

Revision Strategies by Michael Harwick, '11

Revision is often the most neglected part of the writing process. Unlike editing, which focuses on correcting surface errors to make sure the paper complies with “the rules” of English, **revision** is the process of evaluating the argument and the ideas behind the paper and refining them to develop focus, nuance, and style. Revision lets you experiment with your writing, giving you the freedom to create a less-than-perfect first draft. But granted so much freedom, writers can be unsure about where to begin. Here are a few things to keep in mind about how to revise:

1) Ideas take precedence over style. The first step is to check that the content of the paper is **logically sequenced**. The paper should walk the reader step by step through your reasoning. Before you worry about making something “sound better,” first make sure that you have presented the best progression of ideas. During the pre-writing phase, it is often helpful to play with the order of your ideas and see what sequence makes the most sense. During revision, revisit your earlier thinking about the order of ideas.

2) Changing one idea can affect many ideas. Altering one link in the chain of thought can cause a larger chain reaction than we might expect. It is always important to follow ideas to their logical end – and this is why writers sometimes hate revising. **If one thing can change, everything might change.** Your final product may bear little resemblance to your first draft. Try to embrace the possibility of restructuring and refinement rather than fear changes. You’ll end up with a stronger paper.

3) There is no one, right procedure. Each paper is its own self-contained engine, designed to respond to a specific prompt. **Different parts of different papers will malfunction, requiring different attention and different tools.** However, making sure you have a logical chain of ideas is the best place to start. And remember that revision takes time, so leave enough time for rethinking and rewriting.

Despite the case-by-case nature of the process, there are a few general guidelines you can follow to quickly identify and solve some of the most common problems needing revision.

REVISING THE INTRODUCTION

A lot of us get into the habit of “tacking on” our introduction and conclusion after writing the body of the paper. After all, the most important part of the introduction is the thesis, and so long as that is clearly articulated, we can worry about the rest of the introduction later. While the thesis is undeniably a key element, that does not mean that the rest of the first paragraph is just a container for the thesis. **The rest of the introduction must point toward the thesis, either by introducing relevant information the reader needs to know up front and/or by qualifying the thesis’s degree of specificity.** The introduction is a sort of zoom lens that tells the reader where the chain of logic in the body will start.

Consider the following introductory paragraph:

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, literary theorist Wayne Booth tries to explain some frustrating dynamics that had gone unaccounted for in literary theory. Reacting to New Critical theory, Booth defends an analytical system that links the narrator’s method of delivery and the thematic content of the story. Chief among these concepts are the “implied author,” a guiding force the audience perceives to be directing the progress of the narrative, and a continuum of narratorial reliability based on the difference between the implied author and the views of the narrator. Some works of literature are almost impossible to judge without examining this relationship, as in Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Vane Sisters*, where we are presented with an

ethically deficient character who seems unaware of his immorality. The relationship between the narrator's behavior and the audience's expectations of him in Nabokov's *The Vane Sisters* reinforces Wayne Booth's theory of the necessity of an implied author to direct the reader's judgment.

The first thing to observe here is the thesis. To paraphrase, the **idea** behind the paragraph is "This paper will restate and validate Wayne Booth's theory, using Nabokov's story as an example. Booth is right, and here's why." Wayne Booth, however, has already done this job, in a huge book, no less. So why repeat it as the subject of your own paper? After some reconsideration, the writer decides to develop and refine the thesis to examine a slightly different question.

Revised thesis:

The dissonance between the narrator's apparent cruelty toward Cynthia Vane and the sympathy we develop toward her create an ambiguity in judging the narrator's ethics, one best worked out in light of Wayne Booth's concepts of the implied author, a continuum of narratorial reliability, and ethical motive behind narrative distance.

The thesis now has a narrower focus, and not only is the idea now more original (This paper will explain a problematic aspect of the Nabokov story, using some of Booth's theoretical concepts), but the **relationship between the two halves of the thesis has been reversed**. The first thesis promised a proof of the existing theory through a close reading of the story; the second promises a close reading that results from engaging the theory.

