Acts of Revision

A GUIDE FOR WRITERS

Edited by

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Introduction

Eat Like an Owl!

Writers consume more than they produce. Their meals include words, images, landscapes, memories, books, thoughts, emotions, and hours, among other things. They are omnivorous in their search for sustenance, for ideas and images. Taking in more than they need, authors boil down, forge, simmer, concoct, fabricate, assemble, *rethink,* and *revise*. Their processes can take hours—even days, weeks, lifetimes! It is no small task to turn raw input (drafts) into polished output (a public product). You're free to indulge when you write, without guilt, because having more pages available to revise assures that you have more options open to you as you shape your draft to meet your aims. "Eat like an owl," Peter Elbow tells writers, "take in everything and trust your innards to digest what's useful and discard what's not."

This collection assumes you're ready to eat like an owl, and it will help you develop trust in your own work by offering you insights into revision processes. You don't have to twist writers' arms very hard to learn that they have philosophies of revision. Abstract these authors' beliefs from the short quotes shared here:

> I read once that some people start off by writing sentence by sentence or word by word and they never go back and revise. They just write headlong into it. Or some people always know the ending before they begin. It works in different ways for different people. When these stories started off they were really rough, but they changed and it wasn't just mindless or effortless. It was work. —Amy Tan

> Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler. —Albert Einstein

> It is no less difficult to write a sentence in a recipe than sentences in *Moby Dick*. So you might as well write *Moby Dick*. —Annie Dillard

> Paul Valery speaks of the "une ligne donné" of a poem. One line is given to the poet by God or by nature, the rest he has to discover for himself. —Stephen Spender

> I researched the OED [Oxford English Dictionary] to find out how the word *hangnail* developed, how it gets used in idioms, and how its meaning changed over time. I searched beauty books for information on what causes hangnails

> and how to take care of them. I researched newspapers to find out if hangnails had shown up in recent news (they had, and both instances ended up in the essay). —Kristina Emick

> I am so composed that nothing is real unless I write it. —Virginia Woolf

Just as you study the habits and practices of other writers (and read their writing with your writing in mind), you'll benefit from considering how you feel about and have learned to revise. For instance, today as you read this book, what sort of reviser are you? (*Hint:* If you don't know what identities are available for you to choose from, consult Chapters 1, 3, and 4 as soon as you can.) Are you a single drafter—a writer who sits down and writes a pretty coherent first draft that needs little improvement before submission—or do you often need to rework initial rough drafts, like Amy Tan? Do you learn what you want to say as you write, what you think about your life, in the manner of Virginia Woolf? Or do you initially assemble voices and information that other sources provide in a manner similar to that described by Kristina Emick? Are you a pragmatist like Annie Dillard (just write, worry later) or a romantic (listen to your inspiration and it will guide you) or somewhere in between, like Paul Valery, who realizes we are given writing gifts but we also earn our pages through hard work?

The authors who contributed to this collection understand that revising matters, but they also realize it's an aspect of the composing process that is difficult to study. Our chapters are designed to invite you into the acts of revision that we know are productive. We share hints. Offer insights. Help you consider your options. Share our experiences, including what doesn't work and why.

In general, authors in this collection will be considering revision as the practice of making meaningful changes in texts at the word, sentence, paragraph, and full text level by adding, deleting, substituting, and rethinking their work entirely. As editors, they are concerned with assuring the text has consistency and, at times, that is conforms to "house style": the requirements of a class or publisher. As proofreaders, they check to make sure their revisions and their editing has been completed carefully and that no typographical errors mar their best presentation of their texts and thinking. Obviously, these terms can and should be defined by all writers for the contexts in which they are working.

Revision takes you from self to society, from the writer's concerns to the readers' concerns. When you write in a journal, as many of us do, outsiders don't matter. This is safe space where we can be corny, take risks, trail off vaguely into interesting side streets. We learn a great deal from this sort of writing, but we do so in a less systematic way than when we revise. To revise, writers must compare versions, consider alternate methods of development and organization, assess the quality of their communication, and play, often with style options.

Obviously, to compare and contrast, to control and to play, to assess and to experiment requires time and forbearance. Writers and those who work with writers need to learn from play and risk by studying mistakes in order to incorporate new skills. They need to be able to make and take chances in their writing in order to see how the options stack up against each other.

