Re: Revising, Re: Rewriting
(Regarding Seeing Anew, Regarding Writing Anew)

A revision is not a mere polishing of prose, a mere removal of minor infractions against the rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The latter functions could more properly be labeled proofreading, and proofreading should be the last thing you do for the original product, not the first and perhaps only thing you do for the revision. Rewriting is a necessary stage in all writing since it gives you a chance to discover what you were trying to say in the first place.

Rewriting requires that you look again at what you had written before. You can’t test your ideas until you know what your words actually say. Thus, before you can revise, you must first become a reader, a re-reader. To help you get started, try doing the following reading exercises with your completed draft:

1) Reread your essay carefully. Put it aside.
2) Write down (in your log, perhaps?) any words, phrases, sentences, or ideas that you recall fondly. If you can’t recall anything fondly, then you know your essay needs major surgery.
3) Still not looking at your essay, write a single sentence that summarizes what you believe the writer of this collection of words was trying to say.
4) Now reread your essay one paragraph at a time. At the end of each paragraph write down what you feel the paragraph contributes to the essay. Repeat this process until you have completed every paragraph. An occasional “I don’t have the slightest idea what this paragraph adds” will tell you which paragraphs need the most attention.

Now you are ready to revise, and so, back to the step-by-step suggestions.

1) Decide if your summaries belong in their present sequence. To test this, explain to yourself why paragraph one comes first, paragraph two second, number three third, and so on. Sequence implies order and suggests the nature of the best verbal transitions from paragraph to paragraph. In other words, your answers to why paragraphs follow one another should explain something to you about how to indicate the transitions. For example, if you propose to contrast the ideas of paragraph three in paragraph four, however might well prove the right first word for paragraph four. [Yes, you can begin a paragraph with “However.”] On the other hand, paragraph four might contain a narrower treatment of the ideas in paragraph three. In that case, furthermore or (more likely) no rhetorical or direction-giving word might start the paragraph. This process also applies to transitions between sentences.

2) Reread your original essay in this new sequence of paragraphs. Are there any holes you want to fill in? (Holes is intended to be vague—it implies any missing element.) If there are such holes, jot down the kinds of assertions or evidence that might correct the problems.

3) If you feel that you did not have enough to say in the first version of your essay, ask questions of it. Your questions will probably follow the topoi of classical rhetoric: The topics of your idea-generating queries will come from
   a) defining terms,
   b) comparing elements,
   c) seeking relationships between items,
d) considering the circumstances from which your ideas, evidence, and analyses derive.

4) Did your draft contain sufficient and appropriate evidence? If it didn’t, what specific and convincing evidence could you add now and where in the new ordering of your discussion would it go? Did your draft depend on the wrong kinds of evidence, such as purposeless summaries? Ideally, you should be able to add purpose as well as remove synopses in this stage.

5) Look at each of your quotations. Is every word needed to advance your position? If not, remove the lard; you aren’t yet cutting into your own precious words, but you might be getting rid of words, which are not germane.

Bring out the anesthetic (or is that the aesthetics?). It’s time to probe your own words; your sentences are on the operating table now.

1) To paraphrase T. S. Eliot, in our beginning is our end. That is to say, start with your first paragraph but expect to return to it (as least) once more, when the other paragraphs have been revised.

2) One sentence at a time, move through your opening paragraph, asking yourself if the sentence is clear, eloquent, and reader-based. Strive for the second term but accept no less than the last. Test each sentence to see that it is not excessively terse or excessively explicit. Correct such excesses as unexplained points, confusing pronoun references, and redundant details.

3) If you are still dissatisfied with your sentences, first blame the verbs. Verbs are the fulcra of meaning. You don’t need to use comic-strip zaps and pows, but try to be lively. Justify every passive construction, i.e., sentences in which the subject doesn’t actually perform the action or actions being described. [The ball was hit.] Some passives will remain, but five or six passives in a row would be difficult to justify. Also, five or six consecutive forms of to be will put your reader to sleep—“is,” “is,” “is,” “is,” “is,” “is,” “is” leads ineluctably to “ZZZZZZ.”

4) Metaphors and similes can enliven prose as well as poetry. The only danger, as Orwell warns, might be in mistaking clichés for lively similes: “dead as a doornail” is what it says.

Good revisers generally find their opening and closing paragraphs the most troublesome. You might end up, as they often do, spending more than half your time on those two sections. Fine. Beginnings and endings are important. Show the same courtesy to your readers that you would (or will) show to your lovers. Both forms of intimacy, to be rewarding, demand that you get outside of yourself. Writing for yourself alone is no better than making love alone. Of course, both acts are perfectly legitimate as long as you’re not trying to communicate with anyone else.

Finish your first paragraph, and then work your way through to the end of the draft. Style is, I think, fundamentally play and personality, especially at the sentence-level. So, in the new versions of your sentences, seek to achieve greater pleasure for yourself and your readers. At the very least, don’t bore your readers.

1) Monotony is boring, so vary your sentences in length and structure (syntax). A hundred and twenty-five ten-word sentences (five pages’ worth) will leave your reader catatonic. Rhythm counts.
Eventually, you will reach the last paragraph, where you need to ask new questions:

1) Does the conclusion serve as a summary of the points you’ve already made? If so, why do you want to bore your readers in this fashion? Don’t you trust them to remember what you’ve said? If you trust your readers and began with a strong, clear, specific thesis, then your discussion should lead to its own terminus. Don’t return your readers to familiar territory in a synoptic final paragraph (which begins with “In summary” or “In conclusion”—unless that paragraph is all you expect them to remember.

2) Do you want your conclusion to take your readers beyond the text or texts you have analyzed? No rule says you must become profound and philosophical on page four of a four-page essay, but if your treatment of your subject moves you to deliver a significant observation, by all means go ahead. But be careful to control your tone. No violins, please. Elevate your diction but don’t become suppositious. (The last sentence of your essay is no place to send your readers off to the dictionary.)

Now that you know how you plan to end your essay, you can go back to its beginning to see if the first few paragraphs are effective, if your ending is in your beginning.

No, you aren’t finished yet. What are you going to call this creation? Your revision awaits a meaningful title, one, which says something about its contents, about your purpose. Remember: the first words your reader encounters are in the title—first impressions matter there, too.

Before you type (or, better, retype) your masterpiece, read the whole damn thing aloud. If you can, read it to another human being. Four ears are much, much better than two eyes at detecting readability. Every “huh?” must be heeded. Type your revision, and then put it aside for a few hours before proofreading. Proofreading, like composing and revising, is easier for most people to do in stages. Try reading your typescript (hard copy) several times, looking for one specific problem each time. For instance, you might go through it once hunting for agreement problems (plurals with plurals, singulars with singulars?), then another time for punctuation lapses. The last time through you might read your essay backwards in order to locate misspelled words divorced from meaningful context. Each of these sweeps will take only a few minutes, and the total time will be, I suspect, less than if you tried to do everything at once.

Congratulations: Now you have something new and renewed.