

ELEMENTARY REVISION SKILLS CHECKLIST

ACTIVE VOICE

- Read the draft sentence by sentence to identify any written in passive voice.
- Unless the emphasis is intentionally placed on the receiver of the action, revise the sentence by making the subject perform an action.

ADVERBS

- Identify every adverb in the draft.
- Question the necessity of each one. Could a stronger verb eliminate the need for an adverb?
- Look for redundancy created by modifiers (e.g., *She smiled happily*.) Eliminate redundancy.
- Try the stronger verb. Read the sentence aloud. If it sounds stronger or clearer and the meaning stays the same, keep the revision.

ANTECEDENTS

- Read the draft to identify each pronoun. Then read the surrounding text to identify each antecedent.
- If the pronoun-antecedent is confusing or vague, revise by using a noun in place of the antecedent or by restructuring the text so that the pronoun-antecedent relationship is clear.

AUTHENTICITY

- Read your writing aloud. Does it sound enough like you to make the reader hear your voice?
- Examine your word choice. Do any of the words communicate at a higher or lower level than is normal for you? If so, reevaluate their use.
- Are the character's motives and desires clear?
- Would the character, considering background, motives, desires, and other relevant influences, say that? in that way?

CLARITY

- Is the focus of my writing obvious, and is it obvious from the beginning?
- Does this paragraph/section/passage support my focus?
- Are any paragraphs/sections vague?
- "Does each paragraph advance the subject?" (Provost, 1985, p. 154)
- Cut any elements (quotes, examples, anecdotes) that fail to strengthen your message.

- Add any details, anecdotes, and examples that strengthen your message or that make it more easily understood.
- "Do the important ideas stand out clearly?" (Provost, 1985, p. 154)

COMPLEXITY AND SIMPLICITY

- Read the draft to identify passages that address potentially new or unfamiliar topics.
- Review the terminology and sentence lengths.
- Revise to simplify the presentation within these passages by defining necessary but new terms, using familiar terms instead of topic-specific ones, and shortening sentence lengths.

DANGLERS

- Read the draft to identify phrases.
- Examine each phrase. If a phrase lacks connection to another sentence component, revise the sentence to make the connection obvious by adding the connection to the phrase, placing the connection in a position where the relationship is obvious, or by moving the phrase to follow the sentence's main clause.

DEFINITIONS

- Read the draft to identify any terms that may not be familiar to your intended audience.
- Develop definitions for each term.
- Try including the definitions in the manuscript. If they clarify your meaning without distraction, keep them.
- If the definitions cause a distraction, consider revising the draft by using more familiar terms that do not need to be defined for the reader.

IDEA REDUNDANCY

- Read each paragraph and section to identify ideas communicated more than once. Revise to eliminate the redundancy.

ITEMS AND DESCRIPTORS

- Read the draft to identify descriptors or nouns presented in a series.
- Refer to the principles for how many items to include:
 - Use one item or descriptor for emphasis (e.g., Joe is determined.)
 - Use two items or descriptors for comparison (e.g., Joe is smart and determined.)

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- Use three items or descriptors for completeness (e.g., Joe is smart, determined, and conscientious.)
 - Only use four or more descriptors as a list (e.g., Joe packed several items: his uniform, his radio, his weapon, and his phone.)
- Revise to match intent and number of items.
- Revise to state items from shortest to longest.

LADDER OF ABSTRACTION

- Read your draft to note the levels of abstraction it contains. Identify places where movement up or down would strengthen the writing. (Remember, the bottom rung engages the reader while the top rung widens the meaning of your message.)
- Revise accordingly.

MISPLACED MODIFIERS

- Read the draft to identify modifying phrases.
- Check the location of each modifying phrase and its intended "target."
- If the "target" is missing, rewrite the sentence to include it.
- If the modifying phrase and target are separated by other possible "targets," restructure the sentence to keep modifying phrases and targets together.

NARRATIVE THREAD

- Read the draft sentence by sentence, focusing on the flow (or lack of it) from one to the next.
- Rework the writing to base the transitions on an obvious narrative "thread," such as chronology (i.e., an obvious thread frees the writer from being too concerned with transitions).

OVERUSED PHRASES

- Read the draft to identify common phrases.
- Ask yourself if the common phrase represents overused phrasing. Is it what you expect to hear in the given context? If so, it is likely a cliché. [Susan Bell (2007) offers this guiding question: "Am I writing new words to fit this moment and this story?" (p. 136)]
- Revise the sentence with fresher language.

PARAGRAPH UNIT

- Read the draft one paragraph at a time.
- For each paragraph, ask: "What do I want to say here? What point do I want to make?" (Provost, 1985, p. 44).
- Identify the sentence that states that idea. If no such sentence exists, consider adding one.
- Review every sentence in the paragraph. If any do not develop or support the central idea, consider moving or deleting them.

