

Reviewing Repetition



Why do writers worry about repetition? You have probably heard you should avoid repeating words so your writing will be more interesting or so you will sound smarter. However, repetition can be a useful and necessary writing tool. Here are some guidelines for understanding where repetition comes from, what it means when you encounter while reading your draft (or someone else's), and how you can use it effectively in your own work.

How does repetition appear in writing?

- Repetition of a word or phrase
- Repetition of an idea from sentence to sentence
- Repetition of an idea from paragraph to paragraph

In all cases, if you spot any of these as you're reading, it's worth determining why the repetition is occurring before you search for synonyms or cut a sentence out. Repetition can tell you something deeper about your point.

For repetition of a word or phrase, ask yourself, Is this a key word for my argument?

- If so, is its definition so specific that no other word would actually capture the same meaning? The poets would say there is no such thing as a true synonym, so be careful before replacing a key word with something else; you might change your point.
- If your point would change if you varied the word, try introducing a definition of the word early, in your introduction, to help your reader understand how specific the term is for your essay.

For repetition of an idea from sentence to sentence, ask yourself, Do any of these sentences capture my point exactly here, or are they all close to the point without saying exactly what I mean?

- If one sentence captures the point exactly, see if you can make the other sentences go further in developing or explaining the point, rather than restating it; keep in mind, though, that sometimes restating a complicated point in simpler terms is worth doing.
- If they're all close to the point, but kind of circling your idea like a pack of wolves, try synthesizing them: what does each offer, and how can you fit them together in one direct, compact, precise sentence that says exactly what you mean?

For repetition of an idea from paragraph to paragraph, ask yourself, Do these paragraphs deal with this idea differently, or do they actually say the same thing about the idea?

- Sometimes emphasizing how often an idea comes up in the same way can help you make your point.
 - If that's the case, then be sure to acknowledge in your paragraph that part of the point of the paragraph is to show the repetition of the idea in another context (different data supporting the same conclusion, for example, or another approach to the data set still supporting the same conclusion).
- If emphasizing the popularity of the idea is NOT your point, then consider what other purpose the repeated idea might serve.
 - Is that really what you're talking about in that paragraph, or can you use it to transition into that paragraph's real point?
 - If that is really what you're talking about in both paragraphs, could you combine the two paragraphs in some way, since their points are the same?
- Of course, if you find you really do have two paragraphs saying basically the same thing for no good reason, cut one.

Repetition is a valuable tool in writing. Repeated words, phrases, and ideas can emphasize key points, keep the point specific and focused, and help clarify complicated concepts, and certainly if you're writing a speech or presentation, repeating spoken words and phrases is very important.

Repetition without a job in the essay, though, can be distracting. Remember the distraction is a symptom: don't just eliminate it without figuring out whether there's something important for your essay there.