



## THE HOME STRETCH: REVISING AND POLISHING THE SCHOLARLY PAPER<sup>1</sup>

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You have done the research, organized the outline, and written all twenty-five pages of your paper. You are ready to hand it in now, right? Not quite yet—now you must turn all your hard work into a finished product by revising and polishing your paper.

### Why spend time revising and polishing when I have been working hard on my paper all along?

Even the best writers cannot write a perfect paper the first time around, or rarely even after a second or third attempt. After you have rewritten your paper for content, you will still need to do some polishing before the paper is ready to go. Most importantly, it is often the polishing details—such as spelling, grammar, and Bluebook citation—that can make or break a reader’s first impression of your paper. To ensure that readers notice the content of your paper instead of mistakes in presentation, set aside a few hours to revise and polish your paper before you hand it in.

The most efficient way to revise and polish your paper may be to start from the “big picture,” then work your way in. The following pages will offer suggestions and techniques for revising and polishing at the **whole paper level**, the **paragraph level**, the **sentence level**, and the **legal formalities level**. You may also want to print out the paper to work with it at this stage. You will probably find it easier to see the structure at all of these levels on the printed page.

At every level, keep in mind your audience. Your audience includes the professor who will grade your paper or the journal editors who will consider it for publication. Also keep in mind the “intelligent reader”—someone who has a basic knowledge of legal concepts and principles, but who is not an expert in the subject matter of your paper. Prepare a final product that any “intelligent reader” could understand.

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<sup>1</sup> The original handout was written by Dineen Pashoukos, revised in 2006 by Elizabeth Glasgow, and subsequently revised in 2017 by Caleb Graves.

## **The Whole Paper Level**

At the whole paper level, check that the paper tells you what it promises it is going to tell you.

### Organization:

- Copy and paste your headings and subheadings into a blank document. Do the headings and subheadings form a coherent outline of your paper?
- Could your audience understand what the paper is trying to say just by reading the list you have just made?
- If your headings are merely descriptive—Introduction, Background, Analysis, and Conclusion—consider rewriting them so that they say more about *your* paper specifically.

### Proportion:

- Does each section and subsection contain the appropriate amount of explanatory text?
  - If the section seems too long, consider breaking it up into smaller subsections or removing text that is redundant or unsupported.
  - If the section seems too short, consider bolstering it up with more information or turning two smaller sections into one larger section.
- Is your background section significantly longer than your analysis section?
  - Consider re-writing so that the great weight of your paper is your analysis, rather than a report on what has happened in the past. The reader should not get bogged down by a lengthy introduction or background section prior to the analysis.

### Structure:

- Does your introduction show the reader where the paper is going? A “roadmap” can help the reader get a preview of the paper’s structure.
- Does the introduction mirror the organization that you uncovered when you made your heading outline? If it does not, revise and/or rewrite your introduction so that it matches the structure of the paper.

### Flow:

- Does each section and subsection follow logically from the preceding section?
- If it does not, look for any logical gaps between sections. Revise your text so that the reader can move seamlessly and naturally from the end of one section to the beginning of the next.

## **Paragraph Level**

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

### Topic Sentences:

- Does each paragraph have a topic sentence that advances your thesis?
  - The topic sentence should tell your reader what the entire paragraph is about.
  - The reader should be able to pick out one or two words from the topic sentence that describe the legal issue or main discussion point of that section.
- Do the rest of the sentences in the paragraph follow from the topic sentence?
  - Be sure that each sentence relates to the topic sentence in some way.
  - Does each sentence provide support for the topic sentence? Do the sentences work together to present a cohesive discussion?

### Transitions:

- Do you give your reader adequate signals about the direction of your paper through the use of transitions?
  - Remember that transitions can be used to signal many types of connections. Some examples include similarity (*additionally, similarly, likewise*), contrast (*but, however, on the contrary, yet, although*), a list (*first, second, third*), time relationship (*meanwhile, previously, afterward, since*), causation (*therefore, consequently, thus*), and conclusions (*in summary, thus, finally*).
  - Transitions may be appropriate at different parts of the paragraph depending on your content and can explain the relationship from one paragraph to the next.

### Support:

- Are each of your assertions adequately supported?
  - Be sure to cite to appropriate authority when you draw upon outside sources, whether you are directly quoting, paraphrasing, or only summarizing another source. Also, be sure to cite if you borrow an idea from another source.
  - Be aware of GULC's strict policy on plagiarism, which can be found in your student handbook. Even inadvertent plagiarism is punishable, so be sure to cite your sources diligently!

## Sentence Level<sup>2</sup>

Once your paragraphs have strong topic sentences and transitions, you can concentrate on the form of your sentences. But before you go to this level, you should take the time to input the changes you made at the previous levels and work with a clean, updated draft so that you do not waste time moving between old and new text when making future improvements.

### Redundancy:

- Delete meaningless words.
  - Look for “verbal tics” that we use unconsciously, such as *actually*, *particularly*, *certain*, *given*, *practically*, that add nothing to the meaning of your sentence.
- Delete doubled words.
  - Look for repetitive phrases such as *full and complete*, *each and every*, or *first and foremost*.
  - Be aware, however, that these redundancies can sometimes be terms of art (such as in statutes or contracts) and cannot be deleted.
- Delete redundancies that readers can infer.
  - Redundant modifiers, such as *anticipate in advance*, *completely finish*, or *past history*, can be reduced to just *anticipate*, *finish*, or *history*. Such changes reduce wordiness without affecting meaning.
  - Redundant categories, such as *period of time*, *pink in color*, or *shiny in appearance*, can be reduced to just *period*, *pink*, and *shiny*.
- Replace phrases with a word.
  - For example, *due to the fact that* turns into *because*, *despite the fact that* turns into *although*, and *in the event that* turns into *if*. Making such changes tightens up your writing and makes it more accessible to the reader.

