Interior Design: Revision as Focus

SHELLY D. SMEDE

Last spring I took up stenciling. I stenciled pale red apples on tote bags, bright stars down the sides of posters in my classroom, and even a row of dusty pink hearts along the top edge of my kitchen walls. After numerous successful projects, I knew I was ready for the epitome of my crafting career: redecorating the bathroom. ■ The room was covered in the same peeling green wallpaper that the home's original owner had chosen many years before. Its edges curled up like ancient parchment as the humidity took its toll, and the creamy paint revealed beneath had grown yellowish with age. My plan was simple. I had the dogwood branch stencils and peach, pine, and copper colored stenciling paint. My tiny brushes lay in a neat row along the sink. All that stood between my project and me was about twelve strips of wallpaper. No problem.

Three days and seventeen squirt bottles of vinegar water later, the walls were bare. Though my intention was to immediately apply lovely, interlacing dogwood branches around my ceiling, what I saw stopped me cold. Every eighteen inches, a narrow strip of dirty wall reached from floor to ceiling where the paint had been exposed between strips of peeling wallpaper. Four inches to the left of my towel rack was an ugly hole from the former towel rack—the one my three year old had tried to use as a parallel bar after watching a gymnastics competition on television. I had a decision to make. Should I indulge in the instant gratification of stenciling my walls as they were, or should I slow down, repair, and repaint my walls before I put on the finishing touches? Grudgingly, I decided to take the time to do it right.

Too often, students see revision of their essays in this same light—a boring chore that stands between them and their word processor. They want to get to the colored fonts, the fancy graphics, and the rainbow-tinted printer paper. Teachers, too, often gloss over revision. "Your final copies are due tomorrow. Don't forget to revise," they call as students race out the classroom door. Then when they receive a pile of final copies that are merely neat reproductions of the students' rough drafts, they complain to themselves about the carelessness of "kids these days" and a daunting pile of 130 poorly written essays lying in wait for their red pen. If anything, I've learned that revision is the most critical part of the writing process. That's why I've designed my curriculum to include what I've tagged "working revision days." The results are obvious when I evaluate that same pile of essays but emerge on the other side filled with pride and satisfaction rather than disappointment and frustration.

I was a frustrated teacher for many years. I spent days helping eighth graders prewrite, then hurried them through the drafting and revision phase, often sending them home to do most of that. Then we'd spend another whole day peer-editing, which often deteriorated into a case of the blind leading the blind. Students would turn in piles of poor, disorganized, and uninspired papers, and I would spend hours making comments and suggestions to my student writers interspersed with moments of complaint to my husband and colleagues.

As I dispersed red-marked essays back to their owners, I always requested that students check my suggestions and resubmit their work. The few students who accepted this offer ignored my ideas regarding more satisfying conclusions, varied sentence structure, and better verb choices and merely corrected spellings and inserted commas where I'd indicated the omissions. Revision, it seemed, must be beyond the reach of average thirteen-year-olds and at the very most was a chore they refused to do on their own. Putting my negative attitude aside, I decided it was time to make a change.

Gabriele Lusser Rico, author of *Writing the Natural Way,* put it well when she said:

> Every artistic endeavor or creative act involves two phases—the generative phase during which the original vision is discovered and roughly expressed, and the paring and polishing phase during which the ideas are reworked and refined, and finally regarded critically to ensure that the expression aligns with the original vision. (237)

Meredith Sue Willis, a novelist and professional speaker, compared the act of revision with a child's teaching itself how to walk. She explains, "Revision is a form of learning; it pushes us farther into experience, which alters how we see the past and prepares us for the future. I don't mean to describe revision as extraordinary; on the contrary, it seems to me one of the most ordinary of human activities" (22). This "most ordinary" activity also changed forever how my students write and made evaluating their essays a joy and pleasure for me.

"Working" Revision

One thing was clear; few of my students would revise on their own time. If revision were truly as important as I suspected, I would need to provide time in class for my students to engage with their writing. And I couldn't just turn them loose for an entire period. They would need direction and structure. I decided a teacher-led checklist (see Appendix) would be the most logical way of going about active revision. After spending time prewriting and making certain that students had writing topics of personal interest, I instructed them to come to class the next day with a rough draft. It didn't matter *how* rough because we were going to make lots of changes. I likened their draft to a skeleton and told them just to bring the bare bones if that's all they felt they could do.

In class the next day, the majority of my students came prepared—their interest piqued by my promise of success. Some had only a paragraph, but I assured them that, by the end of the day, they would have a quality, revised draft. I asked the students who'd come without a draft to write as quickly as possible and then join us as we revised. Within fifteen minutes, every student in class was actively engaged in the process.

Students cut out words, drew arrows to reorder paragraphs, and added detail in the margins.

