# What’s the Diff? Version Control and Revision Reflections

You’ve probably been told by your teachers to “reflect on your writing.” (And if you haven’t, chances are good it’ll happen quite soon.) But what does that mean? In my experience, without specific questions to answer, a lot of students will tell me how they feel about that particular piece of writing: whether they’re happy with it or worried about it, or just happy to be done worrying about it. While that’s useful information, to be sure, if the goal is to learn from your experience to help in future writing projects, I’m more interested in what strategies or textual moves you use to revise – and in expanding the revision strategies you have experience with.

I’m taking the phrase “revision strategies” from one of the classic studies of writing process, by Nancy Sommers. By comparing early and late drafts, she found that student writers tended to edit words, phrases, and sentences, and that most of the word/phrase changes were substitutions: they didn’t change the overall structure or meaning. Experienced adult writers had a wider repertoire: reordering and cutting, with more changes at larger-than-paragraph scales, like theme or section. It’s an experiment everyone can try: in your own drafts, are you operating at sentence-level and below, or do you also work bigger-picture? Do you reorder and regroup? And do your answers change as you get more focused practice and feedback?

In this essay, I want to make the case for using *version control* technology to help you track how “what changes” may change in the course of a writing class. It’s not always easy, after the thicket of writing, to remember what turns you took, or why; sometimes the new versions just replace what you’d done before, whether in your memory or on your hard drive. A version control system (VCS) is software that can store and display the whole history of a project, including the differences (the “diffs”) between points in that history. If you’ve written with Google Docs, you’ve had one kind of VCS at work – it saves changes down to the second. Wikis, too, store a history of each edit, in part so editors can recover text that shouldn’t have been deleted. (And isn’t it easier to make hard cuts when you have that safety net just in case?)

But the best VCSes don’t just save *for* you: they invite (or even require) a short summary statement of what’s new in each snapshot you commit to. When I use a tool like GitHub Desktop, it visually shows me the latest diff to help me write that summary, which prompts me to reflect on what’s actually changed, what’s added, what’s taken away… or if I’m just refining in place. And that, in turn, helps me commit to making changes worth saving.

I do not plan to quote students in this essay, but I would like to embed screenshots of several diff views and revision histories in action from my own writing, e.g. from GitHub Desktop, from the Wikidot wiki platform, and from Google Docs’ Version History (including the “Name Current Revision” option).