

# Chapter 28. Exercises for Revising

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We can think about “exercises” two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn’t happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

## Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we’re stuck, we don’t have “writer’s block”—instead, we just have a problem we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can



help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- Defining a problem,
- Exploring some options for addressing it,
- Acting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- Learning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

### Avoid high expectations

Practice may “make perfect,” but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the “right” answers. Just keep writing answers.

### Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer.

## 28.1 Add/Move/Change/Delete

### *Define your goal*

Identify some options for revising your writing.

### *Background*

When writers revise, we tend to wait until we spot an obvious problem before we change anything. In that approach, we miss out on less obvious (to us) problems, and we might entirely overlook our opportunities for growth in places that don't need “fixing.” This exercise creates arbitrary problems for you to consider; your goal is to decide if in solving them, you actually create a stronger piece of writing. If not, you can always undo the revision—but in the process, you gain mental muscles for controlling your writing.



*Take action*

**Set up:** Print or save a copy of your document, so that if you decide you don't really like any of these revisions, you can revert to your original. Then try at least 3-4 rounds of add/move/change/delete: You can use each level once, or repeat a level with a different part of your draft.

**Level 1: Revise a sentence for precision.** In a key sentence such as your first or last sentence, your main argument, or an important claim statement, *add* one word, *move* one word, *change* one word to a more effective word, and *delete* one word. Repeat for other key sentences as needed.

**Level 2: Revise a paragraph for cohesion.** In one body paragraph, *add* one sentence to provide clarification or more evidence; *move* one sentence to help guide the reader better; *change* one sentence in terms of its content or structure (you could split it or combine with another, rearrange its parts, or have it include more or better information); and *delete* one sentence.

Yes, for the purposes of the exercise, you have to determine which sentence is the “weakest of the herd” that you would delete, even if you are proud of all of your sentences, and even if you are sure that you need every sentence. For the purposes of the exercise, these must be four different sentences: this is how writers push ourselves to look honestly at our work and try to improve even when we think we are working at a high level. In your *real* revision, you can revise rather than cut a sentence, and you can modify rather than add a sentence; the extremes of the exercise are designed to help you see the fault lines rather than glossing over them.

**Level 3: Revise a document for emphasis and clarity.** Considering your whole essay, you can either start to make these paragraph-level changes in the text or write a note in the margin. Identify a paragraph that you should probably *add* so that your major ideas have the necessary effects on your readers—and explain what it would be about, and where it would go. Write a note about a paragraph that you could or should *move*: where would it go, and how could it help the reader to encounter it earlier or later? Write a note about how you could significantly *change* a paragraph for the better: would you shorten or lengthen it, emphasize your argument or evidence, or alter the tone or voice? Finally, write a note about which paragraph you would mark to *delete* right now: what is your “weakest link” paragraph, the one that is least related, most repetitive, most convoluted, or least convincing?

Again, these should be four different paragraphs, and you have to make all four decisions to complete the exercise. (You might imagine that someone is going to keep your phone in their pocket until you're done!) In your real revision, you might not add or delete a whole paragraph, but using this exercise can help you be honest about the strengths and weaknesses of your current draft. Your goal is to jolt your brain out of seeing your essay the way you've been seeing it for days

and weeks, and re-see it, so that you can revise it with the best chance of creating writing that powerfully affects your reader.

### *Reflect to learn and connect*

When you're done, write a few sentences as a note to yourself: what did you find yourself *adding*, *moving*, *changing*, or *deleting* at each level? Try to identify the *kind* of words, sentences, or arguments that needed more of your thinking, so you know what you should be paying attention to as you revise other parts of your essay. What writing problems were you most often solving?

### *Explore related exercises*

Assumption Inspection, Ten Directed Revisions, Write the Problem

## 28.2 Best and Better



### *Define your goal*

Use this exercise to begin revisions in a positive, focused way, drawing on your own knowledge and success.

### *Take action*

**Choose your best:** Select a sentence or small section of your document that you think is already your “best” work so far: your clearest statement of your point, your most vivid or persuasive example, your most engaging description, your most smoothly integrated quotation, your best use of a semi-colon to create a complex sentence. If you don't trust yourself, you could remember what others have said about your writing in the past, or you could ask someone to tell you what they think the best sentence on your first page is, and why. Write yourself a comment in or near your document: “This is a good \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_” to reinforce your success story.

**Let your best help you be better:** Look for a new place in your document where you could make a similar sentence or section “better,” using your successful section as a model. What kind of example in your fourth paragraph would be vivid as the one in your third? How could the quotation in your second paragraph be integrated into your writing as smoothly as the one you found in your fifth paragraph? You can make the revision right now, or write yourself a note about exactly how you intend to revise: “I want this to be as \_\_\_\_ as my best sentence/example/paragraph, so I will try to \_\_\_\_.”

**Repeat this process** at least two more times: Either find two new places for a similar “better” improvement, or find two new kinds of “best” spots to implement in your draft.

*Reflect to learn and connect*

When you're done, write yourself a confidence-boosting note: "Dear self, I've noticed that you often do \_\_\_ pretty well; keep looking for places where you can use that strategy so that your readers will \_\_\_ more."

*Explore related exercises*

Genre Switch, Inside Out, Write the Problem

## 28.3 Boil Down

*Define your goal*

Use this exercise to identify the exact change that you seek to catalyze in your reader, the better to focus your writing to support that change.

*Background*

When we're looking at complex problems, writers can get a little lost in all of the nitty-gritty details. If we get lost, though, we are sure to lose our readers. So it's vital that writers take time after writing an early draft to step back and recommit to our core arguments and recommendations—or revise them if our own ideas have changed. When we “boil down” our claims to short, direct language, we can check whether we actually make those points directly to our readers.

*Take action*

**Reconnect to your core goals:** Write or copy out a one-sentence statement of your current central argument, hypothesis, or recommendation.

**Consider a distracted reader:** Imagine that a key reader from your primary audience texts you the following questions after reading your document, and that your answer is not allowed to be “Enh, I just wanted you to think about it a bit more, but I don't really care.” In texting back to answer your reader, who is in a hurry, you must answer in ten or fewer words each time. If it helps, you can create a 5x10 table in your document and put one word in each box.

- What do you want me (your reader) to do now?
- Why should I do this?
- Why haven't I done this yet (probably)?
- How exactly will I benefit from doing this now?
- What evidence do you have that this action will bring those benefits?

**Review your draft:** Now for each question and answer, identify one sentence in your draft where you say—or come close to saying—that exact point, and copy/

paste that sentence to this exercise. For at least *one* sentence, revise so that you are more direct, more authoritative, or more specific.

### Reflect to learn and connect

When you're done, finish with a three-sentence plan: What 1-2 revisions can you make to the opening and/or closing paragraphs of your document to show readers "what you want"? What 1-2 changes could you make to the opening or closing sentences of a body paragraph, to help your reader connect your evidence to your goal? What's one place in your draft where you might need to add more data, evidence, explanation, or analysis to be persuasive?

### Explore related exercises

Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Conclusion Transplant, Reason Appallingly

## 28.4 Conclusion Transplant



### Define your goal

Use this exercise to use newfound understanding to anchor the opening sequence of a document.