PATTERNS AND BREAKS

- Read the draft to identify points where a text pattern could be effective.
- Try revising the passages to include a text pattern—and break the pattern if it directs attention to critical concepts.
- If the revised passage works when you read the section aloud, consider keeping it. If it sticks out as a drastic stylistic departure, return to the original text.

PERSPECTIVE

- Read the draft to identify and label the perspective taken by the author.
- Brainstorm alternate perspectives: From what other viewpoint could the author write about the same topic?
- Rephrase a small portion of the draft to reflect an alternate perspective. If the alternate perspective works better, revise the draft to reflect it.
- Read the draft to check for consistency in perspective.

PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

- Read the draft to identify prepositional phrases.
- Examine each prepositional phrase, especially those in sentences that contain two or more.
- If possible, revise the sentence to eliminate as many prepositional phrases as possible without changing your intended meaning.

QUALIFIERS

- Read the draft to identify vague modifiers, such as: sort of, seemed to, tend to, could have, kind of, used to, must have, begin to, somewhat, rather, a little bit, and similar phrases.
- Revise the sentence to read clearly and confidently.

QUOTES & ATTRIBUTIONS

- Read the draft to identify quotes or dialogue.
- If the attribution appears at the beginning or end of the sentence/section, try moving it to the first logical break in the quote.
- Use enough variety in placing attributions that your text reads smoothly.

REDUNDANCY

- Identify every adjective and adverb in the draft, including prepositional phrases acting as adjectives or adverbs.
- Question the necessity of each one. Could a stronger verb eliminate the need for an adverb? Could a stronger noun eliminate the need for an adjective?
- Look for redundancy created by modifiers (e.g., *She smiled happily*, and *The boy was sad and unhappy*.) Eliminate redundancy.

RELATED QUESTIONS

- Read the draft to identify its major ideas.
- For each idea, ask yourself, "What else might be good/interesting to know about this?"
- Phrase the answer as a question.

REPETITION

- Read each sentence to identify repeated words. If possible, revise to eliminate the repetition.

SENTENCE LIMITS

- Read the draft sentence by sentence and identify the main idea(s) of each sentence.
- If the sentence contains more than one (or two) main ideas, break it into more than one sentence.

SENTENCE STARTERS (THERE, IT)

- Find each usage of *there* and *it*. If one opens a sentence and includes unnecessary phrasing, revise the sentence to eliminate *there* or *it*.

SENTENCE VARIETY

- Read the draft aloud to identify passages that seem to lose momentum.
- Review those sections to examine sentence construction.
- Revise to vary sentence lengths and/or types.
- Continue revising until an oral reading reveals continuous momentum.

SHOWING NOT TELLING

- Read the draft to identify sentences/paragraphs/sections that explain something.
- Ask yourself if it is possible to show the same ideas through action or dialogue. If so, make the revisions that entrust the reader to reach appropriate conclusions.

STRUCTURE

- Is the order in which the ideas are presented the best order for communicating the intended message?
- Do any ideas appear in more than one place? If so, are they presented multiple times for intentional emphasis or should they be clustered together in one paragraph/section?
- Does the current text structure communicate the correct relationships between ideas?
- Do the strongest ideas open and close the writing?
- Does the length of this paragraph/section contribute to understanding its critical concepts?
- Does the action move in such a way that conflict increases? Does the text have an obvious climax? Are the resolution and denouement satisfactory for the reader?

SUBJECT-VERB PLACEMENT

- Read the draft sentence by sentence.
- Where possible, shift phrases to move the subject and verb closer to the sentence opening.

TELLING DETAILS

- Read the draft to identify details (adjectives, adverbs, metaphors, similes).
- For each detail, ask, "Does this provide the reader with a new image—one that deepens understanding?" If not, consider deleting the detail.
- For each target, identify the three most significant details. If you have included more than three, consider scaling back the description. If you have fewer than three, be sure you've provided adequate description for the reader to be able to envision what you're describing.

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TO NE

- Read your opening paragraph and label the tone it establishes.
- Read the rest of the text. Identify any places where the tone does not fit with the label you identified.
- Make the changes necessary to 1) make your tone fit your intended message, and 2) keep the tone consistent throughout the text.

TOOLS VS. CLARITY

- Review the draft to identify all examples of literary tools (e.g., alliteration, metaphor, allusion).
- For each literary tool, ask if its use decreases the clarity of your intended message. Delete any tools that negatively affect clarity and revise the sentences to improve clarity.
- For each literary tool that does not lessen clarity, ask if its use improves the text. Delete any that do not improve the text and revise the sentences as needed.

TRANSITIONS

- Read the draft sentence by sentence, focusing on the flow (or lack of it) from one to the next. Do the same with paragraphs and sections.
- If transitions are rough, try one of the following:
 - Repeat a word from a previous sentence in the next sentence to establish a continuity of thought
 - Use a signal word—e.g., *later*, *meanwhile*, *after*
 - Rework the sentence/paragraph/section to base the transitions on an obvious “thread,” such as chronology (i.e., an obvious thread frees the writer from being too concerned with transitions)

VERB TENSE

- Read the draft sentence by sentence and identify any verbs that are more elaborate than simple past or present tense.
- Reword the sentence with a more immediate verb tense. If the meaning remains constant, keep the more immediate verb tense.
- Check each paragraph/section for consistency in verb tense.

