



TURNING YOUR FIRST DRAFT OF A SEMINAR PAPER INTO A FINAL DRAFT¹

© 2024 The Writing Center at GULC. All rights reserved.

You've done the research, you've organized the outline, and you've written all twenty-five pages of the first draft of your seminar paper. Now it's time to turn all your hard work into a final product by rewriting, revising, and polishing. These are critical steps when it comes to creating a strong piece of writing.

Like other steps in the writing process, rewriting and revising should not be done all at once. Instead, you should revise your paper in stages, so that you can look at it from all angles. You may want to print out your paper so that you can read it with pen in hand. You may also want to save different versions as you go; this will allow you to retrieve earlier writing if you get on the wrong track and need to return to a prior copy. Often, it's helpful to let your paper sit for a few days in between revisions so that you can return to it with fresh eyes. With that in mind, make sure that you have left yourself sufficient time before your final deadline.

Rewriting, revising, and polishing take place at multiple levels: the **whole paper**, the **paragraph**, and the **sentence**. The following suggestions are a starting point for your revisions.²

I. Whole Paper Level

At this level, you check that your paper tells the reader what you want it to. Some may find it helpful to single space the paper as they read through it, as that may make it easier to see the argument develop through multiple paragraphs on each page.

- **Identify your audience and reread your paper like a reader from that audience.** Think about who you are writing for. How much background information will they need? What do they already know? What do they *not* know? Are there conventions they will look for? This is also a good time to consider the purpose of your paper and your rhetorical stance. Why is a reader engaging with your paper? Are they an expert in your field or a critic who will be more inclined to doubt everything you say? You can tailor the level of detail in your paper to your audience's knowledge and position.

¹ Originally prepared by Lauren Soroka, Maria Enriquez, and Dineen Pashoukos. Subsequently revised by Daniel Webert and Martha Nguyen. Revised again in 2010 by Larry Malm, and in 2024 by Ava Kamb.

² For additional resources, see ELIZABETH FAJANS & MARY R. FALK, *SCHOLARLY WRITING FOR LAW STUDENTS: SEMINAR PAPERS, LAW REVIEW NOTES AND LAW REVIEW COMPETITION PAPERS* (2d ed. 2000); MARY BARNARD RAY & JILL J. RAMSFIELD, *LEGAL WRITING: GETTING IT RIGHT AND GETTING IT WRITTEN* (6th ed. 2018); WILLIAM R. STRUNK & E.B. WHITE, *THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE* (4th ed. 1999); JOSEPH M. WILLIAMS, *STYLE: LESSONS IN CLARITY AND GRACE* (13th ed. 2020).

- **Write an abstract that sums up your entire paper in a few succinct sentences.** After writing an abstract, look at your introduction and your overall paper to check that they hit all the main points.
- **Check that your thesis is carried throughout your paper.** Can you identify your thesis within the first two pages of your paper? Ensure that arguments relating explicitly to your thesis appear throughout your paper, demonstrating how every section ties into your overall argument. You can do this by using words that relate to your thesis throughout your paper and making sure that transitions between sections reinforce your thesis.
- **Copy the headings out of your paper into a new document.** By reading only your headings, you can see if they are adequately descriptive and whether the structure of your paper matches your thesis. You can also experiment by moving headings around and reading them in a different order. This technique may reveal assumptions, weaknesses, and redundancies, as well as new opportunities for organization. If you rewrite or reorganize your headings, make sure to carry those changes over to your final document.
- **Talk to someone who is unfamiliar with the subject matter of your paper.** Expressing your ideas to a lay audience and fielding their questions may sharpen your language and help you to identify places to expand on your argument.
- **Talk to someone who is familiar with the subject matter of your paper.** A professor from your class or a supervisor at a job can be good a resource here. They may be able to offer critiques and counterarguments that you can address to reinforce your analysis.
- **Outline a paper arguing against your paper.** What would someone taking the opposite position argue? How would your opponent structure an argument? By assessing the other side's strongest points, you can better neutralize them in your own writing.
- **Consider the length of each section.** Although sections and subsections often differ in length, you should confirm that you have allocated sufficient space to each part of your argument. You will want to devote more space to complicated or controversial topics, and less to more obvious arguments. Make sure that the bulk of your paper is devoted to your original analysis, rather than rehashing already-published arguments.
- **Review your paper requirements.** If you are writing your paper for a class, take another look at your professor's assignment memo and follow any conventions listed there. You can also look at law review articles to see how published writers organize and format their papers. Doing so might reveal a need to format headings and subheadings as well as write a roadmap paragraph at the end of the Introduction section.
- **Do not be afraid to rewrite, do additional research, or delete sections.** Your revisions may reveal holes in your research or your argument that require additional work. You may realize that a section you wrote in your first draft is ancillary and could be moved to a footnote, or unnecessary and should be deleted altogether. In general, do not be afraid to rewrite whole sections as necessary—it may be more efficient to rewrite your paper to fit a new structure rather than revise it line by line.