### Background

Since writers learn as we write, we often find ourselves writing conclusion sections that do not merely repeat what our working claims or draft introductions said, but address alternate visions, attend to richer complications, and/or present our own arguments in more direct or specific terms. These new understandings are highly valuable. *Writing your way eventually into what you most wanted to say* is not the same thing as *framing your argument for readers*, however. Most of us live and work in a culture of readers who expect to know up front what our pitch is or what our bottom line is going to be, so they know what they should focus their attention on.

### Take action

**Set the context:** Without looking back at your draft, write a sentence that sums up what you most want to argue to readers. You might also take a minute to look back at your assignment instructions, if you have them: what focus or angle were you expected to address?

**Home in on your conclusion:** Review your draft, paying particular attention to the final paragraph or two—your conclusion. Copy out the 2-3 sentences or phrases from the end of your document that best match the goal statement you just wrote.

**Consider a transplant:** Now review your opening paragraph or two—your introduction. Copy out the 2-3 sentences in your first paragraphs that best match the concluding remarks you’ve been working on. If you notice that the ones at the end are more direct, more accurate, more engaging, or more complete, write a sentence about your plan for *transplanting* them to the beginning for a stronger start. Don’t be afraid to modify or delete earlier intro sentences that were serving as a working thesis or introduction: they served the purpose of getting you started, but you wrote them when you knew less than you know now, and so you can set them aside.

**Enhance your argument:** “But what happens to my conclusion if I take out its vital sentences?” All is not lost! With a stronger introduction and in-between analysis, you can now push your conclusion a little further. Add a note about how you could enhance your concluding sentences to make your argument more direct, more tuned to your audience, or more “out on a limb.”

### *Reflect to learn and connect*

Remember that you will likely have to adjust the rest of the essay to compensate. Write a few notes about which paragraphs or sections will need some adjusting so that they better connect to your newly articulated focus.

### *Explore related exercises*

Elevator Speech, Final Four Proofreading Moves, Old Wine, New Bottles

## 28.5 Diction Flexer



### *Define your goal*

Use this exercise to explore how the language you choose for your writing project affects its meaning, effectiveness, and direction.

### *Take action*

**Set the context:** Begin by writing out your main goal for your document, and briefly describe your current primary audience: what do they know and need to know, and what do you know about the discourse community they belong?

**Practice flexibility:** Copy out 4-6 sentences from a key section of your document: you can choose a section that you’re already confident about or one that you suspect is not yet reaching your readers. Then rewrite those sentences using at least two of the approaches or registers below, using as much exaggeration as you are comfortable with. Try to choose a register that differs significantly from your current writing style.

- **Informal register:** Rewrite your sentences using only language you might use with your friends at lunch or in a text message. You might use slang or abbreviations, sentence fragments or sudden exclamations. Be sure to check all your words: don't leave in a "furthermore" or a reference to "graphical presentation" if you'd never say that in a sentence while eating popcorn with friends.
- **Clickbait register:** Rewrite your sentences in a high-energy, easy-to-understand style that dramatizes how urgent and/or beneficial your ideas are. You may need to cut out some specifics and add exclamations in order to catch people's attention as they scroll through their feeds; you might need more vivid verbs or adjectives. Don't leave a flat or boring sentence, or your audience might click somewhere else!
- **High expertise register:** Rewrite your sentences using as much relevant jargon ("the small perturbations of X-axis variables" or "her complex psychosomatic adaptations") as you can. You may need to go back to some of your sources or run an internet search for "expert analysis of \_\_\_\_" to remind yourself of some important terminology. You may also want to try combining short sentences with semicolons, *althoughs*, or "and as a result" phrasings, to emphasize how connected your analysis is.
- **Descriptive register:** Rewrite your sentences to pack in as much descriptive detail as possible. You can add or intensify your adjectives and adverbs, from "excruciating" to "enchantingly." You might also include more descriptive phrases set off with commas ("Hanssen, *a highly respected multimillionaire lawyer*, argues . . ." or "The house, *teetering on the edge of the sixty-foot-high cliff*, remains . . ."). Readers should never doubt what something looks, feels, behaves, or smells like.
- **Storybook or poster register:** Rewrite your sentences to become as short, powerful, and accessible as possible, without giving up too much important information. You may not make it all the way to "See Eli run. Run, Eli, run!" or to "Uncle Sam wants YOU—to prevent forest fires," but you should aim for concise declarations of key issues. Keep readers focused on what's most important.

### Reflect to learn and connect

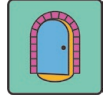
Conclude by writing yourself a note: identify one or two goals you worked toward in your diction revisions—creating energy, showing analysis, connecting to readers, clarifying your point—that could benefit your actual writing task. Are there sections of your document (your introduction, your recommendations) where one of these registers would be appropriate? Underline or star a couple of sentences that you might keep or use as models to help you in adapting your diction to best meet the needs of your current project.



*Explore related exercises*

Audience Switch, Genre Switch, Stance Switch

## 28.6 Expand and Narrow



*Define your goal*

Use this exercise to change the focus or boundaries of the issue you're considering so that you can locate relevant information and/or make a project smaller and more manageable.

*Background*

**You might need to expand** your original vision of an issue if you find you don't have very much to say about it, if you need to connect with more readers, or if you have difficulty finding sufficient supporting data about it. Perhaps neither you nor many other people find it compelling to write just about soccer players' shoes or how two-year-olds learn verbs—but you might all find the project more engaging if you examine a larger related issue, such as sportswear marketing or pre-school language acquisition.

**You might need to narrow** your original vision of an issue if you find it overwhelming or too difficult to be specific about for a short project; you might also narrow so that you don't have to read a zillion sources or so you can find an angle that will intrigue your target audience. Perhaps neither you nor readers will find a new or interesting connection from a three-page report that tries to explain all of global warming or a summary of US space exploration programs—but you could more easily dig into some questions about the effects of melting Antarctic glaciers or the experiences of female astronauts after they return.

*Take action*

**Expand:** Choose two of the expansion options described below. Use at least three or four steps or layers for each one. You can write out your answers in a list, or use a tree or mind-map with lines or bubbles spreading out on a page. Challenge yourself to reach for connections, complex problems, and big ideas.

- **Who else** might be involved or affected? Can you expand by considering age, interests, or profession?
- **What other** causes or effects, problems or solutions are related? Can you expand by considering the scope of the argument?
- **Where else** is relevant or affected by this situation? Can you expand by going from states to nations or by considering international implications?
- **When:** What other timelines or eras might also be connected? Can you

expand by considering longer-term effects, or by going from the present to the past or future?

- **Why:** What bigger reasons or deeper values are relevant here? Can you expand by thinking about complex motivations people have, or by investigating more radical or profound choices that need to be made?
- **How** does this issue/idea connect to other issues you've read about, interests you have, or choices your readers need to make? Can you expand by considering a web of related concepts or problems?

