

# One

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## *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 group-mates 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.