At times, it helps to freeze-frame revision moves, thinking about the demands of an early draft or the demands of a near-final draft, or to focus on general strategies and then genre strategies—the demands of pleasing readers of poetry compared with the demands of readers of private essays and business memos. Writers who enjoy revising are often those who enjoy looking at convention and experimentation in tandem, as equal partners in the composing process.

If you're a rebel at heart and don't like anyone telling you how to write, that's fine. You can still learn a lot and mush around on your own. Or you can try again, new, with each draft, or not revise at all. However, if you adopt this last stance, you risk not being read. Agatha Christie expresses the problem more elegantly: "If you like to write for yourself only, that is a different matter—you can make it any length, and write it in any way you wish; but then you will probably have to be content with the pleasure alone of having written it." In fact, you need others to revise wisely. You need to share your work with supportive readers (peers, friends, family) on the road to learning to share with more demanding critics. You need to learn to forgive yourself and play and to become your own most demanding reader; that is, you need to know which role is most appropriate for which moment. Many writers forgo the pleasures of writing for others because they are thin-skinned. Often, they fail to understand that response to their writing is just that: response. Like an owl, they can eat what they want, use what they need, and discard the rest. Owls do this naturally; writers learn from practice.

In *Acts of Revision: A Guide for Writers*, authors seek to help you consider and overcome any resistance you may feel toward revising. In the opening chapter, Brock Dethier encourages you to tune up your attitude toward the art of reseeing your work. In Chapter 2, I urge you to increase the depth of your text before you start to remove material from your word-hoard; all writers don't do this with every project, but they do all know how this process works. While I'm clearly from the "eat all you can" smorgasbord school of revising, Hans Ostrom, in Chapter 3, believes you can learn from changing the *masks* you use as you approach your work. Working from a stockpile of research into expert writers' revision processes, Alice Horning, in Chapter 4, offers fourteen ways to practice the art of revision based on this data.

Continuing the conversation begun in Chapter 2, in Chapter 5, Melissa Goldthwaite discusses why you need to be your own audience and how you can take risks in your writing but also study the results of such behaviors. In her chapter, you'll discover that rule breaking is not a sin in the land of revision. In fact, it's useful. For pleasure in language choice for the writer

translates into reading pleasure for an audience. In Chapter 6, Maggie Gerrity reviews her personal revision history as an author in several genres.

The authors of Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 move the collection focus from revising in general to revising at the level of style, to improve the sound and effect of your text, particularly your sentences. I admit that I can't inoculate you with "sentence sense" in Chapter 7; instead, I provide a range of exercises that allow you to imitate published and peer writers and to learn something about sentence patterns. In Chapter 8, Devan Cook renews your acquaintance with punctuation but not in a prescriptive way. She examines the ways punctuation choice alters and signals your meaning. Study with her, and you'll learn to use punctuation for your own best purposes.

The final chapters, 9 through 12, take up revising issues that are of interest to authors of creative nonfiction and poetry and hypertext. Chapter 9 finds me reviewing definitions of creative nonfiction and the revision-complicating issues of fact and fiction and memory and truth. Advice for revising with these concerns in mind are offered in the chapter exercises. Laura Newton tackles the subject of revision in poetry in Chapter 10. Some, often novice, poets believe authors in this genre are "born not made," but Chapter 10 suggests the reverse is more likely. Via revision, poets have a hand in their own nativity. Dana Kantrowitz, in Chapter 11, turns her poetic process inside out, letting you sit with her as she composes a new poem. As you read about revising poetry, remember that many of the exercises and much of the advice from these (and other) chapters can be adapted to other genres. In the final chapter, Jay Szczepanski considers composing and revising multimedia. While most of the authors in this collection focus on revision of print texts, similar *and* unexpected revision challenges await those who will continue to revise their lives and their texts during the twenty-first century.

In fact, authors in *Acts of Revision: A Guide for Writers* aim to complicate the image of the writer who writes alone. We do so because it just isn't true. Writers compose and revise in any number of social and collaborative contexts. To illustrate this, included as afterwords is an interview that my regular coauthor, Hans Ostrom, and I conducted on email. After reading our collaborative revision history, you'll find yourself remembering moments when other chapter authors focused your attention on the interactive nature of revising.

