

DR. OBENAUFS REVISION TRIAGE CHECKLIST

Version 4D © 2025 by Richard Obenauf

When you finish drafting a college essay, your work is just beginning. Writing and revising an essay is not the time to save paper, so work with a hard copy of your draft and a pen in your hand. Even if you wrote your paper following the advice in my Guide To Writing and Reasoning Like a Scholar, your essay will benefit from another round of proofreading and revision. Working in this order, you can raise your grade in as little as ten minutes or as much as several days. I have designed this handout to show you how to “triage” the problems in your paper so you can prioritize your attentions for the biggest payoff before the deadline, addressing the most pressing issues first.

If you see an obvious typo or factual error at any point as you are writing or revising, you should mark it and correct it immediately. Search your document [CTRL+F] to find other instances of misspelled words, inconsistent capitalization, misplaced punctuation, etc. as it is likely you made the same mistake more than once.

TRIAGE LEVEL 1: RESUSCITATION (FORMATTING AND APPEARANCE)

Your professor would rather comment on your ideas than mark your formatting, so you should make sure you have followed the specified style guide (in our case, MLA). This stage of Revision Triage can raise your grade significantly and it takes very little time.

- Confirm that the font is 12pt Times New Roman, including your Works Cited section and your running header (with your last name and page number).
- Make sure the margins all measure 1”. (You will have to set the bottom to 0.99” in MS-Word to make sure your pages do not print with 1¼” bottom margins.)
- Confirm that your entire document is exactly double spaced, header, block quotes, Works Cited page, and all. (Your line spacing should be set to 2.0 or double and your paragraph spacing set to 0 pt. before and 0 pt. after.)
- Make sure you have enabled your widow/orphan control so that you never have a single line of a paragraph by itself at the bottom or top of a page (it’s OK if this leads to 23 lines on some pages instead of the expected 24).
- Confirm that your heading is accurate and spelled correctly. It is bad form to misspell your name or your professor’s name. Make sure you have given the correct course and section numbers. The date should indicate the day the paper is due, not the day you started working on it.
- Make sure your last name and the actual page number is at the top of every page, including your Works Cited page.
- Confirm that your essay has a descriptive title that forecasts the contents of your document, such as by mentioning the text or texts you will be discussing.

- Check that the last sentence of your introduction resembles a plausible thesis statement for the assignment.
- Make sure that all of your paragraphs are left-justified, especially the last one before a centered header. The text of your essay should be ragged on the right.
- Confirm that all of the quotations in your essay are properly cited. Read through your document carefully to make sure you have all the necessary quotation marks and parentheses. Look for missing and extra spaces in your citations (do not omit the necessary space between the close-quote and the parenthetical citation). If you are citing poetry, give line numbers rather than page numbers, if available. In MLA-style parenthetical citations, you should generally omit commas and convert Roman numerals to Arabic. Omit commas from parenthetical citations. Consult your MLA Handbook if you are ever in doubt. Your professors are likely to notice your errors even if they do not mark them.
- Read through looking only at capitalization and punctuation, consulting p. 25 of the Guide to Writing and other assigned course materials for reference.
- Skim through to make sure names ending in “s” are treated like other nouns: Dr. Faustus’s soul, Frederick Douglass’s escape, etc. [NOT Faustus’]
- Make sure you have indicated line breaks in poetry with slashes, with spaces before and / after / the slash (if it’s in your own prose) or by reproducing the line breaks (if it’s in a block quote). You may need to consult the source text at this point for accuracy. Do not guess where the line breaks fall.
- Confirm that you have italicized or underlined the titles of longer works like plays, novels, and collections of poems and short stories, and you have put in quotation marks the titles of shorter works like poems and short stories (e.g., “The Foster Portfolio” is in Welcome to the Monkey House). MLA style favors italics over underlining in Times New Roman; whatever you use the first time you must use throughout your document. Do not mix italics and underlining.
- Make sure you have not inadvertently given a translator’s or editor’s name instead of the actual author of the work, whether in the text or in a citation.
- Confirm that every source you cite appears on your Works Cited page, and that your Works Cited page contains no works you have not cited in your project.
- Double-check that your Works Cited page is properly formatted. For example, confirm that the margins are the same as the rest of your paper. (To make a hanging indent in MS-Word: CTRL+T.) Also make sure that the works appear in alphabetical order by author’s last name—anonymous works are filed under their title (and never “anonymous” or “unknown”). Authors without a last name, like Marie de France, are alphabetized by their first name.
- Triple-check that all the entries in your Works Cited list are accurate. Cite the edition you are actually quoting from—not the first edition—or any other edition. Your reader needs to know which version you are referring to. It is safest to use your MLA Handbook and solve the puzzle yourself rather than relying on a website to generate a bibliography that will likely be erroneous.