But does the rest of the introduction that preceded the original thesis still work for this new one? We can find out by asking the following questions:

- 1) **Look at the paragraph in terms of the logical progression of ideas.** In the first version, the writer introduces the theory by providing a bit of history, then transitions mid-paragraph into a description of some of the concepts within it, before finally introducing the Nabokov story as the focus of the paper. This could work in introducing the new thesis, but ...
- 2) **Consider alternative progressions.** Because the new thesis already contains a list of concepts more relevant to the conflict in the story, it may be better to use the introduction to give background about the *story* rather than the *theory*. The idea chain could begin with introducing Nabokov and giving a bit of context about the relationships in the story – a simple case of substitution. Whatever you decide to do...
- 3) **Revisit after revising.** Always go back and make sure that the changes you make hold up under logical scrutiny and reflect the goal of the paper once you've completed a revision.

A revised introduction might look like this:

Vladimir Nabokov's short story, *The Vane Sisters*, ends with an unusual fictional situation: the narrator being at a loss for words. After several pages of following our protagonist through his unapologetically mean treatment of Cynthia Vane, his final sputtering seems both out-of-character for him and noncommittal for Nabokov. We are left unsure of fundamental facts that impede our understanding of the story – specifically, if this ethically deficient character fails to change by the end, what is the point? Nabokov has crafted an elegant but problematic story where we as readers have far more insight into the narrator's personality than he has himself, leaving it up to us to "finish" the story. The dissonance between the narrator's apparent cruelty toward Cynthia Vane and the sympathy we develop toward her create an ambiguity in judging the narrator's ethics, one perhaps best worked out in light of Wayne Booth's concepts of the implied author, a continuum of narratorial reliability, and ethical motive behind narrative distance.

The writer's shift from a focus on Booth to a focus on the text requires that the material introducing the thesis accords with the focus of the thesis itself, so that it both **forecasts** and **reinforces** the thesis.

REVISING BODY PARAGRAPHS

Revising body paragraphs needs to take place on **two levels**. Each paragraph is made up of a series of small ideas that make up a mini-progression, but each paragraph is also part of the overall progression of the paper. When revising, remember that **success on one level does not ensure success on the other**.

Let's look at **an example body paragraph** to see how it can be revised:

The narrator of *The Vane Sisters* is engaging, if cruel. He has a sharp wit and is literarily aware, making his writing intelligent and maddeningly referential. However, he weaponizes this wit against now-deceased Cynthia and suicidal Sybil, characters who ultimately deserve our sympathy. Consider his comic but critical rendering of Sybil's French exam booklet: "that limp notebook [...] a kind of passport to a casual Elysium (where pencil points do not snap and a dreamy young beauty with an impeccable complexion winds a lock of her hair on a dreamy forefinger, as she meditates over some celestial test)" (618). He later also derides Cynthia, his professed friend, though not exactly beautiful: "The interval between her thick black eyebrows was always shiny, and shiny too were the fleshy volutes of her nostrils. The coarse texture of her epiderm looked almost masculine, and, in the stark lamplight of her studio, you could see the pores of her thirty-two-year-old face fairly gaping at you" (619). Because Cynthia is ultimately deserving of our sympathy, it is clear that Nabokov wants us to judge his narrator as ethically deficient.

The paragraph seems coherent enough, and the writer has wisely started the paragraph by clarifying a discrepancy in the thesis: what is the nature of the "dissonance" between these two characters? The writer then builds on three links to the initial claim: 1) a claim that the reader should sympathize with the Vane Sisters, 2) examples from the text of the narrator's poor treatment of them, and 3) a claim about how Nabokov wants us to think of his narrator. **The logical chain, however, seems a bit messy.**

First, and most obviously, the narrator has not yet mentioned Wayne Booth, though given the function of the paragraph, he may not be necessary. However, we still want promise as readers that he will be relevant somewhat soon. Second, both quotations are somewhat long, and neither is really explained or put to any use to merit the length. Third, the sisters' deaths, new information, go unqualified while the narrator's style does. And fourth, we still don't know why the sisters deserve our sympathy.