Discussions and exercises in this collection suggest that you should share with readers and work to incorporate readers' and writers' practices into your repertoire. Revision isn't just for school writers or for creative writers, and collaborative revision takes place in many, if not most, business and technical settings, as scientists prepare a research report, lawyers a brief, a government unit a review. The more you know about yourself as a reviser, the effect of revision on your writing, and the options that are available, the more you'll be able to participate in a number of these writing worlds. Teacher Lil Brannon explains her pleasure in collaborative revision this way:

> That's why I write a lot with other people. That and it's never quite as lonely. That and it's just plain more fun. You get to talk a lot. You get to hear yourself think. The best collaborations I've had were those where there was a lot of talk, where we would talk out the ideas and write as we talked, dictate the piece. The first draft would be a conglomerate of stuff—talked-out ideas, sixteen examples, a ramble or two here and there. A draft much like my [own] first drafts—way too long, a few gems hidden within a jungle. Then, each of us would try our hand at making it right—working on this part here, that part there, adding and deleting, whatever it needed. Then we would meet and see what we had and cut and write and add and subtract together. . . . The writing never seemed hard either—time consuming but not hard.

Place yourself in a similar state of talk and play; revise alone, revise with others.

We hope you'll read our chapters as you work on your writing. If you've always wanted a short course in this particular aspect of composing, here it is. If you're using the book with a writing group, you might preface a draft-sharing session with a discussion of a chapter you have agreed to read beforehand. This way, you may be able to compound your insights. If you're using this book in a writing classroom, your teacher may assign the entire class to read chapters as you undertake course units or paper sequences. She may ask you to focus on particular chapters or even exercises within chapters as you work on the draft of your paper.

You'll certainly find it useful to bring the book with you to one-to-one conferences with your teacher or to the writing center tutor you work with. Your need for advice will certainly vary. Right now you may not need to revise poems but maybe you really could use help understanding how punctuation can change your essay.

This book may be your only outside reading in a course focused on drafting and revising your own and classmates' work. Or it may join other texts—readings by other writers that you can use for some of the suggested imitations or a handbook of rules that you can put in dialogue with some of the reasoned rule breaking suggested in particular chapters here.

Try to undertake at least some of these revision explorations in judgment- and grade-free zones. You need to take risks and learn from mistakes in order to strengthen your overall writing. Consider teacher Mimi Schwartz's characterization:

> To value self-investment, to avoid premature closure, to see revision as discovery, to go beyond the predictable, to risk experimentation, and, above all, to trust your own creative powers are necessary for all good writing, whether it is a freshman theme, a poem, a term paper. . . . Few of us reward risk taking that fails with a better grade than polished but pedestrian texts. We

> are more product-oriented, judging assignments as independent of one another rather than as part of a collective and ongoing body of work. No wonder that students interpret our message as "Be careful, not creative!"

The authors in this collection join me in encouraging you to be creative as well as to be careful when you cast and recast your words for interested readers.

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To Lisa Luedeke and the always helpful staff at Boynton/Cook, thanks for teaching me the pleasures of collaboration. I'm in debt to Hans Ostrom for bucketfuls of writing enthusiasm. Student writing anchors this collection. Thanks in particular to those in recent years who have followed me on a brisk study of revision and style. We've practiced and played—in the classroom, online, and in community writing groups. None of you has ever undertaken revision that I haven't found instructive. And, as always, thank you for trusting me to share your work.

My family has branched and blended, and grown; they've taught me that it's truly impossible to draft too much, for each new version reveals new richness.

For Dean, who believes every day that flat Gulf swells will alter into surf. One storm not so long ago, he was right. He has taught me to believe and to play and to eat like an owl.

Tallahassee, Fall 2003

One

Revising Attitudes

Brock Dethier

In writing and revision, attitude is everything. If you have a bad attitude toward writing, you might be able to do well on standardized tests by identifying parts of speech and completing vocabulary analogies, but your writing probably isn't as good as it could be. You turn in first drafts as soon as you can bullshit your way to the page minimum or to the point where you figure your boss will stop reading and skip to the summary. You view revision as a bad joke that English teachers dreamt up to prolong the torture of homework.

You aren't the only one who resists revision. Every professional writer knows the sinking feeling of reading the editor's critique and thinking, "I have to do that *again*?!" My own writing group has nurtured most of the writing I've done during the past six years, yet every time I take something to the group, I relearn how resistance to revision feels; I revisit the feeling that I don't have the energy to do what my colleagues want me to do. So my concern in this chapter is not "How can I get novice writers to see the obvious value of revision?" but "What do all writers need to see, think, and do to improve our attitudes toward revision?"