TRIAGE LEVEL 2: URGENT CARE NEEDED
(READ YOUR PAPER OUT LOUD TO MAKE SURE IT IS COHERENT)

Proofreading your paper for coherence (rather than for nuance) is an urgent task in all writing. Even if you must submit an essay that is poorly organized, your professor should not have to attempt to paraphrase, rewrite, or translate your prose into standard written English in order to make sense of your claims. Whether or not you have time to proceed to Levels 3 and 4 of Revision Triage, you should first take a few minutes to read your paper out loud and mark anything that you stumbled over or had to read twice. Quickly repair the confusion by inserting missing words, deleting extra words, rewriting the sentence from scratch, or deleting the sentence altogether.

Although you should not devote significant time to revising or expanding material that is likely to change through deeper revision, at this stage of Revision Triage you should keep your eyes open for typos and misplaced punctuation—and your ears open for jarring shifts in tense, statements that conflict with one another, assertions that are too broad to be useful, and anything else that you know is BS. Unless time allows you to rework your arguments more thoughtfully, you should remedy the problems you encounter efficiently, cutting ruthlessly and toning down the force of your assertions. At this stage of editing you are triaging, not deeply revising or expanding your material.

Listen to make sure quotes and block quotes flow seamlessly into your own prose. If a quote is preceded by a colon, when you read it out loud you say “Quote” or “And I quote,” then read the quote, and then say “end quote” or “end of quote.” If a quote does not make sense as you have trimmed it, you should resolve the issue immediately by quoting the source text more fully or by adding additional framing and context.

It is more embarrassing to turn in an incoherent paper than it is to read your work out loud. Some people find it helpful to read to a pet or a stuffed animal in order to feel less self-conscious about reading out loud. (Before I am ready to read a paper to my wife, I often read to whichever cat will sit still.) But you really must read out loud—as if to a roomful of people—even though you will almost certainly do this in private.

TRIAGE LEVEL 3: PRIORITY CARE NEEDED
(EXAMINE THE OVERALL SHAPE OF YOUR PAPER AND ITS GUIDEPOSTS)

At this stage of Revision Triage, you have polished your paper as much as is possible without considering the overall shape of your project or your approach to guiding your reader through your argument. If you still have time before the deadline, instead of massaging your prose I urge you to invest the time to X-ray your paper by making a “reverse outline.” **A reverse outline is where you write the main idea of each paragraph in the margin.** This will help you identify material that is off topic and sections that you can combine or move to a more logical place within your paper. A reverse outline will help you write more effective topic sentences and guide you to a more logical way to wrap up each paragraph. At this third stage of Revision Triage, you should make sure your essay conforms to each of these expectations of good writing:

- Your introduction should provide the key details your reader will need to know in order to make sense of your thesis and the essay that follows. Avoid broad openings. Instead, announce your topic, texts, authors, dates of composition or publication, brief summaries of the works you will be discussing as they relate to your topic, etc. These details will vary from assignment to assignment and from course to course, but your introduction should always build to the thesis.
- Your essay must have a clear thesis statement. A strong thesis is more than an announcement of your topic: it must sum up the main finding of your paper.
- The body of your essay should match the thesis you've provided. If your paper and thesis don't match, you will need to rethink your thesis. (You may well also need to tweak parts of your paper, especially through guideposts like topic sentences, but you should not twist your interpretation so that it matches your thesis. Adjust the thesis to match the evidence and analysis in your essay.)
- If you are discussing more than one work, you should be sure you have treated the material in chronological order. If you have to rearrange the structure of your essay, make sure that the introduction, conclusion, and other instances that mention both texts reflect the new order so as to keep everything parallel.
- Your conclusion needs to stake out some new points that the reader can take away. Do not merely recap your paper. The conclusion is perhaps the most important part of your essay. After devoting several pages to laying out your evidence, you must explain the greater implications of your findings.
- Each paragraph should have a clear topic sentence. Use your reverse outline to make sure that the first sentence of each paragraph previews the main idea of the paragraph. It should not be a plot point or merely summarize the text. Use your topic sentences to build your argument. Echoing your thesis in some small way can help reassure your reader that you are still on topic.
- Each paragraph needs to make the point that its topic sentence announces. In many cases you may need to revise your topic sentences until each one truly serves as a sort of thesis statement for the paragraph it introduces. If you are unable to write a topic sentence that succinctly sums up the ideas you address in a particular paragraph, that is often a clue that your paragraph is not sufficiently unified; at this stage of Revision Triage you may need to start deleting and shuffling material to more a appropriate place in your paper.
- You must cite evidence in support of every assertion you make. In some cases you can simply cut unfounded claims; if time permits, you should cite additional material to help you develop a more persuasive, and more nuanced, argument.
- Your essay needs analysis (not summary) in approximately equal proportion to the quotations you present as evidence. Your analysis should go beyond restating the point of the quotation: at every turn you should strive to explain the significance of the quotation to your thesis. Explain what each piece of evidence suggests, signals, points to, implies, etc. about your stated topic.
- Break down long block quotes (more than about five or six lines) into more manageable chunks you can discuss more carefully.