**Narrow:** Choose two of the options described below. Use at least three or four steps or layers for each one. You can write out your answers in a list, freewrite some responses, or use a tree or mind-map with lines or bubbles spreading out on a page. Challenge yourself to go as small as you think is feasible (and maybe even one step smaller: once you start thinking about it, the inside may be bigger than you imagined).

- **Narrow by people:** What's one sub-group of people or even a single individual who might be most affected, or need to change the most? What particular aspects of your issue are relevant and not relevant to him/her/them?
- **Narrow by location:** What one city or town, one school or course, one neighborhood or street, might be affected by, or be a prime example of, the issue you're discussing? What priorities would you set for that location?
- **Narrow by timepoint:** Can you pick a decade, a year, or even a month when this issue seemed most important—or a time when the causes were just revving up, or a time when the effects were most evident? What aspects of your issue were/are most crucial to examine at that time?
- **Narrow by resources:** What if you or a person or organization in power only had a few months or weeks, only had a small group of supporters or workers, only had a very tiny amount of funding to help implement changes or improvements? What aspects of your issue might be feasible or crucial to address in that limited-resource scenario?
- **Narrow by steps:** What if your job is not to explain the whole solution, but just to get people started on the first step, or help them envision the second or third step? Sometimes it's important just to identify one cause or one solution, to gather initial evidence, or to mobilize public opinion: what are some small steps that you could focus on for your project?

### *Reflect to learn and connect*

When you're done, consider your current experience and your long-term experience as a writer: in the future, are you most likely to need to expand or to narrow your focus? Write yourself a note of advice for upcoming writing projects.

*Explore related exercises*

Cousin Topics, Date My Topic, Six Degrees

## 28.7 Final Four Proofreading Moves



*Define your goal*

Use this exercise to raise the bar for rhetorical editing and proofreading accuracy.

*Background*

Writers who just “look over” a document in a few minutes are likely to “overlook” both errors and inappropriate writing moves. Advanced writers know that proofreading is a rhetorical skill that requires attention to one’s goals, readers, and genre. Writers also need to employ critical thinking strategies to help compensate for our tendency to read what we intended rather than what we wrote. To add final polish to a document you’ve already invested hours or days in composing, you need to review it using deliberate strategies appropriate to your goals.

*Take action*

**Proofread deliberately and with focus:** Choose one strategy in one of the four categories to start your review process. Spend at least 15-20 minutes just on that approach, and track the changes you make.

- **Interrupt your flow** to proofread for word-level errors
- **Choose your battles** to proofread for likely or serious problems
- **Watch your language** to proofread for powerful language use
- **Polish your front door** to proofread the sections that will make the strongest impression on readers

**Proof set 1: Interrupt your flow.** If your goal is primarily to identify *sentence- or word-level errors*, you’ll benefit from moving your brain out of the “flow” of reading these familiar words silently from top to bottom. Research shows that readers tend to make corrections of our own writing in our heads rather than notice the errors on the page or screen. To interrupt your flow and make your sentences feel “strange” enough that you’ll see what you wrote rather than what you think you wrote, try one of these strategies.

- **Read out loud, with energy:** If possible, stand up, use enough volume that your voice will carry across a room, and read dramatically—pause deliberately where you have placed punctuation, emphasize key words, and enunciate each word clearly. If you spot something, you can just highlight or circle it to return to later. This approach is particularly effective for

native speakers who may “hear” or “trip over” an error even when they don’t spot it on the page.

- **Read backwards** one paragraph at a time or even one sentence at a time—use your finger on the page to hold your attention or adjust your screen size so that you can’t skip around as you focus just on a small part of your text.
- **Change your view** by switching your font, your font size, your font or screen color, or your page margins, so that you are seeing your text in a fresh way. Be dramatic: go to 18- or 20-point font, or to 3” margins, so that the words and sentences fully rearrange on the page.
- **Listen to your words:** Ask your friend—or your computer—to read the text to you, while you follow along with your copy, checking that what is spoken matches what you wanted to say.

**Proof set 2: Choose your battles.** As you’re proofreading and editing, you’ll benefit from identifying and focusing on just one kind of writing challenge at a time. It’s difficult to keep all possible errors at the front of your brain at once, so reviewing for just one category—especially a category that you struggle with or your readers emphasize as important—can increase your accuracy and engagement. Even though it seems like you might spend extra time by reviewing the whole document more than once, you may find that several short, targeted reviews where you look at just the relevant sentences or sections produce higher accuracy in less time.

- **Length:** Spot and review any especially long or especially short sentences that might be run-ons or fragments
- **Punctuation:** Spot and review any instance of one kind of punctuation that is troublesome for you, such as looking at each comma or each semicolon
- **Quotes:** Spot and review each quotation or in-text citation to check for punctuation or integration errors
- **Features:** Spot and review each instance of a key genre element, such as captions for pictures or graphs or sub-headers for memos or reports
- **Individual challenges:** Spot and review each instance of text that might display an error you know you personally struggle with: you could look at subject-verb agreements, pronouns, transition words, or passive verbs such as “is” or “are.”

**Proof set 3: Watch your language.** Writers often find it difficult to choose the best words to express our ideas. Although your school teachers may have strongly encouraged you to use more sophisticated vocabulary, the “best” words aren’t always sophisticated, nor do they always mean exactly what you want to say. Depending on your genre and your readers, you may need words that reveal action,

words that demonstrate expertise, words that reveal your own “voice,” and/or words that connect to readers’ experiences.

Try searching your document for one kind of tricky word or phrasing at a time:

- **Jargon:** Words or phrases that are highly specialized, jargony, or technical. Check whether you’re sure you have (and understand) the exact right word; consider switching to a more precise or a more commonly used phrase if you think readers might not understand what you mean
- **Vague:** Words or phrases that are vague or generalized. If you see a lot of “things,” “stuff,” or plural statements such as “sometimes some people do some things in some ways,” consider switching to a more precise or specialist phrasing or include more exact explanations (“for example, one time . . .”).
- **Genre- or goal-specific:** Words or phrases that might not match your perspective, topic, genre, or readers. Perhaps for a chemistry report you should avoid “I” and “we” pronouns, but for your sociology or hotel management project you need that personal approach; perhaps for a technological instruction sheet you need specialized terms but you want your pet-sitting business brochure to use slang and informal sentences to mimic the reassuring way your grandmother talks.
- **Low-energy:** Words or phrases that slow down the reader’s experience. If the genre and argument allow it, consider changing sentences with static verbs like “is,” “are,” “has,” or “does” so that they emphasize action or processes (from “the bomb was defused” to “the SWAT team defused the bomb”).
- **Repetition or unnecessary synonyms:** You want words or phrases that balance novelty and variety with clarity and precision. For instance, you may have learned already to seek ways to use synonyms to help add interest to your writing, so that you discuss “farming” but also “agriculture,” “cultivation,” and “harvesting.” In other cases, though, you know that a giraffe is really just a giraffe and the US electoral college is always the US electoral college, and so repeating the same word gives your writing precision and cohesion.

