

# Essay Revision Helper

EXPECT THIS PROCESS TO CONSUME  
MORE THAN ONE EVENING OF YOUR TIME.

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**1** Check your essay rubric. Was your **thesis statement** marked down? If so, why?  
Rewrite it.

**NOTE:** If you're not sure how to do anything this packet asks you to do, **seek assistance**, either from a friend, or from the teacher (outside regular school hours). Decide: what kind of assistance will help you the most?

- Seeing a sample essay written to the same prompt
- Watching the teacher model it
- Finding something I can refer back to, for my English binder

**2** Check your essay rubric. Were your **topic sentences** marked down? If so, why?  
Rewrite it. *They must support the thesis statement, and they must all be different.*

**3** Check your essay rubric. Were your **Es** marked down? If so, they probably aren't specific enough, or they don't support their corresponding topic sentences, or they aren't as clear as they could be.

*Es can always stand improvement. Always. Fix them.*

**4** Check your essay rubric. Were your **transitions** marked down? If so, and you want to fix them, seek help!  
Rewrite them.

**5** Check your essay rubric. Were your **introduction** or your **conclusion** marked down? Maybe you didn't finish. Time to finish now.

**6** Next, *estimate* the **length** of the essay. Is it too short?

- A standard school-length essay (5 paragraphs or not) ought to contain 40-50 sentences of varying lengths, or 800-1,000 words. Your teacher will probably say if a different length is desired.

**NOTE:** Typically, drafts handwritten during a single class period contain far fewer than 800 words. There are two main ways to lengthen a good essay:

- Elaborate by making the Es more specific and well-developed
- Add an additional body paragraph

(that's right... there's more!)

**7**

Now, if you haven't done so already, type a draft with the changes made from steps #1-5. *Make sure the typed draft follows the formatting instructions given by the teacher.*

- Is it supposed to be double-spaced?
- Is the heading in the right place?
- Does the heading contain the correct information?

Sorry, you're not done. Don't cry! You will now mark the first typed draft. To do this, you'll need a number of differently-colored pens or pencils.

**8**

Now, that you've created your first typed draft, print it out and count **the number of words in each sentence**. Write the numbers in the right-hand margin of the rough draft. This is not an estimate like the one you calculated in Step 6. The length of **every sentence** must be noted.

If the sentences all roughly the same length, *don't start fixing them yet*. They may have other problems that need identifying.

**9**

Check your first typed draft for **major fouls**. Ask someone else to check for you if necessary. A process paper final draft will be penalized substantially for EACH major foul.

**10**

Take out **three colors**. Colored pencils or highlighters work great!

**NOTE:** You're now going to be asked to highlight and change a number of words. It's probably best to color everything first before going back and changing anything.

**11**

Now, check for the unquoted words

- I, me, my, mine
- you, your, yours
- we, our, ours
- one [As in "One might go to the store." Not only is this technique pedantic, it's just icky.]

Are these desirable for the prompt you've answered? If not, use your **first color** (preferably red) to highlight all of them. You will be changing ALL of them.

*Also, please note: "you" is rarer than "I." In many cases, a personal reflection is appropriate. In few cases is the word "you" appropriate. Do you have a specific reason for using it? If not, get rid of it.*

**12**

Now, use the **same color** to highlight the unquoted words

- like (unless it's part of a simile)
- nice
- people

You will be changing ALL of them. No excuses, please.

(but wait... there's more!)

**13**

Now, use the **same color** to highlight the unquoted words

- very
- really
- basically
- essentially

Get out the bug spray. We want all of these dead and gone.

**14**

Now, use the **same color** to highlight the unquoted words

- a lot
- things
- stuff

These awful things deserve no less than your most powerful nuclear weapons. Leave no trace of them.

**15**

Now, use the **same color** to highlight the unquoted words

- go
- went
- going
- goes
- come
- comes
- came
- coming

Sorry, but it's time to diet. These words are like junk food. They're indicators of lazy writing. Once you're an expert writer, you'll use them sparingly and purposefully, but for now, it's time to practice writing without them.

