

## Revising the Draft

Having drafted your essay, you have gained the perspective of hindsight. Was the subject matter more complex than you anticipated? Did your preconceived ideas prove less interesting than discoveries you made while writing? Would you like to revise, but feel uncertain about how to do so?

### *How to revise:*

- Put your draft aside. Time away from your essay will allow for more objective self-evaluation.
- Get feedback. Since you already know what you're trying to say, you aren't always the best judge of where the draft is clear or unclear. Let another reader tell you. Then discuss aloud what you were trying to achieve. In articulating for someone else what you meant to argue, you will clarify ideas for yourself.
- Construct a backward-outline of your essay. Identify the main idea(s) in each paragraph. Rank their importance in advancing your thesis. Consider connections between and among ideas.
- Rethink your thesis. Based on what you did in the previous step, restructure your argument: reorder your points, cut irrelevancies or redundancies, add complications and implications. You may want to return to the text for additional evidence.
- Now that you know what you're really arguing, work on the introduction and conclusion. Make sure to begin your paragraphs with topic sentences, linking idea(s) in each paragraph to those proposed in the thesis.
- Proofread. Aim for precision and economy in language. Read aloud so you can hear stylistic infelicities. (Your ear will pick up what your eye has missed.)

### *An example of revision:*

In 1969, E. B. White wrote a one-paragraph comment on the first moon walk. Eventually, White took the comment through six drafts. On the next page of this hand-out, you can see his third and sixth drafts. White's main points are underlined. In Draft 6, White gets right to the point. He states the problem he's addressing--"the moon is a poor place for flags"--in his third sentence. In Draft 3, he does not suggest this until the sentence that begins "Yet," and never directly; it is the sum of the large amount of underlined material. Revision enabled White to be clearer by articulating concisely and directly an idea that was earlier implied; correspondingly, revision let him move an idea that was clear by the middle or end of an early draft to the beginning. He also cut his introductory device, the beach trip. The amount of space he devotes to it in draft 3 suggests that White was attached to this example. But it prevents him from getting to the point. So he substitutes the bouncy dance, which preserves the playfulness of the trip to the beach but is more economical.

**Draft 3:**

Planning a trip to the moon differs in no essential respect from planning a trip to the beach. You have to decide what to take along, what to leave behind. Should the thermos jug go? The child's rubber horse? The dill pickles? These are the sometimes fateful decisions on which the success or failure of the whole outing turns. Something goes along that spoils everything because it is always in the way; something gets left behind that is desperately needed for comfort or for safety. The men who drew up the moon list for the astronauts planned long and hard and well. (Should the vacuum cleaner go, to suck up moondust?) Among the items they sent along, of course, was the little jointed flagpoles and the flag that could be stiffened to the breeze that did not blow. (It is traditional among explorers to plant the flag.) Yet the two men who stepped out on the surface of the moon were in a class by themselves and should have been equipped accordingly: they were of the new breed of men, those who had seen the earth whole. When, following instructions, they colored the moon red, white, and blue, they were fumbling with the past--or so it seemed to us, who watched, trembling with awe and admiration and pride. This moon plant was the last scene in the long book of nationalism, one that could have well been omitted. The moon still holds the key to madness, which is universal, still controls the tides that lap on shores everywhere, still guards lovers that kiss in every land under no banner but the sky. What a pity we couldn't have forsworn our little Iwo Jima scene and

**Draft 6:**

The moon, it turns out, is a great place for men. One-sixth gravity must be a lot of fun, and when Armstrong and Aldrin went into their bouncy little dance, like two happy children, it was a moment not only of triumph but of gaiety. The moon, on the other hand, is a poor place for flags. Ours looked stiff and awkward, trying to float on the breeze that does not blow. (There must be a lesson here somewhere.) It is traditional, of course, for explorers to plant the flag, but it struck us, as we watched with awe and admiration and pride, that our two fellows were universal men, not national men, and should have been equipped accordingly. Like every great river and every great sea, the moon belongs to none and belongs to all. It still holds the key to madness, still controls the tides that lap on shores everywhere, still guards the lovers that kiss in every land under no banner but the sky. What a pity that in our moment of triumph we did not forswear the familiar Iwo Jima scene and plant instead a device acceptable to all: a limp white handkerchief, perhaps, symbol of the common cold, which, like the moon, affect us all, unites us all!

<p><b>planted instead a banner acceptable to all--a simple white handkerchief, perhaps, symbol of the common cold, which, like the moon, affects us all!</b></p>	
--	--

*As you revise your own work, keep the following principles in mind:*

- *Revision entails rethinking your thesis.* Because clarity of vision is the result of experience, it is unreasonable to expect to come up with the best thesis possible--one that clearly accounts for the complexities of the issue at hand--before beginning a draft, or even during a first draft. The best theses evolve; they are the products of the kind of precise thinking that is only possible to achieve by writing. Successful revision involves bringing your thesis into focus--or, changing it altogether.
- *Revision entails making structural changes.* Drafting is usually a process of discovering an idea or argument. Your argument will not become clearer if you only tinker with individual sentences. Successful revision involves bringing the strongest ideas to the front of the essay, reordering the main points, cutting irrelevant sections, adding implications. It also involves making the argument's structure visible by strengthening topic sentences and transitions.
- *Revision takes time.* Avoid shortcuts: the reward for sustained effort is a clearer, more persuasive, more sophisticated essay than a first draft can be.

**Copyright Laura Saltz, 1998, and the President and Fellows of Harvard College, for the Writing Center at Harvard University.**

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21A.461 What is Capitalism?  
Fall 2013

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.