**Proof set 4: Polish your front door.** If you have limited time for reviewing, you’ll benefit from investing your time in sections or features that readers will pay the most attention to. Take a moment and think: when someone hands you a document to review, what parts do you notice first? What are you most likely to remember? In the document you’re creating, what parts are most important for accomplishing your goals? These might include

- **First impressions:** your title and opening paragraph, or sentences that begin new sections
- **Final thoughts:** sentences at the ends of sections or the concluding section of your document

- **Argument highlights:** which sentences make your case most directly? what's your best evidence or your most compelling example?
- **High visibility sites:** do you have subheadings, graphics, or photos with captions that might catch readers' eyes?

Once you identify five or six high-priority sites, you can read those sentences slowly to catch errors—and you might also check on one or more of the following:

- **Slim down:** are you using short declarative sentences to make key points visible?
- **Draw connections:** are you using longer sentences to show how important elements connect?
- **Turn up the color:** could you switch in one more vivid verb or add more precisely descriptive language?
- **Make it pretty:** add a metaphor or other comparison, give it rhythm with a list of three or balance it in two equal sides, or use alliteration to repeat common sounds

### *Reflect to learn and connect*

Once you've completed a round of proofreading, write yourself a note: What were the main kinds of changes you discovered you needed to make (give a few specific examples)? What are the benefits and drawbacks of the approach you just tried? In what kind of situation might you use it again, or choose a different option?

### *Explore related exercises*

Best and Better, Ten Directed Revisions, Remix/Mashup

## 28.8 Inside Out

### *Define your goal*

Use this exercise to find the essential ideas of your current draft so you can foreground them.

### *Take action*

**Find the inside scoop:** Review your current draft, looking for your most essential, fundamental sentences *aside from the sentence(s) you currently consider your "thesis."* You're looking to highlight or underline about 4-5 sentences; each one should meet some of or all of the following conditions:

- It was written by you, not quoted from someone else's writing.
- It "rings true" to your experience, your position, your understanding of the issue at hand, without dodging or hedging or qualifying.



- It is a sentence nobody but you would have written just that way (consider the difference between “Sometimes writing is hard,” which lots of people could say, and “When I write, I feel as though I am trying to bowl while wearing ugly green shoes two sizes too big,” which probably only one person would say).
- It goes “out on a limb” or takes a provocative stance or provides an important detail that many other people have missed.

Often these sentences are buried in the middles or ends of paragraphs, or toward the end of your essay: remember that you learned as you wrote, so some of your later sentences were written by a smarter person!

**Name your fundamentals:** Copy these sentences onto a new page. Now, thinking about just these vivid ideas, imagine that someone has asked you what the most important point(s) in your document is/are, and write for 5-10 minutes as a response to that question. What truths, what goals, and what key situations are embedded in these sentences?

**Bring the inside out:** Look back at your current whole draft, and make some notes about how to ensure that these core ideas shine brightly throughout your document? Could you revise your intro, your thesis sentence(s), your conclusion? Could you use the starts or ends of key paragraphs to help your new ideas pop out at a reader? Are there paragraphs or sentences that need to be modified or deleted to help you show your best insights to the world?

### *Reflect to learn and connect*

There may be lots of reasons your best ideas are hidden. Writers often learn as we write, and so we have our “aha!” moments in the middles of random paragraphs. Sometimes we don’t even recognize our best ideas when they show up! Writers may also be hesitant to stand out, to say something risky, or to celebrate our own ideas. Write yourself a note: what do you think contributes to your good ideas staying hidden “inside,” and how can you help yourself bring those good ideas “outside” where others can see them?

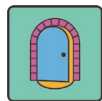
### *Explore related exercises*

Add/Move/Change/Delete, Explode a Moment, Off on a Rant

## 28.9 Letter to Kermit

### *Define your goal*

Use this exercise to imagine giving advice about a writing strategy that could help in your own situation.



### Background

Kermit the Frog is a popular US children’s show puppet who often laments being green, admires rainbows, or worries about his relationship to the overbearing Miss Piggy. He is a calm, encouraging, simple soul, and once you watch a video or two about him, which you can find online, it should seem easy to write him a letter of advice. (However, if you’d rather write advice to another fictional character, you may: you could advise Harry Potter’s friend Hermione Granger on her essay about time travel strategies, or provide anime character Arsene Lupin III with suggestions on his memoirs about defeating Inspector Zenigata.)

Your goal is to take advantage of what researchers know about learning and deciding: we often give better, quicker advice to other people than to ourselves.

### Take action

**Set your context:** Begin by writing a sentence or two describing in very general terms the writing task *you* are working on. Are you drafting a proposal to argue for change? Revising an essay to demonstrate your understanding of a principle or a text? Storyboarding a video to give instructions on how to complete a process? What feels hardest to you about the work you’re doing now?

**Transfer to Kermit:** Write a sentence or two imagining what Kermit (or another character) might be trying to do in a similar situation: trying to persuade Miss Piggy to take a difficult movie role? explaining why he likes being a green frog? Your view of Kermit’s writing task doesn’t have to be an exact match; you just have to be able to imagine Kermit wanting to write it, and being frustrated that he’s stuck on some challenges similar to yours.

Briefly list out three or four problems that you think Kermit might be having with his project. One or two of them can be problems similar to ones you’ve already been solving pretty well, like “getting started” or “finding enough to write about.” One or two of them should sound like the problems you’re struggling with right now: “the opposition is too strong” or “there are too many reasons and they’re hard to organize.”

**Start your letter:** “Dear Kermit [or other character], I hear you’re having trouble writing (about) \_\_\_\_.” Try to imagine kindly Kermit waiting on your response, and be as specific and reassuring as you can: identify each problem, and provide some specific suggestions for him to try out. “Maybe what you have is a rhetoric problem, not understanding why your audience, Miss Piggy, doesn’t like to play this type of role due to something in her past, and so you should ask some of her childhood friends or relatives about how she grew up.” Since the situation is imaginary, your answers can have imaginary elements, even as the strategies are real: if you need to suggest that Kermit consult Fozzy Bear for advice or use the



Grumpy Old Men as a skeptical audience, do so. Finish your letter by reminding Kermit that you're confident he can figure out how to complete his project and explain why you're eager to read it.

### *Reflect to learn and connect*

When you're done, write yourself two notes. The first note should begin with an optimistic reminder: "Someone might be eagerly waiting to read my project because \_\_\_\_." Give yourself the benefit of the doubt here, just as Kermit might if he were writing back to advise *you*. The second note should begin with an optimistic recommendation: "One of the strategies I recommended to Kermit might also be useful for me to try a version of now: for instance, I could \_\_\_\_." Alternately, if those strategies don't quite fit but they've reminded you of something else you could try, add that to your note.

### *Explore related exercises*

Best and Better, Expand and Narrow, Inner Three-Year-Old

## 28.10 Power Sentences



### *Define your goal*

Use this exercise to practice improving sentences so that they express complex concepts clearly.

### *Background*

Physical fitness coaches often recommend that people base their workouts on having "a strong core"—usually the abdominal and back muscles—and then build strength, endurance, and flexibility out through the rest of the body. Writers can also benefit from identifying the "strong core" of a sentence or a pair of sentences, and then adding power strategically.