- Your paper should not have any unsubstantiated claims, material based on speculation, or anything colored by outside knowledge or unattributed sources.
- Of the material that survives, make sure that every sentence belongs in its present position. Either rehome it within your paper or simply delete it. Strike everything that is not on topic. Ruthlessly delete the fluff, filler, and BS.
- Consider whether each paragraph is in its optimal position within the essay. You may have to write new bridges and transitions as you move things around.
- Aim for smooth transitions from one paragraph and section to the next, using your topic sentences to guide your reader through a clear progression of ideas.
- Double-check that you have not inadvertently begun or ended any paragraphs with a quotation. You must insert new material so that it is clear how and why you are providing that textual evidence and how it relates to your main ideas.
- By this stage, all quotations should be incorporated into your own prose. Readers need context for everything you quote, such as who is speaking or what is happening in a scene, followed by a colon, comma, or no punctuation as the case demands. Consult a style guide if you are unclear about how to use commas and colons in relation to quotes (especially pp. 253 and following in your MLA Handbook).
- By this point in Revision Triage, you may wish to expand your analysis as you consider how other readers will interact with your paper. If you think of new points to add to your interpretations, you should add them now.
- As the last step in Level 3, if time allows you should reread the source materials you discuss in your paper, flagging additional quotations you can insert into existing paragraphs, along with new analysis, to help bolster your claims and refine your argument. Then repeat Triage Level 3 before proceeding to Level 4.

TRIAGE LEVEL 4: ROUTINE CARE NEEDED (NUANCE, PROOFREADING, AND COHERENCE)

Now that you've finalized your formatting, weeded out the most incoherent phrasing, and worked out the best order for your most rigorous analysis, you are ready to polish your paper to make it crackle. At this stage you will need to read your work out loud again, this time with more of an ear for developing a mature tone that matches the seriousness of your ideas. This time you may wish to work with a partner to polish your prose and ideas more carefully than you did in Level 2 of Revision Triage. Your task is to catch new typos and other errors that you introduced during revision, and to recast your ideas in a more elevated style without being pretentious.

- Most obviously, you should make sure you don't have any spelling errors. Reading your work out loud will help. A friend can mark words whose spelling and/or meaning and usage you need to double-check.
- Rephrase all clichés and colloquialisms into direct English.

- Hearing your work out loud will help you catch many grammatical errors, especially those of subject/verb agreement and singular/plural agreement.
- Reading your work out loud, or having a friend read it to you, is the best way to catch anything left in your document that simply does not make sense.
- Make sure you have provided your reader enough context for everything to make sense. We should not be wondering who a character is or what happens in a certain scene. You must efficiently explain every necessary detail—without bogging down your reader with irrelevant information.
- At this point you should make sure you have not made any jumps in your logic. Sometimes you will need to insert additional context, evidence, analysis, or other commentary. Transition words (e.g., “moreover,” “furthermore,” “additionally,” “hence,” “thus,” “in this way”) or new sentences can also help show a progression of ideas.
- Do you have any comma splices? Repeat offenders should visit CAPS for help identifying and resolving comma splices. Your word processor’s grammar check can help you identify comma splices and other run-on sentences.
- Do you have any “semicolon splices” where you actually only needed a comma?
- Make sure every sentence is grammatically complete. College essays should not have sentence fragments.
- Has the passive voice been used [by you]? Writers who chronically revert to the passive voice should visit CAPS for help identifying passive phrasing and reworking it into the active voice. Again, your word processor’s grammar check can help you identify the passive voice, but you should not automatically accept its proposed solutions because not only does the computer sometimes change the meaning in reworking the sentence, but in many cases the passive voice is actually appropriate. Use your good judgment.
- Listen to make sure you have been consistent in your use of tenses. The convention is to write about literature in the present tense, though you may find times that the past tense is more effective for your argument, especially in your conclusion. See my writing guide and your [MLA Handbook](#) for further advice.
- OMIT NEEDLESS WORDS! Condense as much as possible without losing meaning. Avoid at all costs the phrase “the fact that...”!!
- If you have used any words whose meaning you’re not absolutely certain of, you should look them up in a dictionary. Variety of words is good, but clarity and accuracy are much more important.
- Revise out any needless absolutes (e.g., “the only,” “always,” “all,” “none,” “never”) by omitting them or toning them down.
- Strike most modifiers that weaken your point (e.g., “very”).
- Do you have any rhetorical questions that you could rephrase into assertions?

ABOVE ALL—DOES YOUR ESSAY ANSWER THE ASSIGNMENT?