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ABSTRACT

A major goal in teaching basic writers is to show them the importance of revision in the writing process, specifically revision for correctness (correcting), for creating content (adding), and for cutting out inessential material (subtracting). Revising for correctness includes varying or limiting the assigned revision tasks, varying the length of writing and revision assignments, assigning several distinct tasks of reading and revision of a single piece, varying the timing of rereading or the amounts reread, assigning collaborative rereading and rewriting, suggesting rereading aloud, intervening directly in the rereading and rewriting process, and using the holistic process of rereading for errors. Revising for creating meaning and content begins with helping students find good topics to work on, then uses oral or written brainstorming sessions to show how topics can be narrowed or broadened. Some aspects of revision by adding meaning include supplying examples or details left out, adding specific information to support generalizations, straightening out problems of logic, or otherwise clarifying a text. Along with adding meaning, revisers must cut out nonessential material, which includes removing "deadwood"--words or details that are vague, roundabout, repetitive, obvious, unnecessary, or contradictory. (EL)

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Teaching Rereading and Rewriting to "Basic Writers"

by Pamela S. Saur

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One major goal in teaching students classified as "basic writers" is conveying to them the importance of revision in the writing process. It is encouraging for these students to learn that experienced and successful writers are not a class of superior beings, but fellow toilers who must often re-write, re-think, scratch out, add or move material, correct and edit, endure periods of frustration, and seek help from dictionaries, reference books or other people. As advanced writers ourselves, we may share with them examples of some of our own revision processes - even seeing a messy, scratched out record of our own writing struggles might be illuminating. The other side to this encouraging news for our students, however, is the less appealing news that writing well will always involve a good deal of hard work, that improvement is always possible.

In a recent book on writing, Stephen Krashen wrote: "Perhaps the most dangerous false belief some writers have is that there is no writing process, that experienced writers simply sit down at the typewriter, begin at the beginning, and write through to the end, with no planning, revision, or break in the linear flow." (p. 33) He adds an important warning, that assigning complete essays within the time limits of a class period tends to encourage this false belief. As advanced writers ourselves, revision is one of the aspects of writing we take for granted. The distance between our own writing level

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and our students' can be a disadvantage; to teach our students what we do automatically, we need instruction and introspection to develop conscious awareness of our own writing strategies.

A fundamental problem in teaching "basic writers" to revise involves the sad, unfair fact that as they are just learning to reread their own work to revise it, they have a great many more pitfalls and problems to look out for than do more advanced writers. For many of our students, this unfortunate dilemma is intertwined with an accompanying sad and unfair fact that their spoken dialect is quite different from standard academic writing. It is of crucial importance that we teachers of basic writing do not add yet another layer of "unfairness" by expecting that our students, who are novices at rewriting, attempt to reread their work and see and correct overwhelming numbers of errors. By "error" of course, I mean deviations from standard written English required in college. I make it a point to explain that my goal is to teach such "formal" English, not to eradicate their "informal" conversational language.

Our goals and strategies in teaching revision must be identical or closely tied to our overall goals in basic writing. It is important that we clarify, to ourselves and to our students, what we hope for in terms of writing improvement. No doubt there exist a variety of good approaches to basic writing, but all must involve selection, limitation, and clear goals so that we teach a manageable amount of important material.

We must confront the facts that our students bring to us a history of failure, a lack of self-confidence, and substantial writing problems. To address their needs, we must find the right beginning; we must work out reasonable, fair, and workable goals; we must define what is "basic" and what is "advanced" in writing.

I believe that revision is basic to writing. It is logical that revision is basic to writing improvement, and it is important to convince students that it is. We cannot convince them, however, by merely lecturing them with the slogan: "Revision is important." We must take particular care to define precisely what we mean when we use this word; our students may have quite different ideas than we do about what revision involves; and we are quite likely to use it with a variety of different meanings ourselves. Similar care must be taken with related words such as "edit," "correct," or "proofread."

When we set our goals, we should also allow ourselves some flexibility, for our courses need to be partially governed by student needs; "advanced" topics must be addressed if necessary in response to serious writing problems. As is shown on the accompanying sample course syllabus, I also introduce some more "advanced" topics briefly in my course, noting that they are areas emphasized in future courses.

The need for flexibility noted, I would like to suggest three goals for teaching revision to basic writers. These are revision for correctness, for creating content, and for cutting out inessential material. In three words, the three goals I will

explain can be called correcting, adding, and subtracting.