Before you conclude that you fit the bad-attitude stereotype I've sketched here, let me make clear: You already are a reviser. You already like revisions. You revise every time you hit the delete key, every time you insert. You revise phrases in your head before you even start typing. Everything you read has been revised, and everything you listen to. It's a rare CD that doesn't contain at least one revision of another performer's work, whether it's Tori Amos' reworking of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" or Run-DMC's version of Aerosmith's "Walk This Way." Revision is everywhere. If you're going to write for the rest of your life—and most adults do—the question is not whether you will embrace revision, but when.

Improving your attitude toward revision can revolutionize your writing and your enjoyment of it. With a positive attitude toward revision, you will listen to feedback with an open ear and not get so quickly offended when a reader tries to help. If you trust in your ability to make it better later, you may be more willing to lower your standards on the first draft and accept that the draft will be (temporarily) awful. That willingness will keep you from getting hung up and blocked, as often happens to writers who feel that they *must* start with the

perfect first paragraph. Think of how much time you could save, how much stress you could shed, if you could relax and spew forth a first draft, rather than agonize over every movement of the cursor.

As you come to value revision, you will find an almost infinite array of tools at your disposal. Some of them were developed as prewriting techniques, but now that many writers compose directly on a computer as soon as they get an idea, these methods of focusing, expanding, and collecting have found new life as revision tools. After all, writing is almost never a linear process that starts with a title and marches directly to a conclusion, with never a backward glance. Instead, most writers take a few—or a few hundred—steps forward, then circle back and cut, expand, and revise. So an alert writer may be collecting new information even during the final polishing steps just before publication.

No one example or argument will transform a writer's revision attitude. But before we can hope to learn something new, most of us need to unlearn dysfunctional beliefs, the reasons we resist revision.

Resistance to Revision

We need to be convinced about the *why* of revision before we'll get very far on the *what* and *how*, so let's start by figuring out the roots of revision resistance. You may distrust revision because you feel that:

1. *Revision is trivial, the nitpicky correcting of superficial niceties.*
Revision *can* include editing and polishing, but it means, after all, reseeing, so in extreme cases (as you'll see later in this chapter) it can mean rescrambling every paragraph of a paper or throwing out everything except the conclusion. Naturally, if you think of revision as concentrating on surface errors, you'll dislike it; few people enjoy having to focus on their own mistakes.

2. *Revision is unnecessary.*
If you've been praised for writing you did the night before the deadline, you may think the whole idea of revising—messing with that "good job!"—is crazy. You probably get, at 2 A.M. the morning of the deadline, what Susan McLeod calls the "joy of completion," and you probably feel that any additional work would be drudgery (1997, 23).

But revision offers writers many things beyond more praise or a better grade—a deeper, sharper understanding of the subject, a satisfying sense that the ideas come across in the best possible way, a chance to clarify and perhaps change your opinions. Unfortunately, because good student writers often don't seem to need revision to write A papers, they may reap the benefits of revision more slowly than their less proficient peers, who learn that revision holds their only hope of getting an A or pleasing the boss. Sometimes only a kick in the teeth—a C on a paper or a caustic comment from a teacher, editor, or boss—will convince a writer that a good first draft is no longer good enough. I know

a few writers—experienced journalists—who in effect revise in their heads and make very few changes in the first hard copy. For the rest of us, though, revision is as crucial as running a spellchecker.

3. *Revision makes things worse.*
It does, if you change just for the sake of changing. All writers need to keep their purposes and audiences in mind as they revise. Change only to make the phrase, sentence, paragraph, or paper more clear, concise, complete, compelling, or convincing. You may need readers—peers, teachers, family members, editors—to help you decide if a change is an improvement.

4. *Revision is wasted time.*
Time spent revising can feel like good money thrown after bad. But experienced revisers learn when and how to revise for maximum effect. And the satisfaction of getting it just right gradually teaches writers that revision is its own reward, worth doing even when publication or a better grade is only a remote possibility.

