



23 Ways To Improve Your Draft

1. **Consider your options:** How much leeway do you have in terms of tone, organization, and style? Maybe your first draft sounds like you are talking to your best friend, but it needs to be more academic. Maybe you've stuck to the five-paragraph format, but there is room for you to expand. Remember: keep your purpose and audience in mind at all times when considering what kind of choices should be made!
2. **Revisit the prompt:** Whether you have a physical assignment prompt from your professor or you have committed to a project, check to make sure you are meeting all of the requirements and fully fulfilling the purpose. For example, maybe you forgot to address a counterargument, which may be crucial for your audience to understand your point. Did the prompt ask you to evaluate a book, but you simply discussed the content instead?
3. **Check your thesis:** For most academic writing, there should be a single sentence (or two) that directly states an argument that someone in your audience could reasonably disagree with. Many readers expect this to fall at the end of the first paragraph (or second, in longer essays). Does your thesis at least touch on every argument that arises in your essay? It must be broad enough so everything in your essay falls under its jurisdiction, but it must also be specific enough to give the reader a clear idea of your argument.
4. **Make connections:** Often, it is easy to not realize what you are truly arguing until you reach your conclusion. Re-check your introduction and thesis against your conclusion to make sure they are lining up. While you want to reiterate your argument in the conclusion, it needs to be stated most clearly in the introduction. (Don't forget to check the rest of the essay: all paragraphs should reflect this new main idea!)
5. **Write a bold beginning:** Your title should be an accurate reflection of your paper's subject matter, but it should also be interesting enough to grab your reader's attention - to "hook" the reader. Your first few sentences can start by broadly introducing the issue or subject matter that will be discussed in the essay. Questions, statistics, and illustrative stories can also be intriguing ways to start an essay, but they can be distracting if relied upon too heavily or if they are not effectively connected to the argument.
6. **Focus on individual paragraphs:** Each paragraph should be arguing one aspect of your larger argument. They all need (in order): a *topic* sentence that transitions from the previous paragraph and introduces the argument for the new paragraph, *evidence* (either from outside sources or general facts), *analysis* of the evidence (which includes explaining, describing the significance of, and making connections), and a strong connection to your thesis. The paragraph can, more or less, end by summing up your argument in that paragraph.
7. **Add transitions:** At the beginning of paragraphs and between ideas within the paragraph, transition words can help the reader keep track of how your arguments are related to one another. For example, if two ideas are alike, you may use transition words like *moreover*, *in addition*, or *also*. If two ideas are not alike, you may use words like *however*, *in contrast*, *meanwhile*, or *on the other hand*.
8. **Rely on key words and phrases:** You will feel like you are being redundant, but repeating key words and phrases from your thesis and topic sentences throughout your paper will keep your audience anchored in the main idea. Remember: every idea has to be related back to your thesis.
9. **Favor analysis over summary:** You will most likely need to summarize the context of an issue, an opinion, or another piece of writing in your essay. However, your analysis should almost always be longer than your summary. Summarize the main ideas in a few short sentences, and then spend more time explaining, evaluating, refuting/agreeing, and connecting the ideas to your larger argument in your own words.

10. **Be specific:** Words like *things*, *very*, *stuff*, and *interesting* are vague. Search for words or sentences in your essay that could be replaced with more specific words. You also may want to add more specific details to strengthen your argument. For example, “Barbies are bad for people” might be revised to “Barbies are harmful to young girls’ self-image because they set unrealistic expectations for weight and size.”
11. **Expand from the inside:** If your essay isn't long enough, ask yourself, "What else can I *show* the readers?" Get more facts, give an additional description, add another angle to the argument, make up another hypothetical example, define your terms, explain the background of the issue, describe *exactly* what you want your readers to see and why.
12. **Get a second opinion:** Another set of eyes is crucial to the success of your essay. Many times, you can become too close to your work to see the fallacies, inconsistencies, or lack of clarity. Snag a relative, a roommate, or a Writing Center tutor to read over your essay. Ask them to mark places that are unclear or difficult to follow. Set your ego aside and really consider ways to improve based on their feedback.
13. **Go out in style:** Your conclusion should not only re-hash your main argument and main points, but it should leave the reader with a provocative thought. You might accomplish this by connecting your issue to the larger world (why does this matter?) or suggesting new questions that naturally arise as a consequence of your argument (what now?). You can push your conclusion a bit: what is the *real* "truth" about this topic?
14. **Sandwich your quotations:** For every quotation, make sure you indicate who is speaking (“According to...”) and then explain how that quotation fits into your argument through analysis. Watch out for *dry quotes*, which are quotes dropped into paragraphs without any introduction of adequate explanation.
15. **Cut it down:** Pare any quotations to the minimum effective length (to avoid interrupting the flow of your own language too much)—sometimes *you* can smoothly paraphrase the idea just as clearly as the author can.
16. **Know whose idea you are using:** Quotes and statistics are more obviously someone else’s ideas that need to be cited properly, but remember that paraphrases and summaries are also someone else’s ideas that need to be cited – even if you put them in your own words. These ideas need to be credited to the right people through in-text citations and a Works Cited page.
17. **Catch fragments and run-ons:** Any sentence that begins with *Which*, *Although*, *As*, *Being that*, *After*, *Since*, *Because*, or *For example* has a higher-than-average risk of being a sentence fragment. Is the opening phrase then connected to a complete sentence? In addition, any sentence that goes on for several lines or has multiple commas has a higher-than average risk of being a run-on sentence. Break them up with periods, semi-colons, or the correct connectors. Likewise, double-check any paragraph that goes on for over a page—can you find a good way to sort it into two paragraphs? Remember: each paragraph should represent a single idea/argument.
18. **Be yourself:** Some essays need to be more formal or require more academic jargon, but you can be most clear when you are simply using your own words. Remember: being specific is often a better substitute to “sounding smart.”
19. **Vary your sentences:** Use long sentences to show connections and shorter ones for emphasis; write some starting subject-verb and some with introductory phrases.
20. **Put your verbs into motion:** Search for your *to be* verbs, such as *is*, *are*, *were*, and *was*. Can you rewrite some of these sentences to show motion, surprise, activity, thought, or progress? Pick the activated verb over the *to be* verb when you can.
21. **Know your grammatical pitfalls:** How long can it take to look for all the its/it's or there/theirs—or whatever error you *know* you're susceptible to—in your essay, checking *each one* to be sure that you've got it right? Don't trust the spelling or grammar checker to catch all errors.
22. **Read backwards:** If typos or other errors are a weak spot for you, read your essay backwards, a sentence at a time, last sentence to first sentence. You can also read every other line. Reading the

sentences out of context like this will prevent you from filling in the gaps or reading what you mean instead of what you actually wrote.

23. **Listen to yourself:** Read your essay out loud, slowly, dramatically, and with feeling. Really listen to it. If it *sounds* wrong or awkward, it probably *is* wrong or awkward—you can catch a lot of rough spots this way. And if your tongue trips over a sentence or phrase, it's likely your reader's thoughts will trip over it, too. Smooth it out.

*Adapted from Dr. Shelley Reid, Director of Composition, English Department, George Mason University
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