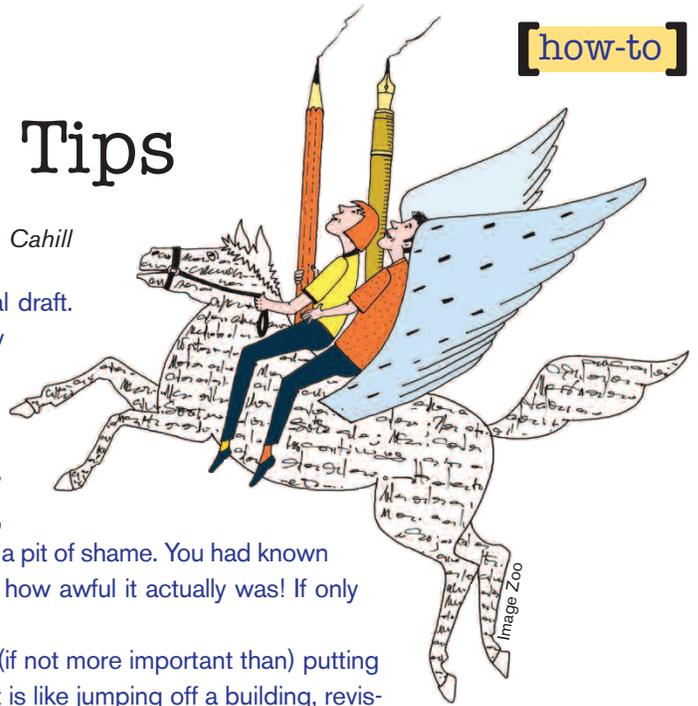


# Writing's Top 10 Tips For Revision

By Bryon Cahill



**W**E'VE ALL PRETENDED THAT A FIRST DRAFT is a final draft. Don't deny it; you know you're guilty of this. How many times have you waited to write a paper until the night before it was due? When you were finally done, what did you do? If you're like most procrastinators, you shoved it into your schoolbag and went to sleep, totally exhausted. Then in the morning, sitting at your desk in class, you reread what you had written the night before and fell into a pit of shame. You had known it wasn't the best thing ever written, but you hadn't realized how awful it actually was! If only you had set aside the time to revise.

Reworking what you have written is just as important as (if not more important than) putting down your original ideas and concepts. If writing a first draft is like jumping off a building, revising is like suddenly sprouting wings and taking flight.

Sounds great, doesn't it? So, then, how does a writer go about revising a draft? Where should he or she even begin?

Here's a helpful list of 10 revision tips. There are more, of course, but these are the most important tips to help you get started ... or, rather, to help you pick up where you left off—at your first draft.

## 1. Take Pause

As soon as you have completed your first draft, put it away. File it in a drawer, lock it in a safe, hide it in the freezer. Put it anywhere you won't be tempted to look at it for at least 24 hours. Now breathe.

It is important to put some distance between your work and yourself. There is no set time you should stay away to detach yourself from your piece. One day should probably be the *minimum*, though. Just don't forget about your deadline (if you have one).

## 2. Imagine You Are Your Audience

When you are ready to come back to your work and begin the second draft, imagine yourself as the reader who is reading your work for the first time. In fact, if you read your first draft aloud, you will probably find glaring errors that silent reading would not show. What might confuse the reader? What is unclear? If you were the writer, how would you have handled things differently?

Hey, guess what? You *are* the writer! Fantastic! Now that you have seen your work from somebody else's perspective, go back into it and fix it.

You should also be sure to consider your audience. If you are writing a paper for a grade, think about what your teacher is looking for in your paper. If you are writing a story for a magazine, make sure you understand the magazine's style. If you have no intended audience, make up one. Impress the audience in your head. Somebody has to.

## 3. Think BIG Thoughts

What are the large issues in your writing? Can you see the piece as a whole and try to find the holes? Sure you can—but how?

Think about what you originally intended to write about when you started your project. What's your thesis or main argument? Does your paper support it with examples? Where does it stray? How can you fix those areas?

If your piece is fiction, why are you writing the story? What is the plot? Are you faithful to the plot, or does your story wander off in directions that don't move the plot forward? What about your characters? Who are they? Are they believable? Do you sense anything wrong with them? How can you make them better? More solid?

“I'm not a very good writer, but I'm an excellent rewriter.”

—James A. Michener, Pulitzer Prize-winning author

### 4. Cut Out Adverbs

In case you've forgotten what an adverb is, it is a word that describes a verb, an adjective, or another adverb, and it usually ends in *-ly*. Often, these bad boys are useless or redundant. Observe: *Suddenly, Pablo burst into the room.* Of course it was sudden; he burst in, after all! Don't repeat yourself; just cut out the adverb and say *Pablo burst into the room.*

The problem with adverbs is that they are almost always very unnecessary. See? Like right there. *Very*, although it does not end in *-ly*, is an adverb. And you don't really need it, do you? *Very* is OK to use sometimes, but there is probably a better way of describing something.

*Mayu walked very angrily.* Rework that sentence to read *Mayu stomped away.* Voilà. Adverb, be gone!

### 5. Go Easy on the Speech Tags

*"What's a speech tag?" he queried.*

A speech tag is the "he said, she said" part of your dialogue. The temptation to use wild speech tags may occur when you find yourself writing "he said, she said" all over the place. You may want to mix it up by throwing in a "he queried" or a "she pontificated." Come on, don't be silly. "He queried" is extravagant.