### *Take action*

**Choose your sentences:** Copy two or three sentences that appear next to one another in a crucial section of your current (or a recent) writing project.

**Identify the "core":** Use boldface or underline to identify the **subject** and the **verb** (and maybe the **object**) in each original sentence. You need to identify these key grammatical elements in order to have the most control over your revisions.

Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins. (**Chris** + **earned** + **MD**)

Chris is a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA. (**Chris** + **is** + **practitioner**)

It's likely that your sentences already have additional words and phrases in them. You can either work with the original longer sentence, or carve it down to its core and rebuild from that.

You should know that most native speakers of English don't need to know the names of all the grammatical parts in order to "write good sentences," but knowing some names can help you gain more control over your writing, especially for approaches that feel new to you. As you work on revisions, see if you can identify the kinds of phrases and structures you have already been using.

**Boost your writing:** Use at least three of the "Power Up" moves below to improve your sentences.

- Combine two core sentences to create a compound sentence with a semi-colon or conjunction
- Try a "secret handshake" semi-colon sentence
- Add one (more) descriptor phrase into a core sentence (preposition, appositive, or verbal)
- Combine two core sentences to create a complex sentence using a subordinating conjunction
- Edit one or more sentences to add more active or vivid subjects and verbs
- Edit one or more sentences to delete unnecessary phrases

Don't forget to reflect on your work when you've finished editing your sentences!

**Power Up 1: Expand a sentence—or combine two sentences—using a compound or complex sentence structure.** Your goal is to provide more information *and* to show how that information is related to your core sentence. These models still use one or both of the same core sentences: *Chris + is + practitioner* or *Chris + earned + MD*.

- **Compound sentence:** A compound sentence joins two complete core sentences by using a coordinating conjunction or a semi-colon. Writers use different coordinating conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) to specify different relationships between the ideas. A semi-colon just indicates that there is some kind of relationship in the thoughts but doesn't specify the connection. How do the examples below tell slightly different stories?
  - Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins; they are a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
  - Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins, so now they are a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
  - Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins, but now they are a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.

- **Complex sentence:** A complex sentence joins two complete core sentences by using a subordinating conjunction. (Twenty common subordinating conjunctions include *after, although, as soon as, because, before, even if, even though, if, in order to, now that, once, since, so that, unless, until, when, whenever, whether, while, and why.*) Usually a comma separates the two parts.

The core sentence is *Name + is/became + GP*. When you add a subordinating conjunction to a sentence, you make that idea subordinate or dependent, and it no longer functions as a core sentence. (*After Chris earned their MD* is not a complete sentence.) Note how each sentence now tells a different story:

- After Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins, they became a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
- Although Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins, they became a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
- As soon as Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins, they became a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.

**Power Up 2: “Secret handshake” sentence:** Academic writers use one particular compound sentence structure so frequently that using it can serve as a kind of “secret handshake” to demonstrate that you belong in the advanced writing club. The sentence structure mirrors a crucial argument move: because advanced writers join a conversation rather than just yelling our own arguments out, we often acknowledge what other writers have concluded, and then explain how our ideas or arguments expand or even contradict what they say.

- The basic sentence structure for this handshake sentence is this: **Core Sentence + semi-colon + “however” + comma + Core Sentence.**
  - Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins; however, they became a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
- A more advanced idea structure for the handshake sentence makes the conversation (they said + I say) more evident: **Some experts say X; however, [I argue] Y instead.** You might need to add language beyond your chosen core sentences to frame a full argumentative contrast that takes advantage of this sentence structure:
  - Chris’s advisers recommended that Chris use their prestigious degree from Johns Hopkins to join an elite hospital in Boston or New York; however, Chris wanted to use these skills to serve ordinary people in their home town of Roanoke, VA.

**Power Up 3: Expand a sentence by inserting a descriptor phrase.** Your goal is to provide more information embedded in the sentence, so readers have more detail without a lot more words.

These model sentences keep the same strong core (*Chris + is + practitioner* and *Chris + earned + MD*). You can either *add* different descriptor phrases or use a structure to *combine* sentences so that one describes the other. Choose one version below as a model to revise your sentence.

- **Prepositional phrase:** Prepositions are any word that relates two ideas in space/time/concept (the 20 most commonly used English prepositions are *about, after, against, as, at, between, by, during, for, from, in, into, like, of, on, out, over, through, to, and with*). You can add several prepositional phrases together; they don't usually need to be separated with commas.
  - Chris earned their MD at Johns Hopkins **after they turned 30**.
  - Chris is a general practitioner **with a private practice** in Roanoke, VA.
- **Appositive phrase:** An appositive is a noun phrase that renames the noun it comes next to; the phrase is set off with commas. Think of it like an equals sign: *Chris = Hopkins graduate* and *Chris = my older sibling*.
  - Chris, **a Johns Hopkins medical school graduate**, is now a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
  - Chris, my older sibling and a Johns Hopkins medical school graduate, is now a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
- **Verbal phrase:** Verbal phrases *look* like verbs but aren't. A verbal phrase may have a *participle* (which looks like a past tense, “-ed” verb) or a *gerund* (an “-ing” form of a verb) along with a subordinating conjunction, like “who,” “after,” or “because.” Sometimes it has an *infinitive* construction (a “to” form of the verb, as in “I like to write”). Note how the verbal construction “*who earned*” or “*after earning*” allows a writer to condense two sentences' worth of information into one.
  - Chris, **who earned their MD at Johns Hopkins**, is now a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA.
  - Chris is now a general practitioner in Roanoke, VA, **after earning their MD at Johns Hopkins**.

**Power Up 4: Edit to focus on clear actors and vivid verbs.** Your goal is to help readers see your key point quickly and stay engaged.

If your sentences sometimes get long and tangled, see if you can locate the core sentence and give it more power: look for a stronger verb (it may be camouflaged as a gerund or a participle), move the subject of the sentence to the subject position, and/or unclutter the beginning of the sentence. Sometimes writers cannot or should not make these changes to sentences in academic prose, but often we have better options than we think we do.

- In their work as a GP in Roanoke, it is possible for Chris to spend hours and hours helping up to 30 patients per day.

- In Roanoke, **Chris** often **helps** up to 30 patients per day.

This revision changed the core from **It + is + possible** to **Chris + helps + patients**, and moved Chris—our hero!—from the middle to the beginning of the sentence.

**Power Up 5: Eliminate unnecessary language.** Your goal is to write a more concise sentence by focusing on key information rather than trying to sound important. However, be sure to keep any specialized language that your audience will need in order to understand the nuances of a particular argument. Be clear, but do not oversimplify a situation.

Often writers can cut our longer sentences by 6-10 words and not miss anything important.

- While it could be noted that several of my purposes run similar to and parallel with Chappell's, I have discovered that I rely to some degree more heavily on Engeström's painstakingly detailed models to recommend that at least for the time being teachers and educators make opposing contradictions appear in a more knowable way to the students who may be perceiving them.

The sentence above can reasonably be revised to the next one: Do you see how shorter phrases, stronger verbs, and the cutting of unnecessary phrases helps readers follow the thinking?