We started by taking a clean sheet of paper and making three columns. The first column was titled "Sentence Beginnings." On the overhead projector, I modeled what I wanted students to do, and then they quickly looked through their essays and listed the first word of each sentence. If they found that they repeated a word, they reworded or reordered sentences to ensure that they had varied sentence beginnings. We titled column two, "Sentence Lengths." After a brief demonstration, they counted the number of words in each sentence. Some were amazed to see that all of their sentences were nine to twelve words long and were very pleased with the change in rhythm when they shortened some sentences and added to or combined others to make them longer. Finally, the last column was simply titled "Verbs." For each sentence, students had to list the verb or verbs they had used. Not only was this an excellent application of the grammar we were learning, but the students were able to quickly see that their papers were littered with linking verbs and dull, repetitive action verbs. We talked about verbs acting as the "engine" of the sentence. In turn, students excitedly tried out vivid, more descriptive verbs and rewrote sentences to "show rather than tell."

Over and over I emphasized that students were required to submit their rough drafts with revisions, along with their final copies, and I reminded them that the best revisions were those that were really "ugly." Students cut out words, drew arrows to reorder paragraphs, and added detail in the margins.

Best of all, they were having fun doing it and weren't complaining, since this was an in-class activity.

My next request was that they rewrite their introductions. I gave several ideas (see checklist) and then let students work for five to ten minutes rewriting. Several students shared their new paragraphs and, when asked, the majority of students conceded that this new introduction was better than what they originally had and would replace their prior work. We did the same with conclusions. Students often don't include conclusions at all or at the very most conclude with a pat ending ("It was all a dream.") or an agonizing "The End." With their teacher by their side and time to do it right, all of my students wrote conclusions that effectively tied up their essays.

Our next step was imagery. I orally walked students through revision ideas. I first said, "Add color. Avoid common names of colors, like yellow and red, but don't overdo it with the thesaurus and put in colors your classmates wouldn't recognize like 'beryl' or 'cyanic'" (which are both blue, by the way). Our second step was to name our nouns more specifically. Students analyzed their essays and replaced words like "dog" with "Old English Sheep hound," and "car" with "Volkswagen Bug." Third, I requested that they add a "sound" detail, but avoid using the words "hear" or "sound." Students created sentences like "The leaves crackled beneath my feet," and "I screamed in terror." Our next task was to add "smell detail" but avoid using the word "smell." My favorite revisions included "The odor of rotting fish wafted up the beach," and "The blooming lilies were a sweet perfume beneath my bedroom window." Fifth, students added "touch details" but avoided the words "feel" and "touch." Even my less eager eighth graders excitedly shared revisions such as, "The rough bark scratched my arm as I leaned against the old elm tree," and "Icy wind chilled me through my thin jacket."

They had truly caught the vision of revision. Every rough draft was literally splattered with green, purple, red, and teal revisions. Students were thrilled with their ability to visualize their writing, sharing their new paragraphs with their tablemates and excitedly calling me over to listen to their beautifully detailed prose. I heard no complaints as I challenged them to take what we'd learned in poetry and try to add similes, metaphors, and personification to their drafts.

As the period came to a close, students wrote the assignment in their notebooks for the following day: *Write a final copy of your essay using the revisions made during class.* Every student had a draft to work from, and we spent the next day in a way I had never expected. So many students wanted to read their essays aloud to the class that we devoted the entire period to listening. The audience's applause was genuine and vigorous as former "C" and "D" students read beautiful, musical prose to us. And grading the essays? It was as quick and satisfying as I would ever have hoped. Because of the improvements students had made during our revision session, they took more pride in their work, and I found there were even fewer mechanical and usage errors than normal. Plus, the added time dedicated to writing and revision inspired more students to complete a final copy rather than neglect the assignment completely.

As the year progressed, students took more responsibility during our revision sessions, and I was soon able to give out a "checklist" that they could work from. One thing did not change, however; for each essay, I made certain that at least one class period was reserved just for revision. Something so important, I assured them, must be given a respectful time for thought and work.

Success!

Hilma Wolitzer, author of many novels and short stories, wrote an essay about the twenty questions most commonly asked of writers to see "if there were, after all, some practical answers." When asked, "Do you revise?" she replied, "Is the sun going to set today? One of the great *pleasures* of writing is revision, the second and third and fourth chance you hardly ever get in any other area of your life" (Pack and Parini 289). As English teachers, so much of our time is spent in writing instruction and grading that it makes sense to engage in the process in the most effective and efficient way. Through my "working revision days" I was able to show students how much impact the very act of going back to a piece of writing and making sweeping changes can have on the end result. The interior decoration of words and paragraphs is a project worth doing right.

As for the stenciling of my bathroom, I ended up patching the holes and repainting the walls. I put masking tape around the edge of the floor and shower enclosure. I removed the outlet covers and meticulously painted around the light switches. Finally, I dotted my pastel paint meticulously into the tiny branches, leaves, and petals of my dogwood stencils. And my final result? Stunning!

Works Cited

Pack, Robert, and Jay Parini, eds. "Twenty Questions." *Writers on Writing.* Hanover and London: Middlebury College Press, 1991.