VERBS TO NOUNS

- Read the draft to identify nouns formed with a suffix.
- Identify the verb from which the noun was formed (e.g., action formed from act).
- Revise the sentence by using the verb form. If the meaning stays the same, consider keeping the revision.

ADVANCED REVISION SKILLS CHECKLIST

STORY REVISION

While writing in every genre must be assessed and revised at both the macro and micro levels, fiction (i.e., storytelling) features challenges at each stage. Author Donald Miller (2009) describes stories as “music” with several movements contributing to the complete piece. Author and editor Elizabeth Lyon echoes this idea and suggests assessing a manuscript at five stages. Each stage possesses potential problems. The table below identifies a few associated with each stage and provides a checklist for revisions.

STAGE 1 The protagonist has a problem/challenge	
Problem	Revisions
The problem/challenge is too small to capture the reader's interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Ask yourself if the reader would care about the main character's problem and why (or why not). <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Increase what is at stake for the main character and/or increase the size of the problem or level of the challenge. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Make the problem/challenge both external and internal (inner turmoil, emotional distress) for the main character.
The problem/challenge is too great for the main character to believably overcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider your main character. Can you give him/her abilities/strength equal to the challenge? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the problem/challenge. Can you alter the challenge to fit the main character's abilities? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the setting. Can elements within the setting balance the main character's abilities and the challenge (e.g., provide tools that can be used)?
The problem/challenge is unclear or overly complicated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Refocus the challenge; select and develop one clear goal for the main character. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Compare the challenge with your intended theme. Focus the goal to support your theme. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Evaluate your events and delete any that do not move the main character toward addressing the challenge. Make the problem/challenge present in every event.
The problem/challenge lacks originality (e.g., reads like something recently seen on a television show or in a movie)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the problem/challenge. Does it seem similar to other stories/TV shows/movies? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Brainstorm alternatives and revise.

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ADVANCED REVISION SKILLS CHECKLIST continued

STAGE 2 Conflict increases as complications arise	
Problem	Revisions
<p>The established problem/ challenge lacks complications; the conflict fails to intensify</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider your main character. Would an additional flaw or weakness allow for an intensifying of the conflict? Could an internal conflict be added to increase the conflict and/ or raise the stakes? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the plot. Would additional or more difficult events complicate the main character's progress toward solving the problem or overcoming the challenge? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the problem/challenge. Does it contain more than a physical element (e.g., a moral conflict)? Could development of additional elements increase the conflict? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider every event. Do any fail to increase the tension? If so, edit them. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the antagonist(s). Could increasing their strength/influence increase the conflict or add complications?
<p>The established problem/ challenge becomes confusing due to its complexity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider characters. Are too many peripheral characters giving the reader too much to track? Edit any unnecessary characters. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider relationships. Are the characters clearly connected to one another? If not, strengthen relationships between them. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider plot. Does one, main journey (the main character's) flow through the events? or are other, less important journeys distracting from the central conflict? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reduce subplots and edit "rabbit trails."
<p>Subplots fail to intensify to a climax</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Review subplots. If they play an important role, treat them like the main plot, giving them increasing conflict and a climax that coincides with or occurs just before that of the main plot.

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STAGE 3

Conflict reaches its greatest intensity, its climax

Problem	Revisions
Climax lacks intensity, tension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider events. Increase tension by making connections between events and the conflict more direct or by making things worse for the main character. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the main character's investment. Does the main character truly stand to gain or lose something valuable? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Raise the stakes for the main character.
Climax lacks originality or is predictable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the climax. Does it seem similar to other stories/TV shows/movies? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Brainstorm alternatives and revise.
Climax is missing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider your main character. Does he/she grow without a dramatic stimulus? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Develop the plot so that events intensify tension or raise the stakes for the main character and provide the reason for the main character's growth.

STAGE 4

The protagonist solves the problem or meets the challenge

Problem	Revisions
Resolution lacks clarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the climax and the events that follow. Is the main character's triumph (or failure) obvious? Is a return to calm or peace obvious? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Revise to make a resolution obvious to the reader.
Resolution introduces or creates new problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the conflict's outcome and the events that follow. Do new problems or challenges appear? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Revise so that all major problems resolve, leaving the main character without major distractions.

STAGE 5

The protagonist gains self-knowledge or learns something

Problem	Revisions
Character fails to change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reconsider the main character. Does he/she gain a new or deeper understanding about self or life, or an ongoing wound or weakness? If not, the events seem not to have had any influence. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Revise to strengthen connections between the plot's events and the main character's thoughts/beliefs/perspectives. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> How has the world changed from inside the main character's mind, memory, and viewpoint? Consider adding a scene(s) that explore how the character has changed/grown throughout the text.