



TECHNIQUES TO ENCOURAGE REVISION

As faculty, we know that writing well is not easy. The hard work of writing often involves taking a draft through several, sometimes quite dramatic, revisions. From experience, we also know most undergraduates rarely appreciate or practice real revision of their papers. They believe that *good writers* produce excellent writing without difficulty, usually on the first draft. When they cannot do so, they are convinced that they are *bad writers*. Erika Lindemann notes, “For most students, rewriting is a dirty word. It’s a punishment, a penalty for writing poorly. . . [It] confronts them with countless inadequacies. . . and convinces them that words manipulate writers, not the other way around” (189). Ideally, we want our students to see the process of writing and revising as a way of learning more about a given topic and clarifying their thinking.

How do we get students to see revising as reformulating their papers, not merely as punishment or a request to run spell check the night before the paper is due? One very effective way is to share your writing and revising process with students, especially when you show them, with actual documents, the various stages you go through to produce a finished product—from the rough draft, to deep revision, to reorganization for a particular audience, to looking at surface issues. When students see that your writing involves considerable revising, they may imitate your process. As they move from writer-based prose (“*I know what I think about the topic*”) to reader-based prose (“*O.K. Here’s how I can best communicate to my reader*”), they discover more about their topic, audience, and disciplinary conventions.

Rather than assigning more papers in your classes, you might consider assigning more drafts of what you already assign. In an experiment, Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord, Director of Notre Dame’s Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning, responded to drafts in a colleague’s senior-level business class. She looked at global issues (focus, support, organization), not sentence-level issues. Students said that being required to produce a draft before the final draft had been “crucial to the success of their analyses” (35). Such intervention is far more useful than extensive post mortem comments made on papers students will barely look.

- Require a **preliminary draft**. You choose the level of intervention, from commenting on global issues, to giving check marks for having a complete draft, to assigning a few points towards the final grade.
- Include an **evaluation checklist** with your assignment, giving students revision guidance. Some faculty have two checklists: one for the early drafts covering **global issues** and one for a later draft covering **sentence-level issues**. Be sure to explain what you expect. Students can review the checklist to reconsider key elements: in argument papers, for example, students often neglect to include counterarguments. The checklist would emphasize the importance of refuting opposing viewpoints.
- Provide students with a **model** of the paper you have assigned. Models are helpful either before students begin writing or after they have completed a draft. Sharing the model on an overhead works well and saves paper. You can explain it aloud or use annotation to highlight key features.
- Require an **after-the-fact outline** so students can quickly see organizational problems. Such an outline requires students to do the following with their drafts:
 - Number each paragraph.
 - On a *separate* sheet of paper, briefly write the topic of each paragraph in a few words (beside #1, write the topic of the 1st paragraph; beside #2, write the topic of the 2nd paragraph, etc.).
 - If there is more than one topic in a paragraph, write a separate phrase for each.
 - Review the outline to look for logical organization, paragraphs with more than one topic, topics that need further development, topics that are extraneous, etc.
 - Compare the thesis/controlling idea with the outline to make sure the paper stays focused.
 - At this point, begin revising the paper.



- Set up **peer review sessions**. (See Tipsheet, *Creating Effective Peer Review Groups*)
- Spend ten minutes in class the day preliminary drafts are due asking students to **discuss the challenges** of completing the assignment. Answer any questions, and clarify what you expect on the paper.
- Invite **short conferences** to discuss global issues: strategy, content, use of evidence, conclusions, and implications.
- Give **permission to change** the direction of papers as students get further into the assignment.
- Set aside time for an **in-class revising** session. Give the students specific things to work on in their own papers. Underline the controlling idea/thesis with a wavy line. Underline the major supporting points with a double line. Circle all transitional phrases, etc.
- Review the drafts and provide **specific written comments** or questions. As Walvoord writes, “the time for that investment can be stolen from the time normally given to comments on the final paper, which. . . [now] you merely grade” (88).
- Provide a **cover sheet or checklist** for the final draft. Make students responsible for reporting changes they have made. Or you can ask students to include a cover note (sometimes called a metanote) with their final draft explaining what they wanted the reader to know and what they did to revise.

WAYS STUDENTS CAN HELP THEMSELVES REVISE

- **Revise at the global level first.** Reformulating the focus, support, or organization should come before revising individual sentences. Why bother fixing sentences that rightfully should be deleted?
- **Read the paper aloud.** When students read their papers aloud, either to themselves or to someone else, they use hearing and seeing to check for problem areas. It may be even more effective when the student asks someone else to read the paper aloud; then, the student can hear where the reader stumbles—either because of poor sentence structure or because of confusing content.
- **Color-code sentences.** When a student’s writing is disorganized, this visual system helps. The student uses an orange highlighter on all sentences about topic A, a blue highlighter on the sentences about topic B, etc. Then the student puts the orange info in one paragraph and the blue in another and so on.
- **Reread the assignment.** Many students don’t realize they have gone off track in the first draft. By re-checking the assignment, they can see what’s missing or if they have compared instead of analyzed.
- **Work with the writing center.**
- **Try out helpful heuristics** (problem-solving procedures). Encourage students to use heuristics such as the 5 W’s (Who, What, Where, When, Why, and sometimes How) to interrogate their drafts.
- **Use Richard Lanham’s Paramedic Method.** This is a quick, sentence-level editing process to recognize flabby or flat sentences. Using this method, students circle all the prepositions and the linking verbs. If a paragraph has many circles, Lanham provides steps for getting out the “lard.” (For more specific information, please see <http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/concise.html>)

USEFUL SOURCES

Lindemann, Erika. *Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. 4th ed. NY: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Walvoord, Barbara Fassler. *Helping Students Write Well*. 2nd ed. NY: The Modern Language Association, 1986.

http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/strategy_for_analyzing_and_rev.htm

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_edit.html

http://writing.umn.edu/tww/WID/social_sciences/grading/resp_grade_grid_for_draft.html (excellent rubric for quick evaluation of drafts)

