

Revision Strategies: HOCs and LOCs¹

This handout addresses a situation you will undoubtedly encounter in your academic life: You finally completed your first draft. You lean back in your chair, take a deep breath, and realize you still have some time left before the paper is due. What, if anything, should you revise?

Based on how much time you have to revise a draft, it might prove helpful to use a system of Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) and Lower Order Concerns (LOCs) to plan your revision strategy. If you have time to revise substantially, you will most likely want to evaluate the HOCs first: if something needs to change here, it could change everything lower in the hierarchy. For instance, there is little point in fiddling with commas if your central claim (thesis) isn't working. Furthermore, the roots of many LOCs tend to be in HOCs. An ineffective claim, for example, often leads to the incorrect ordering of material, which leads to poor transitions and unclear sentence structure.

How much time you have before the paper is due and what you consider most important at this juncture will influence how you proceed. If you have several hours to continue working on the paper, you could decide to spend most of your time on HOCs. If you have only a short time and feel your paper is in good shape from a HOC point of view, you could direct your attention to LOCs. If you have only a short time but discover your claim is weak, you could spend your time strengthening your main argument. However you decide to proceed, if you hope to use your remaining time to best advantage, you do need to proceed strategically.

Use the following list as a guide to decide how and what to revise. Consult the hyperlinks if you would like more detailed information on a critical topic. Each category begins with important questions to ask and then offers strategies for answering the questions.

Some Higher Order Concerns:

Sources: [Plagiarism](#)

Plagiarism is a serious offense at Duke and beyond. While correctly citing sources won't, by itself, make your paper great, *failing* to do so may constitute plagiarism and be grounds for judicial review. Don't jeopardize your career at Duke: cite your sources! Follow the [citation style](#) appropriate to the field within which you are writing.

- Is everything cited that needs to be? Do you provide citations, including page numbers, for all [direct quotes](#)? For all [paraphrases](#)?

¹ The information in this handout is based in part on material presented by Purdue's Online Writing Lab at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/690/01/>.

Claims

- Does the draft have an engaging [claim](#) (or “thesis”) that focuses and organizes the paper?
- Can you, if asked, offer a one-sentence explanation or summary of what the paper is about?

Ask someone to read the first paragraph or two and tell you what he or she thinks the paper will discuss.

Purpose and audience

- Why would someone want to read this paper?
- Do you have a clear purpose for the paper? What is it intended to do or accomplish?
- [Does the purpose match the assignment?](#)
- Do you have an appropriate audience in mind? Can you describe them?

Development

- Is the claim supported with sound reasoning and solid evidence?
- Are there places in the draft where more details, examples, or specifics are needed?
- Do any paragraphs seem much shorter and in need of more material than others?

Ask someone to read the draft and comment if something is unclear and needs more description, explanation, or support.

Organization

- Is there an effective [introduction](#)? A satisfying [conclusion](#)?
- Do paragraphs have a clear focus?
- Is there a clear logic to the flow of ideas? Do the transitions work? Is it easy to navigate?
- Is the order in which information is presented the most effective one?

Create a [reverse outline](#) by going through the paper and summarizing the topic of each paragraph. Does the organization make sense? Should any information be moved to another section of the paper? Does additional information need to be added?

Ask someone to read the paper. At the end of each paragraph, ask the person to forecast where the paper is headed.

Sources: Incorporating the ideas of others

- Are [outside sources high quality](#) and appropriate for the purpose?
- Are in-text [quotations](#) properly introduced and incorporated into the paper’s argument?

A Middle Order Concern:

Style

If your prose communicates your ideas clearly, but lacks flair, style becomes a LOC. When your writing style obscures your ability to communicate effectively, it becomes a HOC.

- Are sentences clear and easy to follow?
- Is your prose cohesive, i.e. does one sentence flow logically into the next or are there abrupt changes of topic?
- Is word choice appropriate?
- Do you make judicious or indiscriminate use of [passive voice](#)?
- Does the language seem genuine and alive to you? Does it hold your attention?

Some Lower Order Concerns:

Grammar, punctuation, and spelling

- Are there a few problems, such as tense errors, that frequently occur? Keep a list of problems that recur and check for those.
- Read the paper aloud, watching and listening for anything that sounds incorrect.
- Ask yourself why you put punctuation marks in certain places. Do you need to check any punctuation rules?
- For possible spelling errors, proofread backwards, from the end of a line to the beginning.