II. Paragraph Level

Once you are confident that your document is complete at the whole paper level, the next step is to ensure that each paragraph furthers the goals of your paper.

- **Look only at your topic sentences.** Consider copying the topic sentences for each paragraph into a new document. Does each paragraph begin with a sentence that advances your thesis? This is one way of creating a “reader-based outline” that enables you to assess how a reader might skim through the main points of your paper.
- **Focus on each paragraph individually.** Copy each paragraph into a blank document so that you can revise it in isolation, thinking not only about the content of the paragraph but also about its style. Does the paragraph’s topic sentence accurately describe its main point? Remember that each paragraph should be organized around a cohesive point or two, and it should build towards your overall argument. If you think that a single paragraph includes too many disparate ideas, consider breaking it up into multiple paragraphs.
- **Consider paragraph length.** Long paragraphs can be overwhelming to a reader. Try to break up your long paragraphs into manageable and coherent parts. It can also be valuable to vary the length of your paragraphs.
- **Think about how the paragraphs relate to one another.** Transitions can signal many types of connections—similarity (*additionally, similarly*), contrast (*but, however, on the contrary*), items in a list (*first, second, third*), chronology (*meanwhile, afterward*), and conclusions (*finally, in summary*). Ensure that transitions between paragraphs are seamless and further the organization of your paper.
- **Ensure that there is adequate support for your statements.** In legal writing, identifying support for your assertions is an essential part of formulating a strong argument. Make sure that the statements in your paper are adequately supported by facts or cited legal authorities and include those in your paper as citations.
- **Read your paragraphs out loud to yourself.** Reading out loud can help you identify run-on sentences, sentences that do not flow, and missing words or typos. You can also use the Read Aloud feature on your computer so that you can listen to another voice read your words out loud.

III. Sentence Level

Once your paragraphs have strong topic sentences and transitions, you can concentrate on the form of the sentences themselves. Before continuing to this level, you might take the time to input the changes you made at previous levels and print out a clean copy of your paper. The tasks at this level of review are often quite time-consuming, so make sure to leave yourself ample time to complete them.

