REVISE

ZOOM OUT – ZOOM IN

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Tips &
Optional

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Activity

This is Chapter 8

Rewriting is the essence of writing well—where the game is won or lost. –William Zinsser

The word "revise" means to "see again," and this is exactly what you need to do when preparing your writing for public consumption.

While writing, you are zoomed in. You've planned your purpose, analyzed your audience, created a structure, decided on a strategy, and drafted your message. To revise, you just zoom out, then in again.

SEE IT AGAIN

When you finish a substantial first draft, get away from it. Go outside and run around the block. Get your mind completely off the topic for a while. Cognitively, your brain will assemble and organize the information it's been processing for so many hours. Set an alarm or timer for when you'll start work again.

The amount of time you spend revising your work depends on both its length and importance. An annual report is a major project, but even a short, critical email might take days to get right. When you come back from your break, you'll be examining your writing in a new and powerful way: by mentally zooming out and then back in, just as your reader will approach it.

Make revising your emails standard operating procedure. Don't fill in the TO: field until after you've written *and* revised.

ZOOM YOUR DOC

Although you'd like to think that your audience will start with your first word and read carefully through each word in order, you know that's not how it works.

As a reader you first notice the design and layout of a piece, glance at the title, scan the headings and visuals, and skim some lines. Only then do you decide whether you'll commit your time to reading it through. So try revising by using that same sequence. Imagine yourself zooming out, then zooming in.