5. *Revision is drudgery; only the first draft is creative.*
Writers at all levels are susceptible to this myth. Susan McLeod, who studies writers and their emotions, explains, "With this kind of myth helping to shape our emotional reactions to writing, it is no wonder that many of us (not just students) get discouraged waiting for inspiration to strike, or that we resent having to revise our work if we feel inspiration has produced it" (1997, 41). In *The Craft of Revision*, journalist and writing teacher Donald Murray says, "The published writer knows it takes a great deal of practice to be spontaneous" (2003, 3). Revision can be so creative that the original idea, the seed, disappears in what novelist Bernard Malamud called "the flowers of afterthought."

6. *Revision is a sign of failure, and criticism a personal affront.*
Because of such feelings, it's difficult for some writers to see that for most of us revision is the only road to success.

7. *You don't have time to revise.*
If you tack hours of revision onto a painful, labored process of writing a first draft, you *will* feel that the writing project is taking up your whole life. But if you learn to count on revision for improving a sloppy draft, you'll spend less time anguishing over the first draft and may actually finish more quickly.

8. *You don't know how to revise.*
You're not alone. But that's why we've written this book—to help you learn how.

If you identify with any of these feelings about revision, you're not going to change just because I tell you it's a good idea. To become true believers—and

practitioners—of revision, most writers need to witness the power and value of revision, understand why they're revising, and experience a revision process that clearly improves their own writing.

Seeing Is Believing

To create a more productive attitude toward revision, we need first to see for ourselves what revision can do. Examples of major, positive revisions abound in the world outside of writing: architects' revisions of their house plans, directors' revisions of their movies (now open to study because of extended home video versions of many movies), your parents' repainting of the kitchen to get the color right. As a music lover who brings a boom box to almost every class, I find the best models in musical revisions. They're everywhere and easy to find, especially in this era of sampling. Although other groups' remakes of popular songs give us hope because they can transform dull into dazzling, I learn the most about writing by examining Bob Dylan's revision of his own song "I Want You."

The original version of the song was probably the most popular track on what many consider Dylan's best album, 1966's *Blonde on Blonde*. Before I play it, we read the words and debate what kind of tone, tempo, and attitude the music should convey. (I encourage you to get a copy, download the words off the Internet, articulate your own reaction to the lyrics, then listen for yourself.) Most people read desperate longing in the words and predict that the music will be slow and pained, reflecting the desperation. When I play the original version, they're chagrined—it has a bouncy, catchy tune, probably the happiest-sounding song on the album.

Twelve years later, Dylan released a live version of the song from a concert in Japan. It's much slower, pained, with at times only a flute accompanying the straining voice. It certainly raises the possibility that Dylan eventually heard the words the way most lyrics readers do and changed the music to match. In any case, the revised version is radically different, and it helps us see that sometimes writers revise even when they don't have to, even when the earlier version is published and acclaimed.

Think of your own favorite music. Do you listen to bands that record different mixes of the same song? Do they do cover versions of songs that others have written? How are the versions different? Why do the cover versions seldom follow the originals exactly? It's true that cover versions often don't sound better to fans of the original, but they prove that revision is a creative impulse and that clever people think it's worth spending time to improve something, even something already very good.

Musical revisions are fascinating and demonstrate many aspects of the reviser's art, but since we're writing, not making music, we need to find models of writing revisions as well. To answer the question How does good writing come about? some writing texts now print two or more drafts of a single

piece. Barry Wallenstein and Robert Burr's *Visions and Revisions* (2002) offers almost three hundred pages of drafts and variations of poems, many by famous poets. In his *Read to Write*, Donald Murray publishes drafts from several prose writers as well as seven different versions of Mekeel McBride's poem "Red Letters" and an essay by McBride on the process of writing the poem (1993, 116–31). McBride explains that observations, dreams, word sounds, even typos affect the evolution of a draft; her essay demonstrates that good writers revise more than many novice writers can imagine.

Most writers have their own favorite examples of professional revisions and learn from these drafts how to improve their own. We can also find useful demonstrations in the drafts of our peers. Friends who write well may assert that they don't revise, but if pressed, they can probably show you early drafts, copies littered with corrections and changes, papers they rescued and overhauled after first efforts went nowhere . . . or at least they can tell you about the computer files erased and written over countless times. Whenever you get a chance to talk to other writers about their work, ask how much rethinking the piece of writing went through and whether you can see the first draft. Almost always, good writing results not from inborn talent, something that few of us can claim, but from hard work and sweat.