Rico, Gabriele Lusser. *Writing the Natural Way.* Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1983.

Willis, Meredith Sue. *Deep Revision: A Guide for Teachers, Students, and Other Writers.* New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1993.

SHELLY D. SMEDE teaches English in the Idaho Falls School District, Idaho Falls, Idaho.

APPENDIX: REVISION CHECKLIST

Choose at least five of the following to do on every rough draft. Your final draft should include obvious changes from your rough draft.

1. Rewrite your grabber (introduction). For Fiction: • Start with a description of the setting using sensory detail. • Start with a character in action. • Start with a character's thoughts or a description of the character. • Start with a conversation between characters.	For Non-Fiction: • Start with a story. • Start with an example. • Start with a question. • Start with a definition. • Start with a startling fact. • Start with a well-written summary. • Start with a quotation.
2. Rewrite your clincher (conclusion). (Start with a "concluding" word.) For Fiction: • Conclude with a final description of a setting. • Conclude with the character's thoughts. • Conclude with the character in action. • Conclude with a final conversation between characters. • "Frame" your essay; conclude by tying back into your introduction in some way.	For Non-Fiction: • Conclude with a thought-provoking question. • Conclude with a call to action. • Conclude with a thoughtful synthesis of what you've written. (Explain what it all means when seen as a whole.) • Conclude with an appropriate quote. • Conclude with an evaluation (your opinion on quality).
3. Add color description. Avoid common names of colors (like red, yellow, and blue), but don't overdo it with your thesaurus (beryl, cyanic, pavonine—which are all blue, by the way!)	"The *iron-gray* clouds promised to flood us with rain by mid-afternoon."
4. Use specific nouns. Not *car,* but *Porsche;* not *store,* but *K-mart;* not *dog,* but *St. Bernard;* not *street,* but *Woodruff Avenue;* not *girl,* but *Susan.*	"*Rainey* chased her mother's *Honda Accord* all the way down *First Street.*"
5. Use specific, action verbs. Not *walk,* but *saunter;* not *run,* but *sprint;* not *talk,* but *chatter;* not *see,* but *glimpse.*	"John *shuddered* and *cringed* from the heat."
6. Add "sound" details, but avoid using the words *hear* or *sound.*	"The Christmas paper shuddered and crinkled beneath the toddler's excited feet."
7. Add "smell" detail, but avoid using the word *smell.*	"The scent of cinnamon and oranges floated from the kitchen into our warm dining room."
8. Add "touch" detail, but avoid using the words *feel* or *touch.*	"The burlap bag rubbed against my bare leg like sandpaper as we waited to start the three-legged race."

9. Add unique and creative figurative language. • Similes • Metaphors • Personification	 • "Butterflies stream toward flowers like dead leaves in the wind." (simile) • "Her voice was a soft song lulling me to sleep." (metaphor) • "The tiny flowers in the window box whispered me awake." (personification)
10. Add complex sentences. • Begin with a subordinating conjunction, or include a subordinating conjunction within the sentence. • Make sure sentence has two parts. • Punctuate correctly.	"*Even though* Jack seemed calm, his head filled with anxious thoughts." "Jack's head filled with anxious thoughts, *though* he tried to act calm."
11. Vary sentence length. Include short sentences (1–5 words), average sentences (6–15 words), and long sentences (16+ words).	"I was terrified. Dusty cobwebs floated across my skin as I hurried to leave the old house. The tiny sliver of light where the front door opened into warm sunlight seemed a million miles away."
12. Vary sentence beginnings. Don't start two sentences in a paragraph with the same word or letter unless you are purposely using repetition. (Challenge: Start every sentence in your essay with a different word.)	
13. Avoid linking verbs: am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been. *You will usually have to reword or rearrange the sentence in order to use an action verb. SHOW, DON'T TELL!*	Dull: • "She was angry." Exciting: • "She *threw* her books across the room and *slammed* the door as she *stormed* out of the room."
14. Make sure you have used a LOGICAL form of ORGANIZATION. • Grabber (Introduction) • 3–4 Paragraphs of support • Clincher (Conclusion)	• Order of Importance (persuasive) • Spatial Order (descriptive) • Chronological Order (narrative, expository) • Comparison/Contrast (expository) • Other
15. Use transition words to guide your reader through your essay.	*First,* I did my homework. *Then,* I washed the dishes. *Finally,* I brushed my teeth and headed for bed.

EJ 25 years ago

Reveling in Revision

"If by revision the teacher means catching errors and nothing more, the student will not be likely to develop a very respectful attitude toward the process. Revision and rewriting, when properly done, can serve to strengthen any piece of writing quite substantially . . . [Donald] Murray suggests that all writing experience, if it is really to lead to any satisfying result, must pass through what he calls a Cycle of Craft involving prewriting, writing, and rewriting."

R. Baird Shuman. "What About Revision?" *EJ* 64.9 (1975): 40–43.