1 Ft

2 Ft

5 Ft

10 Ft
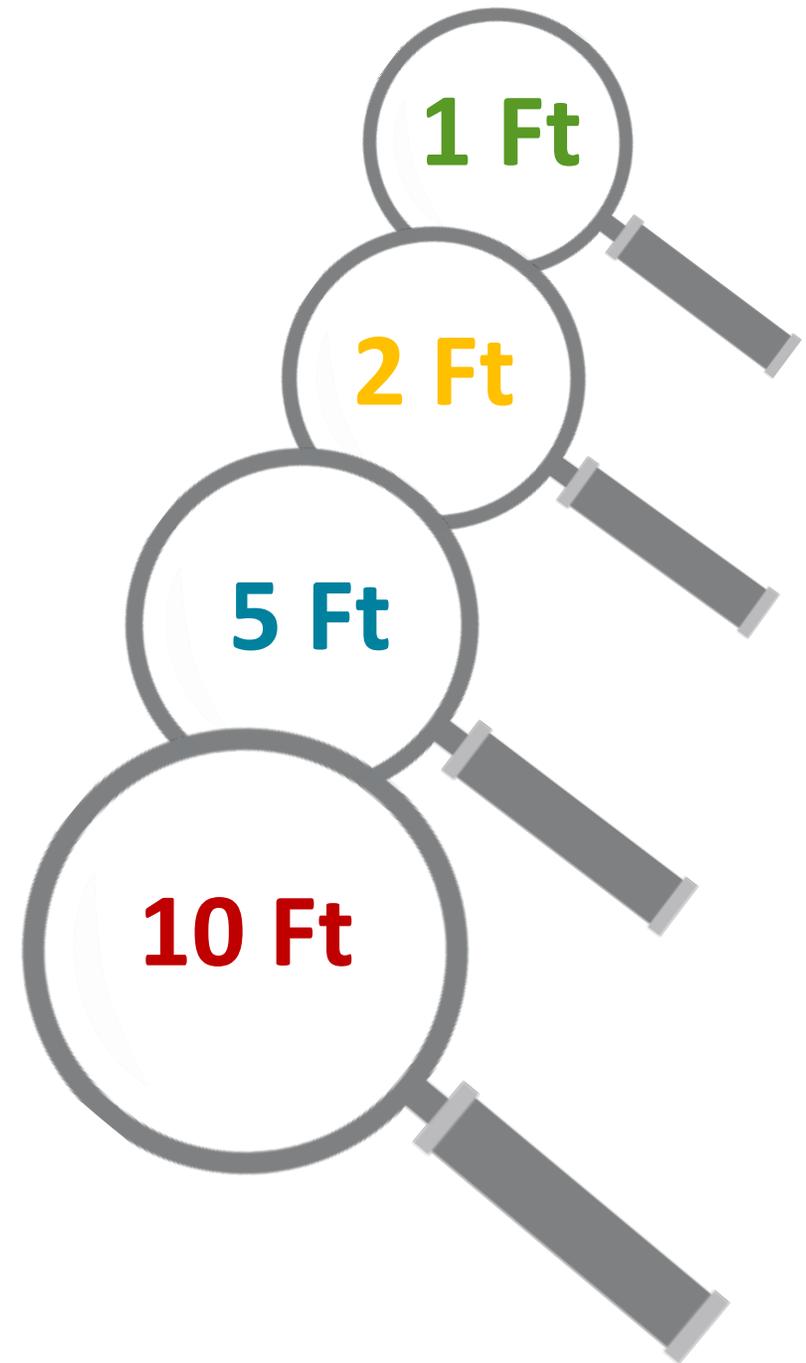
ZOOM OUT TO 10 FEET
LAYOUT | DESIGN

Imagine yourself about 10 feet away from a printout of your work. What do you see? Layout, spacing, headings—not much else. From this distance, you can't actually read the document. Instead, you get a sense for its overall design: headings, alignment, white space, graphics, contrast, etc. This is important because readers' first (and perhaps most powerful) impression of your message will be more about its design than its content. More than ever before, **good design = credibility.** This Purdue Owl video demonstrates the basics of Visual Rhetoric.

At the **10-foot** level, ask yourself these questions about LAYOUT AND DESIGN :

- ▸ Does my document look good from a distance?

- ▸ Does it have a clear entry point?

- ▸ Should I use color to add interest or draw attention to key points?

- ▸ Did I choose attractive and clear fonts?

- ▸ Did I leave enough space to make my message look inviting? (Blank lines between paragraphs, 1.15 line spacing, comfortable margins?)

- ▸ Is there any data that I should illustrate with a graphic?

- ▸ If this will be viewed online, is it readable on a mobile device?

ZOOM TO 5 FEET
AGENDA | ORGANIZATION | HEADINGS

Your reader will be looking for quick signs that you are organized and trustworthy. Use the first two of the 4A's to prove it:

ATTENTION Do I capture the readers' attention immediately? Do I provide the context of the message and tell my readers why they should care?

In a report, the title and opening sentence are your most important attention-grabbing tools. In a letter, your opening sentence serves the same function. In an email, focus on the subject line: keep it short, descriptive, and interesting enough to stand out from the dozens (or hundreds) of other emails the reader receives daily.

AGENDA Can my reader easily locate a clear agenda that previews the content of the message?

Your agenda is usually the last line of your opening paragraph. It will set up the organization of your message and prime your readers' minds to receive it. All but the shortest messages deserve agendas.

ZOOM TO 2 FEET
CONTENT | SUPPORTING DETAIL | PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE

The third step is to examine the substance of your message. Make sure you support your attention grabber and your agenda. As you zoom in to the two-foot level, check the remaining two of the 4A's.

ARGUMENT Do I have a strong argument with all the information necessary to fulfill the promise of my agenda? Remember, an argument in this sense is not a conflict. It's the combination of your main point and how you back it up. Ask yourself:

▸ Can I streamline the reading experience for my reader by deleting anything? Or can I link to information instead of including it?

▸ Have I remembered the readers' point of view and made clear why they should care?

▸ Have I given the details and support my readers will want or need? And have I checked my facts and claims to make sure they're absolutely accurate and cited?

ACTION Does my conclusion include a call to action for my readers, reminding them why the whole thing matters? Have I included information that will make next steps easy for my reader?
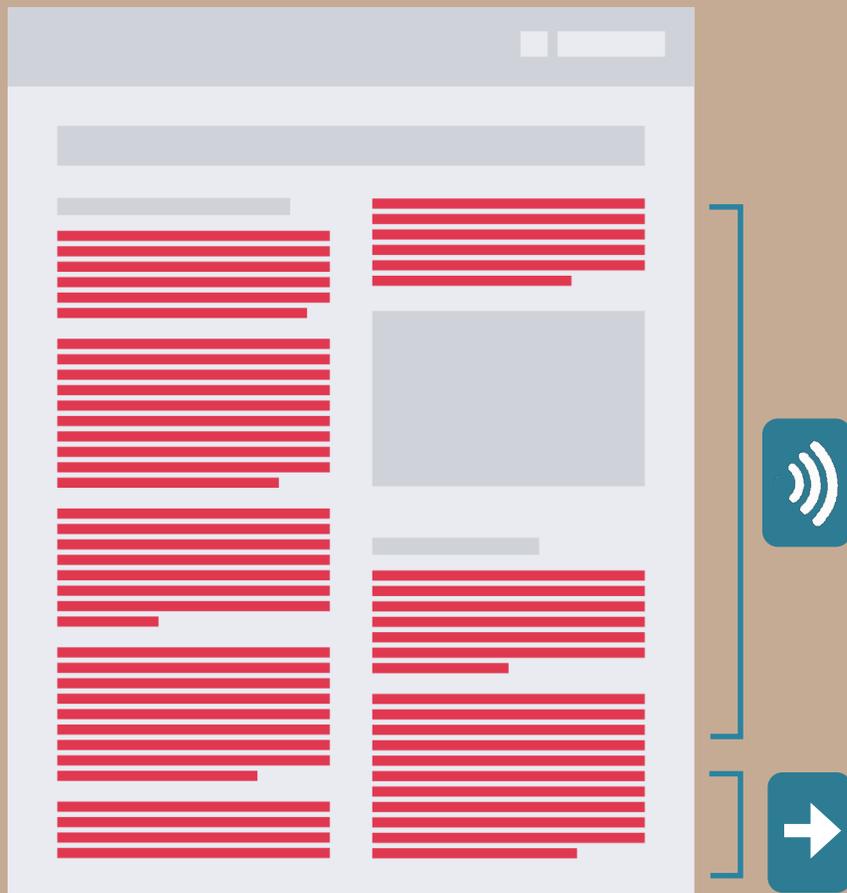
TOPIC SENTENCES

Next, make sure each paragraph passes muster. For each paragraph, read the topic sentence. Is it clear? Does it contain the main point of the paragraph? Does everything else in the paragraph relate to the topic sentence? Remember that **busy readers** often **skim documents** by **reading only the topic sentences**. If someone did this to your document, would they catch the main points of your argument? If not, it's time to rewrite.

4A

! **ATTENTION**

✓ **AGENDA**

))) **ARGUMENT**

→ **ACTION**

"The need to communicate succinctly and directly is essential to any professional work environment, whether it's with a small startup or a Fortune 500 company.

People move fast and don't have time to parse through what you are trying to say. Avoid using 'throat clearing' phrases— phrases or words that add more to your word count but contribute nothing to the message. It all goes back to being clear and succinct."

Robby Boyle
Sr. HR Generalist at LinkedIn, Organizational Behavior/HR, Brigham Young University
MBA Class of 2016

ZOOM TO 1 FOOT
GRAMMAR | PUNCTUATION | STYLE

Your final step is to edit for grammar, punctuation, and style, so zoom in really close.

Comb through your work at the sentence level to catch any errors of **grammar, spelling, or punctuation** that will interfere with the message. Alert: You may have already read your work so many times that you mentally skip words, so try reading it aloud to force yourself to slow down and hear the words. To catch spelling errors, read backwards so you see each word instead of its meaning.

Style refers to tone, word choice, sentence variety, and a host of other elements. Everything you write has a style; you can't escape it. As an analogy, think about what you decide to wear each day. Your wardrobe choices communicate something about you; they reflect your personal style or fashion sense (deliberate or not).

So it is with your writing. The way you use words, the rhythm of your sentences, even whether you use a semicolon or a dash—these subtle choices constitute your style.

STYLE AT THE ONE-FOOT LEVEL

At the one-foot level, the ZOOM process forces you to notice and evaluate your style. Is it appropriate to the context and audience? Too stuffy for a quick check-in with your project teammates? Too chatty for an update to the vice-president? These are the questions to ask yourself at this stage of revision. If something in your writing sounds clunky or off-key, it's a style problem that needs to be fixed.

More generally, style refers to a certain X factor that elevates writing from useful to delightful, informative to compelling. **The best way to develop good style is to read, read, read.** Get the voice of great stylists in your head so you can imitate their cadence, nuance, wit, and flair. The end of each chapter of this book has recommendations for further reading that will help you improve your own style. Great books, great thoughts, great style...what's not to like?

WHEN SHOULD I GET SOMEONE ELSE TO REVIEW MY WORK?

If your project is long, complicated, or mission critical, be sure to have someone else give you feedback on your writing. Be reasonable in your time request, and make the job easy for your editor.

Ask if they'd like a printed copy, or offer to grab them a drink while they look it over. To overcome the natural anxiety about putting your work in front of critical eyes, focus on the project rather than yourself. Mentally put your editor on your team in getting the job done well.
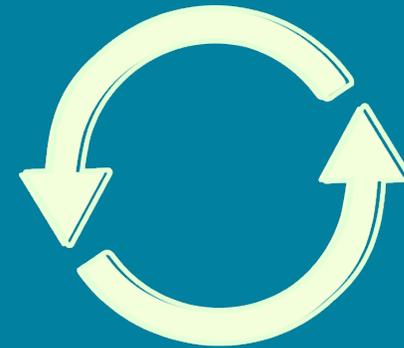
"I know my stuff looks like it was all rattled off in 28 seconds, but every word is a struggle and every sentence is like the pangs of birth."

Theodor Seuss Geisel (Philip Nel, *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 35.)

IN CONCLUSION

Remember that doing a thorough revision allows you a fresh take. You see your work again.

Imagine yourself zooming out to get an overall impression of the **layout** and design. Then zoom in until you can just see **structure**—the title, agenda, headings, and logical flow. Zoom down another level to check the main **content**, paragraph structure, and supporting details. Finally, zoom all the way in and get really picky about **grammar**, punctuation, and style.

Make ZOOMing a habit. Your readers will thank you.

LEARN MORE

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(Bold citations are referenced in the chapter text.)