

The Writing Center @ KUMC

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Revision: Art & Craft

Many writers, among them students, do not revise their written work. There are many reasons but revision is the core of writing. It moves a draft from rough sketch to shaped language that impacts readers, even changes lives. Like rehearsal in drama, music, or dance, revision leads to finished performance and is a great teacher of the writing process and especially of persistence. While revision requires specific skills, there are some steps in the revision process that not only highlight practical and conceptual matters but also develop those required skills:



Trust the Process:

There are many throw-away pages in writing, but they are not waste. All writing begins badly. Revision saves us from our mistakes. Writing is a search and revision is a shaping of that search. This process must be trusted. This kind of trust is essential to success. Without it, the writer begins with a deficit.

Revision Begins:

There are two ways to begin revising: after a first draft has been produced and before you have produced it. Before? Here's how it works, according to Donald Murray. Revising before writing is a form of brainstorming/rehearsal. It incorporates the "search" of initial drafting but has a focus/wholeness associated with revision. Here are two techniques:

- ❖ **"Circling the Subject"**: Look at the subject as a photographer does. Skip the easy, obvious approach and regard all angles before diving in. Take notes, make comments or outline, etc. There's both pleasure and discovery in this technique.
- ❖ **"Try-out Lines"**: Start with a word, phrase, or statement with special meaning to you and play with it. Try-out lines can create rhythm or motion that leads to surprise and seriousness. They modify the subject into something that leads you somewhere important. And in the process, they make writing a joy not a chore.

Sharpening:

When a first draft emerges, you reread it and find the good, the bad, and the ugly. Mostly, you find an embryo. To revise/nurse your youngling, you must reread calmly and successively as you rewrite. Critical detachment (without deposing emotion) brings trouble spots to light. Going back to the beginning to pursue a different line of thought occurs often. This sharpens judgment. Much of revision is attention on a small scale, but it leads to the big picture. Here are some main points of the process:

- ❖ Return to a draft over a longer period of time
- ❖ Cut, rewrite, add new things
- ❖ Ask questions such as “Why?” and “How?”
- ❖ Highlight or underline and summarize whatever grabs your attention
- ❖ Read out loud to yourself or to another or ask someone to read your work to you

As you can see, there are aspects of editing in revision. Cutting out is a major aim, a way of getting at truth. To keep your attention bright, use both intuition and a systematic approach. Kenneth Macrorie coined the term “I-Search” to refer to a set of questions that can/should be posed and answered before you call your draft done.

The Paramedic Method:

This technique is described by Richard Lanham in his book of the same title. In his words, the PM is “emergency therapy, a first aid kit, a quick, self-teaching method for translating ‘Official Style’ English into ‘plain’ English.” This approach does not jettison the discipline-specific discourse you must use while in school. Rather, it makes that style of writing more effective by eliminating excess or trimming the fat.

Finally:

Including revision in your writing process will lead to mastery of various kinds. Revision means “to see again, more, better.” It is not rereading or perfectionism, but rather, expansion, enlargement, amplification. Revision leads to these three things: a gain in objectivity, a growth in personal and professional acumen, and the acquisition of an authentic self.

References:

- Lanham, R. (2007). *Revising prose*. Pearson Education.
- Macrorie, K. (1984). *Searching writing*. Boynton/Cook Publishers.
- Murray, D. (2013). *The craft of revision*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning.