Revising Second-Stage Drafts:
Examining your Words and Sentences

If your draft is fairly complete at this stage—with most of your concerns about content and organization under control—you can focus on revising words and sentences.

Common Second-Stage Draft Issues

1. Do you use specific language?
   Your essay will include both general and specific language, but specific words create the sharpest images. You can write about someone “wearing clothes” (a relatively general expression), but if it is important to the scene, be more specific—for example, "old blue jeans and a sweatshirt" or perhaps "faded Levi's ripped out at the knees and a baggy Redskins sweatshirt."

2. Do you include sensory details?
   Sensory details can be useful in expository and persuasive essays, and are often linked to specific words. For instance, an author might write about “camouflage uniform pants,” "black mar boots," and "brown T-shirts," placing the color detail in front of the specific article of clothing. Later, the author may add a sensation, by describing "sweaty faces." Of course, all spoken dialogue creates a sound impression, but linked to active verbs, the sound can become more dramatic, as in this example: "Linda roars, 'MARY! Come here this instant!'"

3. Do you choose "active" verbs to describe action?
   Verbs are important in conveying action, but some verbs do not convey action well (be, do, have, and make are common culprits). Consider these pairs of sentences:
   
   A. Thunder could be heard on the lake.
   B. Thunder shook the lake.
   C. I moved my head around to my left toward the shore.
   D. I jerked my head around to my left toward the shore.

   If you think that sentences B and D create more vivid images, review the verbs in your own draft to see if any can be replaced with more active, interesting ones.

4. Do you use any -ing words?
   Particiles (one kind of word with an -ing ending) can also show action while helping you to vary your sentences. Consider these pairs of sentences:
   
   A. My girls made it through all the obstacles.
   B. Running, climbing wooden walls, crossing rope bridges, and playing Tarzan on a rope swing, my girls tore through that course.

   If you think sentence B creates a more vivid image, revise your sentences, adding -ing words wherever needed.

5. Do you experiment with comparisons like metaphors or similes?
Metaphors and similes can create fresh, sometimes startling images by comparing two seemingly dissimilar things that have something in common. Consider these two descriptions:

A. Thunder shook the huge lake, and I could see the water move.
B. Thunder shook the huge lake as if it were a glass of water, vibrating, nearly ready to fall off of some gigantic rock and shatter on the ground.

Comparing the lake to a glass of water is a fresh image (versus a cliche), and the fragile nature of a glass that can be smashed helps set the mood for the tragedy later in the story. If you think that sentence B has more power, then review the sentences in your own draft to see if any literal description might benefit from a metaphor or simile.

6. Are the sentences in your essay varied in length?
Writing can be more or less interesting based on the structure of sentences alone. After polishing word choices, check the length of sentences (counting the words can help). If you find more than four sentences in a row of roughly the same length (say, 14, 17, 12, and 15 words), either combine two or divide a long one.

7. Are the beginnings of your sentences varied?
If even two sentences in a row begin with the same word, such as “the,” change an opening or combine sentences to break up the pattern. Also, look for too many similar openings even if the sentences are far apart. For example, you might notice that you started eight out of twenty sentences with the word “as.” It is easy to change a word or combine sentences to increase the readability of the essay.

8. Do you avoid repeating a word so often that it becomes noticeable?
While some repetition is useful, too much becomes boring. Consider the following two sets of sentences:

A. There were many people on the lake waiting to put their boats in the water there at Hillside Lake on that tragic July afternoon. In my boat on the lake, I felt hot and sticky from waiting on the humid lake water as I frantically maneuvered my small aluminum boat closer to the ramp by the lakeshore.
B. There were many people in the water waiting to put their boats on their trailers at Hillside Lake on that tragic July afternoon. I felt hot and sticky waiting on the lake, frantically maneuvering my small aluminum boat closer to the ramp.

If you think that version B is more readable, revise your own sentences, cutting nonessential words.

9. Do you avoid words that serve no purpose?
Everyday speech is full of unneeded words, but writing should not be. Cluttered writing can bore and confuse; concise writing, in contrast, involves readers and clarifies ideas. Compare the following two sentences. Which is concise and which is cluttered?

A. The meat hot-dogs, long and thin, sizzle with a sizzling sound as they cook, roasting, and drip their meaty juices off the end of the stick.
B. The hotdogs sizzle as they cook and drip their juices off the end of the stick.
If you think that sentence B is more readable, revise your own sentences, cutting out unneeded words.

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