As a writer as well as a writing teacher, I collect my own false starts and messy drafts to demonstrate that even experienced professionals never get it "right" the first time. The cycle of feedback and revision goes on at all levels. I hope this short paragraph is clear and simple and reads as though I wrote it quickly and effortlessly, but I've revised it at least ten or fifteen times, using as guides the comments of a dozen other professional writers.

The three versions of my poem that follow demonstrate radical revision, and I share them to help other writers get over the revision-is-proofreading misconception. The subject of the poem is simple—the importance of mail in the freelance writer's life. With a title borrowed from a Shirelles song and mailbox details that seem to go nowhere, "Please Mr. Postman," an early draft, is not an impressive effort. But the last image—of seeing your own name in your own handwriting on a self-addressed stamped envelope and knowing that it's another rejection—stuck with me. (Writers mail their work—their hope—to editors, enclosing an S.A.S.E. in which the editors can return the material with an acceptance or rejection. So if your living or identity rests on editors saying yes, those envelopes take on an almost Judgment Day importance.)

Please Mr. Postman

As I grow older
and my submissions to fate
even more desperate
my mail boxes—
fate's portals—
get further away.
I used to pluck hope

from the little black wall box
with one foot still inside
on the ground.
RFD boxes were a barefoot sprint away
breath held
anticipation sharpened
by the cold of grass or snow.
Now harvesting the mail
requires shoes
and a five minute suspension
of the day's despair.
The manila envelope
slotted inside the office supply catalogue
slices out
the paper cut deepens
the never-closed wound.
The rejection always comes
addressed by my own hand.

My writing group helped me see that the poem didn't work, but I was unwilling to give it up, so I expanded it to over a page, then finally, disgusted, cut it down to the single image that I and my readers liked. That led to the first version of "S.A.S.E."

S.A.S.E.

By my own hand
addressed and infected
the rejections fester.

Reasonably happy with it but unsure whether it could still be called a poem, I sent it off to *The Epigrammatist*, whose editor, Nancy Winters, responded that she liked the idea but wanted me to revise it and make it rhyme. For days I stomped around, reacting as my students probably react when they get back a paper with my comments—yelling at the editor, griping about the stupidity of rhyme, ranting, "It's only eleven words long; how can I revise it?" But when I finally calmed down and revised, I had to admit that the changed rhythm and new rhyme did help. Rather than cruelly thwarting my ambitions, the editor's comments actually prompted me to make the poem better than I could make it on my own. Winters accepted the revision, and "S.A.S.E." became one of my first published poems.

S.A.S.E.

By my own hand
addressed and infected
it festers, rejected.

Although I seldom know if such happy-ending stories truly affect writers' beliefs about revision, a similar story *did* work for Melanie. Because she's a

musician, Melanie has always had a good attitude toward revision. She's been playing the violin seriously for years, spending thousands of hours going over and over the same passages, trying to get just the right nuance of revision to make the teacher smile, knowing that everything the teacher says is intended to help, to make it all sound better and be more fun.

But one moment in eleventh grade stands out for Melanie because it proved to her the value of extreme revision, of whittling down to the core. Melanie's English teacher, the disciplined and reserved Ms. S., opened up to students and endeared herself to Melanie by sharing a poem she had been working on for seven years. Melanie was astonished that the poem was only eighteen words long. At first, that didn't seem enough for all those years of work. But eight years later, Melanie can still recite every word of the poem. She's learned that sometimes in writing, as in music, less is more, and seemingly endless revision may produce something memorable.

Understanding

Demonstrations of revisions may convince writers like Melanie that they *should* revise, but they're of limited value in helping writers figure out *how* to revise. To learn how, we must first accept that revisers have reasons; revision is, largely, a rational process. Many young writers are confused by the conventions of English grammar and see writing as a mysterious game that only English teachers understand. These writers need to see that logic, imagination, and reason, not obscure rules, motivate everything writers do, every comment teachers and editors make. Writers who don't understand the reasoning behind critiques will, naturally enough, be reluctant to revise. So if you're going to revise successfully, it's critical to understand explanations of teachers', bosses', and editors' responses and to make sense of why you're revising.

Such an understanding was necessary to convince Jared about revision. Other teachers had told Jared that his sentences and paragraphs were too long, and he had always resented it. He's a sophisticated reader, well aware that critics praise, not condemn authors like William Faulkner and Samuel Beckett and their endless cascades of words. So the criticism, the prohibition on letting the clutch out on his sentences, struck Jared as arbitrary and unfair.