Each of these points corresponds to a question you might ask yourself to evaluate body paragraphs:

1) Are there any holes or irrelevances in the chain? By breaking your paragraphs down into ideas, you can see if there are holes in the logical chain that force the reader to leap to a conclusion you think you've proven. For example, what are the circumstances of the sisters' deaths? Will they impact our level of sympathy? Also, Booth's theories may not be important now, but the writer might want to guarantee that they soon will be. Paragraphs may also contain irrelevant details that take up space that could be used to fill in significant holes. One might, for example, point out the paragraph's second sentence, and ask, is the commentary about the narrator's intellectual style integral to the argument of this paragraph?

2) Does your chain hold up to counterexamples? By playing devil's advocate with yourself, you can determine if your ideas hold up or not. Coming up with counterarguments also provides an opportunity to deepen your consideration of a given section of your proof, and may help you develop your argument and increase your paper's effectiveness. A counterargument for this paragraph is "Maybe Cynthia doesn't deserve our sympathy. How are we to be sure?"

3) Do your sources actively support your thinking or just fill space? If you're going to quote directly from the text, it means that the author has said something so well that paraphrasing it will devalue it, or that there's a passage you would like to unpack for the reader. Quotations should be a part of your chain of reasoning, like everything else. If they feel separated or detached, you may want to reconsider what you are using them for. In this paragraph: **Is anything gained by including the whole quotation**

instead of just select phrases? In fact, no – the writer merely wants to provide an example of style, but the quotations wind up bringing up more questions than they answer.

4) Does the conclusion of the paragraph allow for a natural transition and invoke the thesis? The last couple of sentences in a paragraph should accomplish three different things: **conclude** the chain of reasoning in the paragraph, **refer** back to the thesis, and **prepare** the next step in the larger argument. In this paragraph, the writer concludes effectively. However, there is no mention of Wayne Booth, meaning only a part of the thesis has been invoked, and there is no evident “next step.”

In light of these concerns, how might the paragraph be refocused or revised? First, the writer must decide if it is more important in the first paragraph to establish **why** we ought to feel sympathy for the Vane sisters rather than comment on the narrator’s style. The writer can spend **less time quoting and more time analyzing** the relationship of the characters. Narrowing the focus based on the proposed counterargument also allows the writer to conclude with a promise of bringing Booth’s theory into the paper in the next paragraph, after having proven where our sympathy ought to be. This last move ensures not only that the paragraph has a strong internal argument but also that it is positioned in a larger context.

THE CONCLUSION AND “FINISHING”

When drafting conclusions, the general tendency is to restate the thesis and to try to extend the significance of the argument in some way. After having revised the paper, though, you may find you have a deeper or more interesting understanding of the topic based on a more nuanced thesis. You want your last words to reflect the work you have done in reexamining the rest of the paper, so draw on your new understanding when revising your conclusion. Take the time to reflect on a meaningful moment in your revision. Does something seem newly important? Does the thesis imply something controversial? Are there lingering questions to address? How have my revisions made the topic seem fresh?

Experimenting with these questions, however, may lead you to further redefine the parameters of your paper, thus sending you back into the revision cycle yet again. **No draft is ever perfect.** Pace yourself by doing some lighter editing in between spurts of revision thinking, and be open to declaring when the work is done. Consider showing your draft to a friend, a classmate, a professor, or a writing tutor for feedback from an objective reader. Remember that you might not have a solution to every problem, so be sure to keep track of frustrating points as you revise to run by another reader.

You alone will be able to gauge when you have finished revising, but in general, you should be able to point to a **nuanced and specific thesis**, a **rigidly structured and well-supported body in the form of a cohesive, logical chain**, and a **conclusion that highlights an interesting facet of the topic.**

Works Referenced

- Booth, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. “The Vane Sisters.” *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. Ed. Dmitri Nabokov. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.

For more information about composing the components of a persuasive essay, you may wish to consult other Writing Center materials, including *Introductions and Thesis Statements*, *Developing Your Thesis*, and *Conclusions*.

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