**16**

Now, use the **same color** to highlight the unquoted words

- get
- got
- gotten
- getting
- gets

More junk food. They gotta go. (Sorry, I couldn't help myself.)

(but wait... there's more!)

**17**

Time for your **second color**. Highlight the unquoted words

- has
- had
- have
- having
- I've [I have]
- they've [they have]
- we've [we have]
- you've [you have]
- ...and any other form of the word **have**

You're going to change half (50%) of these. Young writers tend to use this word too much.

**18**

Now, use the **second color** to highlight the unquoted words

- am
- is
- are
- they're [they are]
- we're [we are]
- you're [you are]
- I'm [I am]
- it's [it is]
- he's [he is]
- she's [she is]
- be
- been
- isn't
- ...and any other form of the verb **to be**

You're going to change half (50%) of these OR (your choice), only the ones in predicate nominative or predicate adjective position (the ones that aren't lending assistance to a nice, strong, muscular verb).

(but wait... there's more!)

**19**

Now, use your **second color** to highlight the unquoted words

- was
- were
- wasn't
- weren't

Change half of these OR (your choice, same as Step 18), only the ones not lending assistance to power verbs.

**20**

Now, use your **second color** to highlight the unquoted words

- they
- them

Change ANY that don't have SPECIFIC antecedents, and check the rest: this word is a red flag indicating that your Es are *not specific enough*.

**21**

### Adverbs

Now, use your **third color** to mark those ugly adverbs (the ones ending in “-ly”). These adverbs pollute your writing. Here are the lazy ways they're used:

- They're used to modify an ordinary verb (“ran quickly”). Instead, use a strong verb (“raced”).
- They're used by timid writers who don't trust their readers (“said quietly”). The rest of the sentence, or the context surrounding the sentence, should lead the reader to infer that the statement was uttered in a quiet voice.

“Adverbs are not your friends.” – Stephen King, *On Writing*

**22**

### Heavy Nouns

Now, use your **third color** to mark heavy nouns (a noun ending –ment, -tion, -ness). I want you to rewrite the sentence with a stronger verb that won't need the heavy noun. (“I felt displacement.” → “\_\_\_\_\_ displaced me.”)

**23**

### Correlative Conjunction

Use your Parts of Speech Helper to place a correlative conjunction somewhere in the essay.

Why? Because I said so. Just kidding.

Playing with different conjunctions will automatically vary your syntax.

**24**

### Semicolon

Use a semicolon correctly somewhere in the essay. Same reason.

(that's right... there's more!)

**25****Repetition**

Are you repeating certain words too often? If so, are you doing it for a reason? If not, mark them with the **third color** so you'll pay attention to them when you revise.

**26****Slang**

Avoid it unless you're using it for a specific purpose.

**27****Sentence Length**

In step 8, you counted the number of words in each sentence.

The majority of your sentences should be 7-21 words in length. You should also construct a 3-word or 4-word sentence whenever you want special emphasis, as well as one sentence 22 words or longer. If you can do this in each paragraph, you'll see vast improvement.

Keep sentence length in mind when you're revising (step 28).

**28****Revise!**

Now that you've marked the first typed draft with your colors, it's time to rewrite and make the changes. Color #1 indicates the word must be eliminated. Color #2 means half the words must go. Color #3 indicates problems that need your attention as well. Finally, keep sentence length in mind. It's good to have variety: at least one 3-word sentence, and at least one super-long risk-taker. See if you can write one that's not a run-on.

*It's always legal to create more sentences, as long as you're not being redundant, and as long as the essay isn't over-long. Don't repeat yourself!*

**29****Formatting**

Once again, follow the formatting instructions given by your teacher. Some teachers and college professors care A LOT about this and will ding you big time if you don't get it right.

They're working hard for you. When you follow directions, you help them.

(Whew! Did you do everything? If so, there's *no way* you're not a better writer now than when you started.)