

STRONG WRITING AND WRITERS DON'T NEED REVISION

Laura Giovanelli

“The standard perception that revision is something that happens at the end of the writing process is a good place to start revising ideas about revision.”—Cathleen Breidenbach

The fantasy that good writers summon forth beautiful, lean, yet intricate sentences onto a page without sweating is an unhealthy fiction, and it is wrong. What writers need is revision. Novice writers, experienced writers, *all* writers. Anyone interested in writing clearer, stronger, more persuasive and passionate prose, even those of us who are procrastinators panicking because we need to get a project finished or a paper written and it's 2:00 a.m. the night before our deadline—writers need revision because revision is not a discrete step. Revision is not the thing writers do when they're done writing. Revision *is* the writing.

It's important to keep in mind I'm not talking about revision as proofreading or copy editing; no amount of grammatical, spelling, and style corrections transforms a piece of writing like focused attention to fundamental questions about purpose, evidence, and organization. That, to me, is revision: the heavy lifting of working through why I'm writing, who I'm writing for, and how I structure writing logically and effectively.

Revision is Writing

My writing students are usually relieved to hear that published authors often find writing just as fraught as they do. Like first-year college students, people paid to write—the journalists and the novelists and the technical writers—more often than not despair at the difference between what's in their heads and hearts and what

ends up on the page the first time around. The professionals are just a little better at waiting things out, pushing through what Anne Lamott calls “shitty first drafts” and all the ones that follow, the revision of a tenth and a thirteenth and a twenty-third draft. I show a YouTube video by Tim Wenginger, a computer scientist and engineer at the University of Notre Dame. In the video, Wenginger stitches together his revisions of a research paper. In my class, we play a game, guessing how many revisions Wenginger did. The answer—463!—almost always surprises them. It still sometimes surprises me. And sure, some of those revisions are small, fiddly changes. But most of the time, even watching this quickly on classroom monitors, my students notice Wenginger aims for the jugular in his writing. He’s after wholesale overhaul of his argument and of his larger work.

However, talking about revision in terms of numbers of drafts implies that all writing, all writers, and all revision work one way: hit your target draft number, like your daily Fitbit goals, and you magically get good writing. But more revision isn’t necessarily better. Effective revising isn’t making changes for the sake of change, but instead making smarter changes. And professional writers—practiced writers—have this awareness even if they aren’t aware of it. In Stephen King’s memoir *On Writing*, he calls this instinct the *ideal reader*: an imagined person a writer knows and trusts but rewrites in response to, a kind of collaborative dance between writer and reader. To writers, the act of *writing* is an act of *thinking*. One writer in a landmark study of comparing the habits of experienced writers to those of novices called their first drafts “the kernel.” If you’re someone like me who is constantly struggling to demystify this complex cognitive thing we humans do, that metaphor of writing as a seed is revelatory. Revision is not a sign of weakness or inexperienced or poor writing. *It is the writing*. The more writers push through chaos to get to the good stuff, the more they revise. The more writers revise, whether that be the keystrokes they sweat in front of a blinking, demanding cursor or the unofficial revising they do in our heads when they’re showering or driving or running, the more the ideal reader becomes a part of their craft and muscle memory, *of who they are* as writers, so at some point they may not know where the writing stops and the revision begins.

Because writing and revision are impossible to untangle, revision is just as situational and interpretive as writing. In other words, writers interact with readers—writing and revision are social, responsive, and communal. Take Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I

Have a Dream” speech. King gave a rough draft of the most famous American speech of the 20th century to 1,800 people crammed into a gymnasium in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in November of 1962. Seven months later, King gave another revision of the speech to a gathering of political and spiritual leaders, musicians, and activists in Detroit. In August of 1963, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, King riffed and reworked and rebuilt what he preached in Rocky Mount and Detroit, ad-libbing, deleting, and flipping lines. “I Have a Dream” is what Americans remember today, engraved in our collective memories, archives, and textbooks as symbols of an entire era, but King’s famous refrain singing his vision for a less racially divided country was not even part of his speech’s official text that day. Was King writing a new speech? Was he done with the Rocky Mount or Detroit one? “I Have a Dream” was not one speech, but many, written and re-written. King was not content to let his words sit, but like any practiced writer working out his muscles, he revised and riffed, adapting it for new audiences and purposes.

Revision: Alive and Kicking

All this revision talk could lead to the counterargument that revision is a death spiral, a way of shoving off the potential critique of a finished draft forever. Tinkering is something we think of as quaint, but not very efficient. Writers can always make the excuse that something is a work-in-progress, that they just don’t have time for all this revision today. But this critique echoes the point that writing is social and responsive to its readers. Writing is almost always meant to be read and responded to, not hoarded away. A recent large-scale study by Paul Anderson, Chris Anson, and other writing researchers supports the idea that specific interventions in the writing process matter more in learning to write rather than how *much* students are writing. Among these useful interventions are participation in a lively revision culture and an interactive and social writing process such as talking over drafts—soliciting feedback from instructors and classmates. Extending the modern definition of writing more broadly to composing in any medium, revision is as bound to writing as breathing is to living. If anything, humans are doing more writing and revision today. Sure, there are people who call themselves writers and mean that it is part of their formal job title. But then there are the greater numbers of us who are writers but don’t label ourselves as such, the millions of us just noodling around on Facebook or Snapchat or Instagram. Facebook

and Instagram have an edit feature on posts. Google Docs includes a revision history tool. When we send a text and our buzzy little e-devices kick in with Autocorrect, changing Linkin Park to Kinky Park, we compensate with frantic asterisks. We edit our comments or return to clarify them; we cannot resist. Revision as writing is an idea that we should not abandon or trash. And it may not even be possible to.

Further Reading

For more about the relationships between revision, writing experience, and writing processes, see Alice Horning and Anne Becker's *Revision: History, Theory, and Practice* (Parlor Press) and Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* (Utah State University Press), specifically Doug Downs's chapter, "Revision is Central to Developing Writing."

Just a handful of many important studies that have helped writing scholars better understand what's going on when writers revise are Nancy Sommers's "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Writers," Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte's "Analyzing Revision," Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (Oxford University Press); and Paul Anderson, Chris Anson, Charles Paine, and Robert M. Gonyea's "The Contributions of Writing to Learning and Development: Results From a Large-Scale Multi-Institutional Study."

For more on how to frame revision and feedback for student writers, see Donald Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing* (Wadsworth), Nancy Sommers's *Responding to Student Writers* (Macmillan Learning), and the video "Across the Drafts: Students and Teachers Talk About Feedback." Watch Tim Weninger's YouTube video, "Timelapse Writing of a Research Paper." Read more on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech and its origins through the research of Jason Miller.

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