lincoln freed the slaves because he thought they were created equal, then he must have thought that he and the Founders agreed, so they would have supported the North. It’s obvious.”

Well, it’s not. After it has been explained, it may or may not be persuasive (after all, the author of “all men are created equal” was himself a slave owner). But it isn’t obvious. Quotations rarely speak for themselves; most have to be “unpacked.” If you offer only quotes without interpreting those quotes, your reader will likely have trouble understanding how the quote, as evidence, supports your claim. Your paper will seem to be a pastiche of strung-together quotations, suggesting that your data never passed through the critical analysis of a working mind.

Whenever you support a claim with numbers, charts, pictures, and especially quotations — whatever looks like primary data — do not assume that what you see is what your readers will get. Spell out for them how it is that the data counts as evidence for your claim. For a quotation, a good principle is to use a few of its key words just before or after it. Something like this:

Lincoln believed that the Founders would have supported the North because they would have supported his attempt to move the slaves to a more equal position. He echoes the Founder’s own language when he says that the country was “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

MAKING YOUR CASE WITHOUT OVERSIMPLIFYING IT

Some inexperienced writers think that the strongest and most persuasive kind of writing projects a voice of utter
confidence, complete certainty, and no room for doubt of the possibility of seeing things in a different way. That view could not be more mistaken. If communicating with your readers is like having a serious, mutually respectful conversation with them, then the last kind of person you want to talk with is someone who is **UTTERLY CERTAIN OF EVERYTHING WITH NO QUALIFICATIONS, RESERVATIONS, OR LIMITATIONS.**

Two minutes with such a person is at least one too many. Compare these two passages:

For more than a century now, every liberal has vehemently argued against any kind of censorship of art and/or entertainment. And in the last 20 years, the courts and the legislatures of Western nations have found these arguments so persuasive that no one remembers any rebuttals to these arguments. Censorship has simply ceased to exist.

For almost a century now, many liberals have argued against the censorship of art and/or entertainment, and in the last 20 years, courts and the legislatures in most Western nations have found these arguments fairly persuasive. Few people now clearly remember what the rebuttals to these arguments were. Today, in the United States and other democracies, censorship has just about ceased to exist.

Twenty pages of the first prose would quickly grow wearisome. It is too strident, too flat-footed, completely unnuanced. But some would say the second is mealy mouthed, too hedged about with qualifiers. Here is a third version, which neither proclaims nor hedges:

For a century now, liberals have been arguing against the censorship of art and/or entertainment, and in the last 20 years, courts and the legislatures in Western nations have found these arguments so persuasive that few now remember what the rebuttals to these arguments were. Today, in the United States and other democracies, overt censorship by the central government has largely ceased to exist.

It is hard to give completely reliable advice about hedging and emphasizing because different writers have different opinions about it, different fields do it in different ways. But something most of us share is a sense of caution. (Notice that we said "most of us.")

Another kind of reservation you ought to make room for in your papers is plausibly contradictory evidence. No matter what position you take on a text, there will almost always be some evidence in it that someone can use as a basis to disagree with you.

Lincoln may have been willing to let his readers associate the Founders with the North, but it is not clear that he actually believed that they would have supported the Union. He does not specifically say so. Although he describes what the founders did in the past ("Four score and seven years ago"), he does not say what they would do in the present.

The shrewd writer considers these kinds of objections before readers do, and may include the objections in the essay.
Once you think you have constructed an argument that fully supports your claim, skim your reading again specifically looking for evidence that might support a different conclusion. Then raise that evidence and counterclaim in order both to acknowledge and, if you can, rebut them. Even if you can’t fully rebut them, you can suggest that the weight of evidence is still on your side. Don’t worry that including counter evidence will make your argument less persuasive. On the contrary. While there are exceptions, most academic readers are much more persuaded by writers who admit reservations then by writers who insist that they are always absolutely correct.

The point here is to avoid the kind of flat-footed, unnuanced, unsophisticated certainty that characterizes the thinking of someone who does not recognize that things are usually more complex, less clear-cut, than most of us wish.