- While my purposes run parallel with Chappell's, I rely more heavily on Engeström's detailed models to recommend that teachers make contradictions more visible to students.

However, you would not want to oversimplify just to make a shorter sentence; if you need specific ideas or terms to make your point or connect with your audience, keep them. The following sentence loses the key elements:

- Like many researchers, I think contradictions are good.

*Reflect to learn and connect*

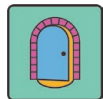
When you're done, finish up by adding a note: Which move do you think you want to try again as you edit your document, and how will it help you?

*Explore related exercises*

Diction Flexer, Final Four Proofreading Moves, Ten Directed Revisions

## 28.11 Sentence Doctor

*Define your goal*



Use this exercise to *diagnose* possible sentence problems in your own writing as you edit, and then *prescribe* a possible remedy or correction you can use.

## Background

How do you correct an error if you don't know it's there? And how do you fix it if you don't know what the best remedies are, or if your sentences don't look anything like the ones in your guidebook? Like careful physicians, advanced writers learn to look for symptoms or other signs that help us locate possible problems, diagnose common errors, and identify a reasonable solution.

**Note about generative artificial intelligence:** The advent of sophisticated grammar checkers and generative artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT or Bard *might* mean that you have less need to learn how to fix your own sentences. If you are writing something not very important or complex, a chatbot fix is likely to be correct (if not very lively). If you're working on writing that is more important to you, consider using a Chatbot Option to get *assistance* while you continue to *improve your learning*.

## Take action

**Select your focus area(s):** Choose one or two of the common sentence problems listed in below that you think you are most likely to run into.

**Investigate risky symptoms:** Copy/paste 3-4 *possible* problem-sentences. Remember that not all long sentences are run-ons, and not all single commas are errors; your goal is to focus your attention in places with higher risk of problems.

- Chatbot option: Input some of your text into a chatbot and ask it to bold-face any sentences that have errors without fixing or labeling any of those errors.
- Check your own understanding: Can you tell what the errors might be?

**Diagnose each sentence:** What evidence do you have that there's an error or not?

- Chatbot option: Input some of your text into a chatbot and ask it to bold-face any sentences with errors and tell you what the name or type of error is, without fixing any of the errors.
- Check your own understanding: Can you see how you might improve the sentences?

**Propose a remedy for at least one sentence:** What's one way you could improve it? Remember that there are always multiple ways to improve a sentence.

- Chatbot option: Input your new sentence into a chatbot and ask if it has any corrections or alternatives to suggest.
- Check your own understanding: Do you agree with the advice? Why or why not?

**Identify something you could learn more about by looking at a print or online**

style guide, if you wanted to gain more sentence knowledge.

Don't forget to add your reflective writing when you finish.

Run-on, comma splice, or fused sentence

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any particularly long sentence
  - Any sentence with a single comma in the middle
  - Any sentence with several pronouns (he . . . he . . . he . . . or they . . . they . . .)
- Diagnose problems
  - Locate subject-verb pairs: if you spot more than one *she verb . . . she verb* pair, you might have a problem
  - NOTE: Sentences with a conjunction (*and, but, so, after, while, although*) between parts may be correct
- Propose a remedy
  - Create separate sentences; test by having each one start with subject-verb
  - Add a semi-colon between core sentences
  - Use a coordinating conjunction like *and* or *but*
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - Semi-colons and colons
  - Coordinating conjunctions
  - Subordinating conjunctions
  - Subordinate clauses

Sentence fragment

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any particularly short sentence
  - Any sentence that starts with an “-ing” word
  - Any sentence that starts with *Although, After, Because*, or another subordinating conjunction
  - Any sentence that starts with a phrase like *For example the X* or *Such as X*.
- Diagnose problems
  - Underline any subject+verb pairs
  - Make sure the first verb is real (not a “verbal” ending with *-ing* or *-ed*; if the verb is the first word, it's risky)
  - If a conjunction starts the sentence, it's risky unless you see two subject-verb pairs

- NOTE: A short sentence that starts with subject+verb is often correct
- Propose a remedy
  - Join the short sentence to the previous sentence with a comma or colon
  - Revise to start the sentence with a strong subject+verb pair
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - Semi-colons and colons
  - Coordinating conjunctions
  - Subordinating conjunctions
  - Gerunds and participles

### Comma errors

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any sentence that starts with something other than a name or pronoun
  - Any sentence with a conjunction such as *and*, *but*, *so*, or *after*, *since*, or *when*
  - Any sentence with just one comma
- Diagnose problems
  - Check if you have an introductory word (*Also*, *However*) or a short phrase before your main subject starts
  - Check if you have coordinating conjunction (*and*, *but*, or *so*) or a clause that is subordinated with *after*, *since*, *when* or a similar conjunction
  - Check if there's a descriptive phrase, *like this one here*, that you could put parentheses around and still make sense
  - NOTE: Some short sentences may not need commas in order to be clear
- Propose a remedy
  - Add a comma after an introductory word or phrase, right before the main subject+verb pair
  - Add a comma before *and*, *but*, *so* (not after!)
  - Add a comma after the whole clause that begins with a subordinating conjunction clause (*After*+subject+verb), putting the comma right before the next subject-verb pair
  - Use a pair of commas the way you'd use parentheses around a descriptive phrase
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - Introductory phrases
  - Transition words or phrases
  - Coordinating conjunctions



- Subordinating conjunctions
- Restrictive and non-restrictive phrases

### Vague pronoun

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any sentence or long phrase that begins with *He, She, or They*
  - Any sentence or long phrase that begins with *This, That, It* or *It's*
- Diagnose problems
  - Look at the previous sentence: does it name only one person/group that the current *He/She/They* start could be referring to?
  - Look at the previous sentence: does it describe only one specific event or item that *This* or *It* could refer to?
  - NOTE: Sentences that include *This+noun* are often correct
- Propose a remedy
  - If there is any possible confusion, use the name rather than the pronoun
  - Add a noun after *This*: *This table, This situation, This proposal*
  - If you are referring to a complex idea, use several words to precisely identify the idea: *The government's handling of the epidemic was . . .*, or *Our first-place finish revealed that . . .*
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - Pronouns
  - Antecedents
  - Concrete vs. abstract nouns

### Inactive sentences

- Investigate symptoms or problem areas
  - Any sentence with an *is, was, are, or were* verb
  - Any sentence with low-action verbs such as *has/have, seem, make, or say*
- Diagnose problems
  - Identify the subject or actor in the sentence and ask yourself, "What did they do?"
  - Identify a hidden verb—look for an *-ed* word such as repaired → repair or an *-ing* word such as breaking → broke—and ask yourself, "Who did this?"
  - NOTE: Some sentences need to describe a steady state (It *was* hot) or need to focus on the situation more than the actor (The election *was* rigged)
- Propose a remedy

- Try revising the sentence by putting the actor and the action close to the start; you may be able to leave out some words
- Imagine the actual scene and focus on what happened or changed: select a new vivid verb to convey the exact action
- Learn more: check a usage or style guide
  - Passive voice
  - Auxiliary verbs
  - Gerunds and participles
  - Nominalization

### Reflect to learn and connect

Finish with a note about how you could *diagnose* and *remedy* one other sentence problem not listed in the table. (Option: You could share your strategy with other students to expand each other's knowledge.)