As had his other teachers, classics professor Mark Damen pointed out some whoppers in Jared's paper. But Damen made sure Jared understood what was wrong with the sentences, not by counting words up to an arbitrary maximum, but by showing how the sentences might be confusing, how an active verb here, some punctuation there, some trimming all over could quickly and easily improve the sentences. After absorbing Damen's comments on the paper, Jared talked with him one-on-one, and the professor's focus on improving the paper convinced Jared that they were working together. Damen was not punishing Jared for his errors.

Like Mark Damen, most people who respond to writing want to help writers improve their work—current and future—rather than penalize them for mistakes. But it's difficult to see that intent when the boss covers the memo with red ink or the teacher hands back a paper with a big D at the end. How can you move from the anger, frustration, and depression you're likely to feel at such a moment to an attitude that will make revision productive, perhaps even fun?

1. *Cool off.*
If you've already looked at the grade or general evaluation, there's probably no point in reading the comments right away. Rejection letters sometimes upset me so much that I can't really "hear" the editor's comments for hours, maybe days. It doesn't help to go through the comments saying, "What a lame thing to say, you loser."

2. *Try to give the responder the benefit of the doubt.*
If you read the comments looking for things that are wrong or stupid, you'll probably find them. But if you read them looking for suggestions that will actually make your paper better, you'll probably find them, too.

3. *Read the comments in context; they won't make sense unless you link them with the paper itself.*
Imagine yourself in the responder's place, reading the paper and making comments about specific things. Back up at least a paragraph and reread what you wrote, then read the comments. It sometimes takes me several readings to see what my words actually say and to realize that an editor really has found weaknesses in what I thought was a flawless passage.

4. *Ask the responder for further explanation.*
Make clear that you want to understand and to improve your paper. Most readers are delighted when writers value their comments.

5. *Use what's useful; disregard the rest.*
It's your writing. Most readers' comments are just suggestions, not orders. I follow most of my suggestions with (?), implying, "What do you think?" A suggested revision of a sentence tells you that there's probably a problem with the sentence and indicates one direction a revision might take. Use that information, build on it, but don't take it as a command.

6. *Applaud every little improvement.*
And don't try to do everything at once. If you find the process difficult and stressful, revise for only fifteen or twenty minutes at a time, or until you're convinced that you've made one substantial improvement. Then pat yourself on the back and do something else. With a draft and a reader's comments in hand,

you can return to the revision whenever you feel like it and work in very small increments of time.

7. *Let it go.*
There's nothing noble about endless revision. Before you start hating the paper, turn it in, send it off, file it. Don't subscribe to the myth that writing is torture. Revision is hard work, but you won't be doing yourself any favors if you push the revision so hard on one paper that you can't stand to revise the next one.

To understand and make use of feedback and revision ideas, we may need to change the metaphors that we use to think about revising. Writing metaphor expert Barbara Tomlinson would want us to wean ourselves from metaphors like *nit-picking* and *polishing* and start seeing revision in terms of what she calls "stories about hard labor and artistic processes," using metaphors like "refining, casting and recasting, painting, sculpting" (1998, 75). My poem "Eddie's Full-Service Rewrite" suggests one way to rethink such metaphors and offers a hierarchy of revision steps, from straightening the frame to polishing the chrome.

Eddie's Full-Service Rewrite

Revision is body work, overhaul
Ratcheting straight the frame
Replacing whole systems and panels
Rummaging heaps of the maimed.
With blowtorch and old rubber hammer
Pound and pull, bend, use your 'bar
Salvage takes sweat but it pays well
(Though never rule out a new car).

Through editing, tuning, adjusting
You get all the volts to the spark
Knock all the gunk from the filters
Set timing right on the mark.
Trade in your hammer for feeler gauge
Test drive and listen, hush!
A smooth-running engine's a miracle
Though mange mars the bucket seats' plush.

The proofreader's focus is narrow
The weary say "Why should I care
About snotballs of tar on the door here
Creases of rust over there?"
But oh! If the paint job's neglected
The whole thing will look like a mess
Stray commas pock bodies like acne
And threaten to rot out the rest.

Why strain your elbows on hood chrome
If the pistons stick, mired in glue?

No profit in setting the carb right
If the drive shaft is broken in two.
So when you're at Ed's contemplating
How to triage repairs on your wreck
Start with the frame and the engine
Don't waste your polish on dreck.