- **Be intentional with your word choice.** Identify places where you use passive voice rather than active and consider whether passive voice is appropriate. Active voice is often—though not always—preferable because it focuses the reader’s attention on the doer of the action. Similarly, look out for nominalizations (that is, the noun form of a verb) that could be more actively expressed as verbs. For instance, *This case provides an explanation of the court’s failure* includes multiple nominalizations compared to *This case explains how the court failed*. The latter sentence is clearer and less abstract.
- **Vary sentence length.** Make sure you do not have long, run-on sentences that may confuse your reader. Instead, vary the length of your sentences to help your writing flow. Oftentimes clear sentences begin with their point, so consider reorganizing any sentences that start with long, meandering clauses instead of the main thrust of your sentence.
- **Double-check your grammar and spelling.** Look out for subject-verb agreement, run-on sentences, and capitalization errors. Run a spell check of your paper, and then look for homonyms, incorrect possessiveness, or other words that could pass a spell check program and still be incorrect.
- **Remove unnecessary or meaningless words.** See if you use words that do not add to the meaning of your sentences, like *particularly* or *given*. Eliminate wordy indefinite phrases like *it is important that*, or *the fact that*. Avoid using too much metadiscourse like *in my opinion*, or *I think that*. Redundant modifiers like *completely finish* or *past history* can be reduced to *finish* or *history*, and wordy phrases like *in the event that* can be turned into the simple *if*. Such changes can reduce wordiness without changing your meaning.
- **Do cite-checking as an entirely separate step.** When you have finished your substantive and stylistic revisions, take out your Bluebook and check your citations for accuracy and compliance with the Bluebooks (for instance, signals, parentheticals, quotations, short cites, internal cross-references, and more).

* * *

Think about the process, develop a plan that works for you, and make it routine.

This guide is intended to help you focus on both the big picture and the minute details of your seminar paper. Following these or similar steps will ensure that the final paper is a finished product, and that your reader can concentrate on the substance of your ideas.

The most important aspect of revision is that you develop a routine that works for you. To do this, you need to honestly assess your strengths and weaknesses as a first draft writer and as a reviser. Based on these assessments, you can focus on different things in this guide and develop a tailored checklist for your revisions moving forward. A sample checklist is provided on the following pages as a starting point.

Lastly, remember that after you have completed your revisions, you will still want to polish and proofread the final draft before turning in your paper.

SAMPLE CHECKLIST FOR REVISIONS

I. Whole Paper Level

Audience:

- Who is your audience?
- How much information can your audience understand?
- How much background information does your audience need?

Theme:

- Can you identify your theme within the first two pages?
- Do words that relate to your theme appear often throughout your paper?
- Are you consistent in your use of language and terms of art to deliver the same message?

Structure:

- Are your headings descriptive?
- Does your introduction show the reader where the paper is going?

Proportion:

- Does each section and subsection contain the appropriate amount of explanatory text?
- Is the bulk of your paper devoted to analysis, rather than background?

Flow:

- Does each section and subsection follow logically from the preceding section?
- Have you stated all your assumptions and logical steps, leaving no holes for the reader?
- Have you included transitions between the sections in your paper?

II. Paragraph Level

Topic Sentences:

- Does each paragraph have a topic sentence that advances your thesis?
- Do the rest of the sentences in the paragraph follow from or lead to the topic sentence?

Transitions:

- Do you give your reader adequate signals about the direction of your paper through the use of transitions?

Support:

- Are each of the assertions in your paper adequately supported by facts or cited legal authority?

Conciseness:

- Do your paragraphs vary in length?
- Have long paragraphs been broken up into manageable and coherent parts?

III. Sentence Level

Strong Sentences:

- Do the sentences use language that reminds the reader of your theme or strengthens your analysis?
- Have you used active verbs and avoided unnecessary use of passive voice and nominalizations?
- Are your subjects and verbs close together?
- Do the sentences vary in length?

Wordiness:

- Have you deleted meaningless or unnecessary words?
- Have you deleted redundancies that readers can infer?
- Have you turned phrases into words?

Grammar:

- Do your subjects and verbs agree?
- Have you used commas and semi-colons appropriately?

Spelling:

- Have you run spell check of your paper on your computer?
- Have you read the document for missing words?
- Have you double-checked for homonyms, incorrect possessiveness, or other words that can pass the spell check program and still be incorrect?
- Have you checked for capitalization of proper nouns?

Bluebooking:

- Have you included the necessary parts of each citation?
- Have you avoided excessive quotations and used verbatim quotes only when necessary?
- Have you used the correct signals?
- Is the spacing for federal reporters accurate?
- Are your internal cross-references correct?

**** Remember to leave time to proofread and polish your final work! ****