- You might choose a usage error you make frequently or a style challenge that's important for this document (such as using formal language or varying your sentence structure).
- You could choose an error from Lunsford and Lunsford's "20 Most Common Errors" list: word errors such as an "its/it's" or "there/their/they're" confusion, missing citation, punctuation error with a quotation, unnecessary or missing capitalization, unnecessary shift in verb tense, unnecessary or missing apostrophe, or poorly integrated quotation. (To learn more about the Top 20, see [Chapter 11, Editing in Context](#).)
- You could identify symptoms or signs that you can continue to look for that would help you identify *possible* areas of concern. What would be one way you could fix or improve a sentence if you found a problem?

### Explore related exercises

[Final Four Proofreading Moves](#), [Power Sentences](#), [Write the Problem](#)

## 28.12 Ten Directed Revisions



### Define your goal

Use this exercise to re-see and revise your project by focusing on one writing or revising goal at a time

### Background

Sometimes revising is harder than writing—in part because writers get comfortable with the current draft and have difficulty seeing what else could be done, and

in part because even making what looks like a simple change can set off a cascade of other challenges that can feel overwhelming. To revise well, writers need to challenge themselves to be honest, attentive, risk-taking, and thorough.

- **Honest** revisers tell themselves that the third paragraph or the fourth example isn't as strong as the others.
- **Attentive** revisers don't just "look over" a document but go through a list of key revisions based on their goals and readers' needs.
- **Risk-taking** revisers experiment with significant changes, not just sentence-edits.
- **Thorough** revisers don't just change the most visible weaknesses but use their awareness to improve the achievements of every paragraph or section.

When you address one particular kind of revision at a time, rather than just looking at a document generally and hoping you see something you can change, you improve your honesty, attention, and thoroughness, and give yourself more permission to take risks.

### Take action

To ensure you have met your revision goals, select at least three of these revision activities to complete. Each should take you 5-10 minutes. Finish with a few sentences to reflect on your work.

- **Tasks and goals check:** Review your situation by writing two foundation sentences. First, state what your readers most need from this document (if you're writing a school assignment, you should look back at the assignment directions). Second, state your own main point or argument, using fresh words rather than copying what you've already written. Compare the two, and write a note that says "My own points \_\_\_\_ (strongly, sort of, barely) match my readers' needs." Next, review at least three or four paragraphs in your document: at the end of any paragraph that strongly meets your readers' needs, write "Matches readers!" and at the end of any paragraph that directly matches your own point, write "Matches argument!" Finish by writing yourself a note: what parts of your writing align most strongly with both the readers' needs and your own arguments, and which should you revise?
- **Structure and focus check:** Write a new sentence that states what you most want readers to acknowledge, agree to, and/or do after finishing this essay. Then write a *functional outline* of your document, one sentence per paragraph or section. In a functional outline, you indicate both the subtopic and the purpose of each part: "Paragraph 2 describes temperature change in Alaska *in order to show readers why* we need new policies about protecting endangered species. Paragraph 3 describes the situation of Steller sea lions *to give readers background* on a specific species' experience." If

any paragraph has more than one topic, or more than one goal, add an additional sentence. Finish by writing two possible revision sentences from the list below. You don't *have* to complete these revisions, but you should challenge yourself to consider bold steps.

- “I could switch the order of \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ in order to be better at \_\_\_”
  - “I could delete the paragraph/section about \_\_\_ in order to focus more on \_\_\_”
  - “I could split the paragraph/section on \_\_\_ (or combine the two about \_\_\_) in order to emphasize \_\_\_”
  - “I could add a whole new paragraph/section on \_\_\_ in order to strengthen my point about \_\_\_.”
- **Paragraph development check:** Although paragraphs—even academic essay paragraphs—don't follow a formula, most paragraphs will use some predictable and repeated strategies. Start by reviewing the common paragraph tasks listed below, and select three or four that you believe are most relevant to your writing project or hardest for you to attend to in your early drafts. Then select one body paragraph for review. You should indicate *how well* it meets each goal and highlight all or part of the sentence(s) *where* it accomplishes that goal. When you've finished, write yourself a note: what one or two paragraph moves are you usually accomplishing well, and what one or two moves do you want to improve in your paragraphs?

Introduce the sub-topic	Describe concepts or theories	Provide vivid examples or exact factual evidence
Connect different ideas together	Provide your own new analysis or interpretation	Engage the reader's curiosity or sympathy
Show a relationship to your overall point	Directly make your own argument about values, causes, effects, policies, or actions	Address and respond to alternate or opposing views

- **Conclusion power check:** Conclusions have specific tasks in most documents—and since writers often compose them last, they can reveal some of the smartest thinking in the project. Underline the sentence in your introductory section that best articulates the point or focus of your project. Then underline the sentence in your concluding section that best articulates the point or focus of your project. If the second sentence is any clearer, more complete, or more engaging than what you found in your introduction, write yourself a note: “Transplant this to the intro and revise later”—acknowledging that since you got smarter while you wrote, you can now use that intelligence to strengthen the beginning of your project. Now rate your concluding remarks on the following criteria, ranking

from 1 (not very strong) to 5 (exceptionally strong) to make sure you're not rushing past important moves:

- How well does your conclusion show readers the big picture?
  - How well does your conclusion draw connections among the parts of your issue?
  - How well does your conclusion give readers a new direction for their thinking or action?
  - Add a note: which of these aspects could you revise to strengthen your ending?
- **Introduction power check:** Introductions have specific tasks in most documents—and these can be difficult to do well in a first draft. To revise, consider specific strategies for the title and the first several sentences of your document. Then rate your introductory remarks on the following criteria, ranking from 1 (not very strong) to 5 (exceptionally strong):
    - How well does your introduction connect with readers' current interests or needs?
    - How well does your introduction engage readers with important background examples or vivid language?
    - How well does your introduction provide an overview of all the main points of your document?
    - How well does your introduction make your own stance and goal clear?
    - Add a note: which of these aspects could you revise to strengthen your opening?
  - **Chorus and connection check (“flow”):** Although you don't want to repeat basic facts, you can improve the cohesion and flow of your document by repeating key ideas and terms. Underline the sentence in your opening section that best states the main point or argument of the document; then underline the sentence in your concluding section that best states this main point. Remember that to improve flow and cohesion, writers can repeat key ideas and phrasings throughout a document, the way that pop singers repeat the chorus to a song, and that the starts or finishes of paragraphs are often good places to make connections and arguments visible. Now read just the first and last sentence of each body paragraph. If a sentence seems like a clear echo of the underlined sentences, and it makes a new point of your own (not just “Taro Yamada says we should think about some stuff”) write “Good chorus!” next to it. If it doesn't quite, write “Make my stance/argument clearer” next to it. Add a note: which paragraphs could you revise, change, or delete to be sure you're staying focused?