This is better: *"What's a speech tag?" he asked.*

Sometimes, you may not even need a speech tag! You can ignore the "he said, she said" baloney when you make the speaker obvious in other ways.

*"Hey there, Laura. What's new?" Bob hadn't seen her in more than a month, and he missed the way her hair smelled.*

*"Not much." She threw her head back, letting loose the fresh apple scent of her shampoo.*

*"That's cool." Bob closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had missed the apples.*

If we keep this up for too long, though, the reader will lose track of what he and she are actually saying and focus on the ridiculousness of following every piece of dialogue with another action or thought.

*"Try to find a happy medium," he said.*

### 6. Watch Out for Weak Verbs

Weak verbs are usually some form of *to be* or a vague, actionless verb. When you use them at the beginning of a sentence, your whole thought is off to a rough start.

Consider this example:

*The monkeys were a distraction to the zoo visitors.*

You can improve that sentence by dropping the weak verb *were* and substituting a stronger verb up front:

*The monkeys distracted the zoo visitors.*

See how much more lively the sentence is when you drop a weak verb?

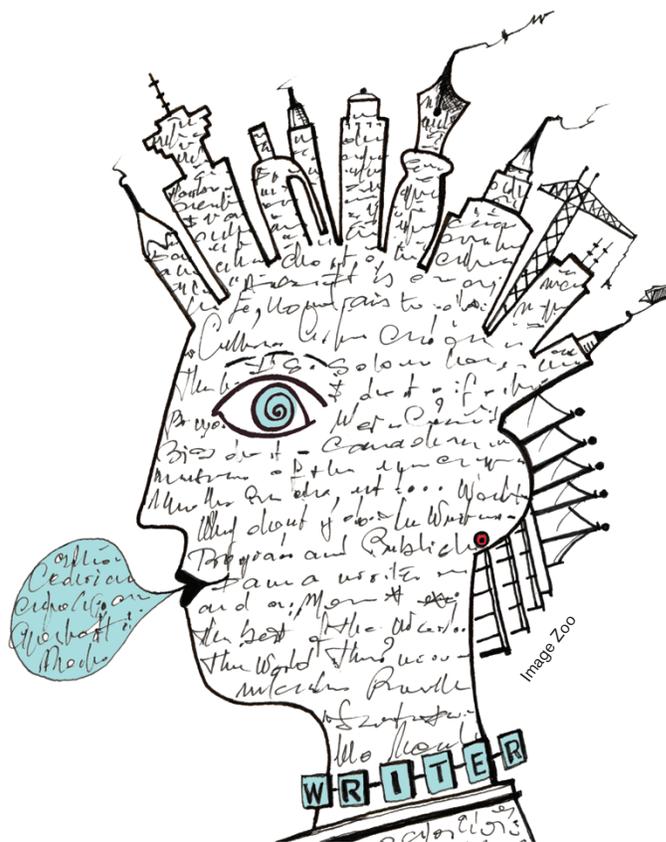
Watch out for weak openers like this one: *There are many bears in the woods of North America.* Remove the weak verb and substitute a punchier one: *Many bears roam the woods of North America.*

You can easily identify a weak verb by asking yourself, "Does this sentence show or tell?" If you are *telling*, you probably have a weak verb on your hands. If you are *showing*, however, you're good.

*The golf course was rained on.*

No, no, no. Avoid the passive voice (a form of *to be* plus a past participle). Try: *Rain is pouring down on the golf course.*

Hey, hand me that 9 iron.



"I believe more in the scissors than I do in the pencil." –Truman Capote, novelist

### 7. Simplify, Simplify

If you're working on a research paper of a required length, you're not going to like this tip. But listen anyway, because it's a mighty, mighty good one. Cut out unnecessary words ~~that do nothing extra for your sentence~~, just as you did with your adverbs. (See Grammar Slammer, page 13.)

### 8. Use a Thesaurus

Everyone's vocabulary is limited. If you find yourself getting frustrated because you seem to be using the same words over and over again, expand your vocabulary by consulting a thesaurus for a better or a richer word. Sometimes, it's not even about finding a "better" word; sometimes, it's just about mixing it up a little.

Be careful not to go thesaurus crazy! That can happen when you substitute every other word for some new, flashy word and, before you know it, you have a totally unrecognizable piece of writing. Sometimes your first instinct is the right one, and you should stick with it.

Here's an example:

*The small accident didn't cause any damage.*

*The small cataclysm didn't cause any damage.*

How can a *cataclysm*, a "very bad accident," not cause any damage? You would be better off sticking with *small*.

### 9. Don't Get So Tense!

One of the most common mistakes we see in student writing submissions is the confusion of tense. Is your piece taking place in the present, or is it taking place in the past? Read the following example, and see whether you can find the tense errors.

*This morning when I woke up, I immediately remembered the previous night's events. I am sitting there watching a movie about goblins and ghouls when all of a sudden, Mike screams out, "This is dumb!" and scared me half to death!*

Here's a helpful tidbit: Writing in the past tense is easier than writing in the present.

### 10. Proofread

No one is born with the skill of proofreading. It has to be learned. Proofreading is the meticulous search for misspelled words, poor grammar, and missing or misplaced punctuation. Countless books have been written on the subject.

When proofreading, remember that your computer's spell-checker is not foolproof. For example: *Beethoven was deaf. He could not here a thing.* Do you see the mistake? If not, maybe you can *hear* it. Spell-checkers sometimes miss errors such as the use of *here* for *hear*, so look carefully for blunders as you proofread. 



Image Zoo

“Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.” —Unknown