Almost every skill or process offers its own analogies to the process of revising writing, and writers who question the value of time spent revising might benefit from thinking about their own metaphors. How is creating a good recipe, learning to sail, developing a relationship, or growing a garden similar to revision? A history of successful revision in one of those areas might give writers the confidence to spend enough time revising their writing that they'll feel successful.

Successful Revision Experiences

Inspiring as Jared's and Melanie's stories are, I think Becky's and Brett's are more common. Both learned to value revision by seeing sentence by sentence and idea by idea what it could do for them. Becky was in a class that required sharing drafts with a group of classmates, and the teacher encouraged groupmates to tear each other's papers apart. Though I cringe at that metaphor—I want peer readers to take the process seriously, but not to use claws—many students report that the right mix of peers can create a relaxed atmosphere of honest feedback and creative sharing, with revision the product, the goal.

Brett's high school poetry teacher was willing to give up her lunch hours to read students' poems, and Brett had enough initiative to write poems and take them to her. He didn't always agree with her responses or like her suggestions, but most of the time he saw that the poem was better by the end of lunch hour, and he became a long-term fan of revision.

Despite all the convincing demonstrations of revision and explanations about how it can work, we probably won't change our attitude about it until we successfully revise our own writing, finding a more interesting focus, a more unusual perspective, a peppier verb. No one can give you such an experience; it has to come about as a result of your own work on your own sentences. But almost any writing teacher, hundreds of books on writing, and even some word-processing style checkers can point you to passages that can benefit from reworking, give you suggestions about reorganization, list focusing questions.

The rest of this book describes ways that teachers and students, readers and writers have worked together to create positive revision experiences, to get over that crucial hump to "Yes, this works. It's worth it." Practiced revisers can work almost simultaneously on scores of processes, from checking homophones to rethinking theses. But I find that simple, step-by-step approaches can best open writers' eyes to the value of revision and lead us to make major changes without thinking, "I'm revising."

One of my favorite step-by-step approaches is the descriptive outline (see Appendix on page 12). It helps writers resee what they've done, revealing where their emphasis is and how they can change it. It enables writers to identify where crucial transitions need to be and therefore helps them achieve a seamless train of thought. My hope is that after following the descriptive outline, or using any of the other suggestions in this book, writers will begin to see revision not as another tedious burden, but as the writer's best friend, something you can count on to improve the writing, the response, and your feeling about it. Someday you may even agree with columnist Ellen Goodman, who said, "What makes me happy is rewriting."

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Appendix

Goal: To resee the paper, its parts, and its connections and to focus revision on issues of content and organization.

Descriptive Outline

1. Number each paragraph. This is the only thing you do on the paper itself. Part of the point of this activity is to take attention away from the individual pages of the paper and focus it on the skeleton you're about to construct. It's much easier to get a sense of the whole when it's all on one page.
2. On a clean sheet of paper, jot down a number for each paragraph, spacing evenly (i.e., if you have twenty paragraphs, number the paper 1–20).
3. Summarize each paragraph in as few words as possible. Write each summary next to the appropriate number.
4. Reflect on what you just did. Why were certain paragraphs difficult to summarize? Are they unfocused or incoherent or compound? Should you break a paragraph into two? Did you find you could use ditto marks because a number of paragraphs in a row were about the same subject? Does the subject deserve that much attention? Could someone glancing at the summaries of your opening and closing paragraphs get a sense of how they connect?
5. Group the summaries into blocks. Use brackets or different colors or whatever works. First get every summary into a group, then bracket some of those groups into larger blocks until you get to the one block that they all fit under. Label each group.
6. Reflect again. Are some summaries out of place, requiring you to draw an arrow to the correct group? Does the number of paragraphs in each block roughly correspond to the relative importance of that block? You have now created a kind of an outline sometimes called a tree diagram. Do its major blocks correspond to what you see as the major sections in your paper? Are you missing parts? Do the blocks appear in the best order?
7. Mark junctions between blocks and summarize what the transition at each spot needs to do. Between every pair of blocks, big and small, there should be some indication of a change of subjects: a paragraph break or a bullet if not some kind of verbal transition. Resist the temptation to see what transition you *did* use. First figure out what *should* be there, then see if you can find it in the paper.
8. Write down all the changes you want to make.

This process in effect X-rays the draft, and this new form of seeing can open your eyes to many kinds of revision, not just organizational problems.