- **Specificity check:** Remind yourself that an example often has more power when it provides a single, authoritative, vivid moment or statistic for readers to consider. Thus where a sentence such as “It’s clear that *lots of teenagers in our world* today have some *different ideas* about their privacy when they use *many* of their social media *accounts*” gives a general idea, a revised version would be stronger: “Teens like Samaine J. think they are private simply when they ‘block [their] parents from Facebook’ (Boyd 20), while my cousin Miko, for instance, thinks he stays private by only using Snapchat because it erases what he sends.” Moreover, since few people will be persuaded by reading one example or knowing one data point (one could just be an accident or coincidence), a strong paragraph will benefit from having two or three examples. For this review, begin reading the third paragraph of the document. If a sentence is mostly “some people do some things in some ways, you know what I mean?” (generalization, lots of plurals, no exact example), draw an arrow to label it a “*Some People Sentence*.” If a sentence gives an *exact statistic*, a *one-person-one-time example*, or a *vivid image*, draw an arrow and label it “Great Specific Detail!” (Not every sentence needs to be labeled.) Do the same thing for another paragraph or two. Add a note: what are two places that you could add evidentiary power? Do you already know of more detailed information, or will you need further research to find it out?
- **Resistant audience check:** If you are writing to persuade an audience that doesn’t agree with you, it’s often not enough to just state your own position and hammer it home. As you revise, take a close look at how you are addressing your readers’ concerns and resistance points. First, locate any sentence or section where you acknowledge valid alternatives or complications: “Opponents might argue that \_\_\_,” or “Current residents might be concerned that \_\_\_,” or “This solution is not 100% effective,” and write a note: “Good resistance acknowledgment!” Then check to see if that sentence or section also includes a direct response or refutation, and includes evidence the reader would find credible: “However, recent research shows \_\_\_, and so residents should feel confident that \_\_\_.” If any of your arguments is missing any one of these moves (acknowledgment, response, and credible counter-evidence), write a note: “Provide more \_\_\_ for readers here.”
- **Secondary source power check:** Quotations and paraphrases of secondary source information do not “speak for themselves.” Locate at least three places your document uses an outside source and check each one using the list below. Write a note for each: “This sourced reference has good \_\_\_ but could use more/better \_\_\_.”
  - **Selection:** The information or quotation should be directly relevant to the point the paragraph/section is making.

- **Limitation:** Direct quotations should be as short as possible to keep readers focused on the exact phrase with the best evidence.
- **Integration:** In many disciplines and genres, the speaker/author of the quotation, and perhaps the issue under consideration, should be identified to integrate the idea into the surrounding text: “According to Aziz . . .” Where possible, paraphrase part or all of the information to keep sentences in the writer’s voice for cohesion.
- **Citation:** Quotations, paraphrases, and summaries need to be cited or acknowledged according to the expectations of the discipline/genre.
- **Explanation:** Sentences before or after the sourced information should directly explain how it supports the writer’s point.
- **Qualification:** In many disciplines and genres, readers benefit from knowing up front why the source is credible (“Aziz, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, argues \_\_\_\_”).
- **Corroboration:** A single source might be seen as a random outlier; a reference to one or more similar, credible sources that have similar perspectives will reinforce the point.
- **Visual/design check:** Your document’s genre may allow or even require features such as non-text evidence (graphs, charts, diagrams, pictures); layout choices such as subheadings, columns, or clusters; or choices in fonts, colors, or camera angles. Pick any one element and check every instance—each subheading, each font chosen—using the following criteria. Finish with a note: what two changes could you make to improve the design of your document?
  - **Is each \_\_\_\_ constructive:** Does it substantially add to the message, or is it just filling space or distracting readers from the central purpose?
  - **Is each \_\_\_\_ complete:** Does it have all the information (caption, citation, legend) necessary for readers to understand and find it credible?
  - **Is each \_\_\_\_ consistent:** Does it match the style of other elements exactly to enhance the cohesion and flow of the document?
  - **Is each \_\_\_\_ connected:** Can readers see how it fits with key arguments or other design elements, and will readers understand the order or flow of elements through the document?

### Reflect to learn and connect

When you’re done with all three, write one *risk-taking* sentence (“If I had time and energy to make one big change, I would revise \_\_\_\_”) and one *thorough revision* sentence (“If I change \_\_\_\_ in paragraph \_\_\_\_ as indicated, I would probably also have to adjust these two other parts of my document: \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_”).

*Explore related exercises*Evil Genie, Final Four Proofreading Moves, Magic Three Choices

## 28.13 Write It Worse

*Define your goal*

Use this exercise to break through “writer’s block” and activate your knowledge about your goals and your readers’ needs by deliberately creating writing that fails to meet those standards and then beginning to improve it.

*Take action*

**Identify a problem spot** in the project you are working on: your title, your introduction, a paragraph responding to counterarguments, your final sentence or two.

- If you are in the process of composing your first draft of this tricky section, your task here is to **write a really bad example** of it.
- If you are revising a section you have already drafted, your job is to write out a version that is **much, much worse** than the one you have already written.

You should do this on a new page or in a new document window without looking back at the early version if possible. If the section is short, like a title or sentence, you might write out two or three bad examples. If the section is long, like an academic paragraph, you might write a short bad version.

**Give your bad draft some careful thought** before you start it: you need it to fail in multiple ways while still being recognizable as a section vaguely related to your project. Identify several criteria: a title for an academic article should be serious and specific; it should use the language of the field; it should predict the topic and argument of the article. Therefore, “Yo, Dudes: Some Stuff I Learned About Phytoplankton Last Summer” is a fairly bad academic title.

Similarly, a paragraph in a researched argument essay should articulate a reasonable claim, have multiple credible facts, integrate and explain information, use language accessible to readers, and show why the information is relevant. Thus a sixteen-line block quote followed by “And therefore I’m right that all income taxes are evil” is not a functional piece of writing for that context. (If your new draft is so bad it’s laughable, then you’re engaging a more positive disposition as well moving forward on an analytical level, and thus solving two problems at once!)

**Finish #1: Improve your first try.** If you’ve just written a very bad first draft, finish by writing (part of) it just a little better, so that you know you can revise it. You’re still not aiming to produce excellent writing, just something that is a tiny



bit less-than-awful. Then write yourself several notes about what else needs to be improved for this section to better meet your goals and the needs of your readers. (It's nearly always easier to improve a bad piece of writing than to produce a perfect one out of the blue.)

**Finish #2: Improve your current draft.** If you've just written a much worse version of a section you had completed for an earlier draft, finish by listing out the top three revision strategies you would need to use in order for this version to meet your goals and your readers' expectations, and to fit the rest of your draft. Then revise (part of) it to make it better according to those goals. Finally, compare your new revised version and your list of strategies to your previous draft: often if you do a complete "tear-down" and rebuild a section, you discover new pathways toward successful writing.

### *Reflect to learn and connect*

When you're done, turn the tables and write your future self a backwards complement, just for fun: "Hey, Self, remember that even when your writing isn't all that great, it could still be way worse by having more/less \_\_\_\_ or by \_\_\_\_ [another bad strategy you tried out here]."

### *Explore related exercises*

Attitude Inventory, Not-Talk, Reason Appallingly