

Tips for the Revising of a College English Essay

By Paul Hawkins

How to Approach Revision of an Essay

1. The main thing that I have stressed is that to receive a change in grade from me, you have to make a **substantial** change (my comments on the first draft may directly point you in one or more of these directions):
 - Amplify (increase) the discussion in different paragraphs
 - Add an additional quotation, or if you already have 3, it could be a 4th or 5th example as direct reference
 - Reorganize the discussion (changing the order of the paragraphs, and adding transitional sentences to the beginnings or ends of paragraphs to make links between ideas clear; in some cases, you may even need to move information that you currently have in one paragraph to another)
 - Add a new paragraph, that reflects further thought and extends your argument by developing another topic sentence (since most of you gave me 3 body paragraphs, and my assignment always says “3-4 body paragraphs,” this is an easy way to make a substantial change that also shows that your argument is **alive** and can be extended)
2. Key word there: **alive**. Good essays are essays in which someone is **really trying to communicate something** to someone else. Perhaps you need to reconsider who your **audience** is and what your **purpose is**. When you write an essay for a class, of course that’s **me, the teacher** (and your purpose is to get a good grade). Traditionally, students in English, though, are asked to write as if for an anonymous reader, and the advice I was given when I was a student was, “write for a **reader who has read the work**, but perhaps not as recently or as deeply as you have, and who **may have a different view** of it, so you want to **persuade** that reader that your view is the best one—or at least, that your view is a good one.” Your essay will have more **punch** even if it has this basic sense of purpose—to **persuade a reader** to change their view and see the work as you do. It could also be helpful if you think of your audience as
 - an intelligent younger sibling
 - a close friend
 - yourself: on some level, I think writers of literature often write for themselves, and literature should speak to us about important human issues—e.g., love, life, and death. We can write essays on powerful texts to clarify what these issues are for us.

A. Introductions, Conclusions, and Overall Organization

- Give your revised version a **good descriptive title**
- It’s good to start with a **catchy opening**, something that grabs the reader’s attention. Other opening strategies include the following: “use a quotation; relate an incident; create an image; ask a question; state an opinion”¹
- As for **conclusions**, here are some strategies: “summarize the paper; echo the introduction; create an image; use a quotation”²; one first draft I read recently ended

¹ H. Ramsey Fowler et al, *The Little Brown Handbook* (1st Canadian edition). Toronto: Gage, 1991, p. 121.

² Ibid, p. 124.

with a question, which can be nice as long as it's a question that reflects back on the paper and invites the reader to ponder further.

- One student objected to an idea I had for a further paragraph saying, "but that would contradict my thesis." "Yes," I said, "but it would be **an interesting contradiction.**" An essay for English is judged on how **alive** it is (alongside the objective criteria like topic sentences and quotations); don't contradict yourself randomly, but there is such a thing as an interesting contradiction.
- One way that some students immediately show that they are in command of the whole text is by trying to draw their quotations from different sections in body paragraph #1. It's not that you must do this—it's a strategy to think about. It's a **CHOICE**. College-level writing should be about making **choices**, and not simply following a formula.

B. A few pointers based on things I noted on the first drafts:

1. Don't just **plunk** a quotation in. A quotation should be **introduced**, and then **discussed**. Also, try to end each paragraph with a **wrap-up** sentence that recalls your topic sentence and concludes the paragraph.
2. Generally, **after a quotation, end the sentence**. Start a new sentence for the discussion of the quotation. To try to combine quotation and discussion in the same sentence can lead to overlong, awkward sentences (though it can work when a quotation is really short).
3. Everyone edits (either by choosing carefully or using ". . .") their quotations, which is great. But make sure that whatever you quote is **complete in meaning** even when edited. Use [] to add clarifying words so that the quotation reads smoothly.
4. We often forget **transitional words** (because we know how our ideas connect), but they can be helpful for the reader (who is not inside our own head), and they **improve flow**: "first [second, third, etc.]," "however," "further," "nevertheless," "moreover," "indeed," "consequently," "in short," "in conclusion," "finally" (and so on). Also, some of you end your paragraph with a **transition to the next topic**; the opening of the next paragraph can also be the **transition**: both are **choices** that can work at different times.
5. **Comma splice (cs), fused sentence (fs), or fragment (Frag)**: in Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, they don't use these terms but **comma splice** is **rule #5** ("Do not join independent clauses by a comma") and **fragment** is rule #6 ("Do not break sentences in two").
6. **To quote** (verb) vs. **quotation** (noun): "We see Ivan Ilych's reaction to death in the following **quotation**: . . ." To use "quote" as a noun is informal (certainly common in conversation); you will impress people more if you use "quotation" as the noun (a tip from a prof of mine at university that I pass on to you).
7. Using the **present tense** is conventional when referring to the contents of works of literature, but be consistent: if you're using past tense within one paragraph (e.g., "what my impression **was** at the beginning of the story"), don't switch to present until there's a reason to change (could be at the beginning of the next paragraph).

C. Quotations: a few examples in MLA style

1. When quoting **prose**:

In *Henry 4 Part 1*, when Falstaff returns to the tavern after the robbery, his lies—boasting his own courage in battling a gang of thieves whose numbers grow as his story continues—are outrageous: “if I fought not with fifty of them, I am a bunch of radish” (2.4. 194-5).

In *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Tolstoy draws attention to the sameness of everyone in death: “The dead man lay, as all dead men lie, in a specially heavy way” (760).

2. When quoting **verse**:

In *Henry 4 Part 1*, Hotspur’s dedication to honour leads him to declare, “methinks it were an easy leap / To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon” (1.3. 206-7).

In *Agamemnon*, we and all the characters must “suffer into truth” (179).

- Use “/” to show line breaks when quoting verse (not necessary when quoting prose).
- Also, please note that in the first two examples above, a colon is used (. . .outrageous; . . .; . . .in death; . . .) because the quotation is introduced by a complete sentence; in the third example, a comma is used (leads him to declare, . . .) because the quotation is the grammatical completion of the sentence; in the fourth example, there is no punctuation (must “suffer. . .”) because there is no interruption.
- Also, please note that the final punctuation goes after the parenthetical reference.
- The number inside the parenthetical reference denotes act, scene, and line number for *Henry 4 Part 1*; a page number for *The Death of Ivan Ilych*; a line number for *Agamemnon*.