### Nominalizations and Active Voice:

- A nominalization occurs when you use a verb or adjective in the form of a noun. Although nominalizations can sometimes be useful, such as when discussing a highly specialized field or to add emphasis at the end of a sentence, generally they should be avoided because they can be unclear, confusing, and verbose. Instead, it is often more effective to look for nouns you can more actively express as verbs.
  - Reducing nominalizations helps reduce the “legalese” sound of your writing.
  - **Example:** *My analysis* of the results of the case provides an *explanation* of the court’s *failure* to rule with *precision*. The italicized words are examples of

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<sup>2</sup> See Diana R. Donahoe, TEACHINGLAW.COM (2016), <https://teachinglaw.com/>; JOSEPH M. WILLIAMS & JOSEPH BIZUP, STYLE: LESSONS IN CLARITY AND GRACE (11th ed. 2014).

nominalizations and could be turned into a verb: I *analyzed* the case to *explain* how the court *failed* to give a *precise* ruling.

- ❑ Generally, it is more effective to use active over passive voice. With active voice, the subject is doing the action, whereas with passive voice, the subject is being acted upon.
  - Passive voice can at times be useful, such as when you want to downplay the actor as a persuasive move. But using active voice is often more effective because it allows for clearer and more concise writing.
  - **Example:** The *ruling was made* by the *judge*. This sentence uses passive voice because the judge is not acting upon the subject. It could be improved by using active voice: The *judge ruled*.

#### Grammar:

- ❑ Know your own grammatical weaknesses and be on the lookout for them.
- ❑ Check for subject-verb agreement.
- ❑ Make sure you have no misplaced or dangling modifiers.
- ❑ Check for subject-pronoun agreement.

#### Spelling:

- ❑ Run spell check of your document on your computer.
  - Be aware that you may have reintroduced errors and typos when you made your edits during the first two stages.
  - Use the “ignore all” function of your spell check program to check names and other words not in your computer’s dictionary. Be sure the first occurrence of the word is correct, and hit “ignore all.”
- ❑ Read the document for missing words. Consider also reading the document aloud as an effective way to catch errors.
  - Your spell check program will not catch a missing “not” or other word that could change the meaning of your sentence!
- ❑ Look for homonyms, incorrect possessiveness, or other words that can pass the spell check program and still be incorrect.
  - Some problem word pairs include *there/their*, *your/you’re*, and *its/it’s*.
  - Look also for “missing letter” words or flipped letters, such as *were/where* or *trail/trial*.

## Legal Formalities Level

Again, before going onto this level, put in your changes from the previous round of edits and print out a clean copy. Printing your paper out at this stage can ensure that internal cross-references are accurate.

### Bluebook Citation:

- Be sure that your footnotes conform to the 20th edition of the Bluebook.
  - Unless your professor has told you otherwise, your paper should conform to the Bluebook's guidelines for law review articles rather than the rules for court documents and legal memoranda. Thus, you will be using a greater variety of type styles, different fonts, and some different citation rules. For basic guidance, look to the inside front cover of your Bluebook.
- Do your citations include “pinpoint” cites? (See Bluebook Rule 3)
- Do you use signals in the right order and for the correct purpose? (See Bluebook Rule 1.2)
- Do you use explanatory parentheticals when necessary? (See Bluebook Rule 1.5)
- Are the sources within each footnote in the correct order? (See Bluebook Rule 1.4)

### Internal Cross References:

- Is your first citation to a source a full citation?
- Do you use *Id.* and other short forms correctly? (See Bluebook Rules 4.1 & 4.2)
- Do you use “supra” and “infra” correctly? (See Bluebook Rule 3.5)

## Conclusion

This checklist is intended to help you focus on both the big picture and the minute details of your paper. Following these steps will help ensure that the paper you turn in is a finished product and make it easier for your reader to concentrate on the substance of your paper rather than the presentation. Over time, you may want to develop your own checklist, tailored to your own writing quirks. For example, if you notice that you always make a particular grammar or spelling mistake, add that mistake to your checklist. Whether you use this checklist or modify it for your own use, the time you put in at this stage is essential to turning in a complete paper.

For more guidance about the revising and polishing process, refer to the following sources:

- Diana R. Donahoe, TEACHINGLAW.COM (2016), <https://teachinglaw.com/>.
- ELIZABETH FAJANS & MARY R. FALK, SCHOLARLY WRITING FOR LAW STUDENTS: SEMINAR PAPERS, LAW REVIEW NOTES AND LAW REVIEW COMPETITION PAPERS (4th ed. 2011).
- JOSEPH M. WILLIAMS & JOSEPH BIZUP, STYLE: LESSONS IN CLARITY AND GRACE (11th ed. 2014).
- MARY BERNARD RAY & JILL J. RAMSFIELD, LEGAL WRITING: GETTING IT RIGHT AND GETTING IT WRITTEN (5th ed. 2010).