The first of these, correcting, begins with finding errors. In more advanced courses, students will be concerned less and less with correctness, which can less pejoratively be termed writing in standard English, and more and more with refinement of style, organization, diction, and argumentation. Although current meaning or process oriented composition theory may sometimes make concern for correctness seem unfashionable, it is essential to the mission of the basic writing teacher. At the same time, it is essential for us to realize, as Sondra Perl's research has demonstrated, that editing for error is overused by many basic writers (pp. 29-30). Students inhibited by fear of error must be identified and taught to focus on meaning and postpone editing; they may require some individualized teaching.

Any exercise on English usage can contribute indirectly to learning to revise for correctness, especially exercises involving finding errors in texts read or seen by use of an overhead projector. Alternatives to try include finding errors in sentences or longer texts, in typed or handwritten samples, in genuine student writing or in teacher-made materials. Level of difficulty can be varied by varying information given concerning the number, location, and types of errors sought. It is of course difficult to make the transition between finding errors in exercises to finding them in ones own writing.

Turning to this task, I would now like to offer some suggestions for making the process of teaching rereading and rewriting for correctness less overwhelming for both teacher and student. Some of these approaches may be of some use for revision of content as well, but they are aimed primarily at the discovery and elimination of error.

1. Vary or limit revision tasks assigned. If a course covers certain usage issues or writing principles, require students to revise only those aspects of their writing. During a course, the aspects focussed upon can be increased as new topics are introduced.

2. Vary the length of writing assignments, and the revision assignments following.

Give short assignments (one paragraph or even one sentence at a time). Looking for particular errors, or even all errors, in such a short piece is a much more manageable and less threatening task than revising a long essay. Some assignments, such as journals or free-writing, may be left unrevised.

3. Assign several distinct tasks of reading and revision of a single piece.

Some composition teachers read and evaluate works several times, judging a single aspect, such as content, organization, or correctness each time. Students can also benefit from trying this approach. Spelling and punctuation are examples of problem areas which may merit a separate reading.

4. Vary the timing of rereading or the amounts reread.

or suggest that students reread only a paragraph or a sentence at a time. To reread for sentence-level errors such as fragments, runons, and disagreement, students can focus on rereading sentence by sentence, perhaps even blocking them off with their hands.

5. Assign collaborative rereading and rewriting.

Although this approach may seem more profitable for more experienced writers or for content revision, this is another option available. Group efforts are also more effective if tasks are limited in scope. Although the plagiarism issue must be discussed first, students may also be encouraged to seek feedback from family members or tutors.

6. Suggest rereading aloud.

This technique may not be helpful to all basic writers, but it is worth trying at least once, especially with a friend or tutor, or during a conference with the teacher. It may bring reading problems to light as well.

7. Intervene directly in the rereading and rewriting process with conferences or your red pencil.

Traditionally, writing teachers have themselves done the bulk of reading and revising students' work, overworking themselves and overwhelming their students with corrections. Feedback from a teacher will always be important, but it is best combined with other approaches and varied in scope, perhaps noting just some errors or patterns of errors, or a combination of strengths and weaknesses. We can also assign various responses, asking for

complete or partial revision after feedback rather than a glance at the grade and toss at the wastebasket.

8. Explain revising by "bells" and "jolts."

How do we reread "holistically," looking for all kinds of errors? My conceptualization explains two processes using the terms "bells" and "jolts." I admonish students that a warning "bell" should ring in their heads when they read or write such troublesome and often misused word pairs as "to/too; its/it's; there/their" and "your/you're." The "bell" may also sound when they encounter doubts over spelling (a doubt we try to cultivate in a spelling unit) or when they encounter situations in which they have a history of errors. Usually, however, we read or reread a text by following the thread of meaning or the sequence of events, expecting unity between meaning and language, and a smooth flow of both. The encounter of language errors or abrupt shifts or surprises in meaning distracts the reader from the meaning of a text; the reader is "jolted," often by a disruption in both language and meaning. For example, confusion of meaning results from such errors as misplaced modifiers, omitted punctuation marks, subject-verb or pronoun-antecedent disagreement or tense shifts.

Students understand, many of them too well, what it means to revise for error. They can also understand the ideas, although they are probably new ideas, of revising a piece for a different purpose or audience or with an expanded or narrowed topic. What we cannot expect students to grasp without explanation, however,

is the concept of revising the same piece on the same topic for the same audience. We must remember that, to some students, revising means copying over in ink! If we neglect to explain ourselves, it is our fault if we receive second drafts which are word-for-word copies of first drafts, changed only by a few usage corrections, more than likely those we have marked ourselves.

Research done by Sondra Perl and others shows that "experienced writers focus on content in revision." (Qtd. in Krashen, p. 17), but basic writers must be taught this concept. Turning from revision for correct form to revision of expressed meaning, I think the best most "basic" beginning involves invention itself, the generation of meaning. Concentration on the processes of creation will introduce our students to the same processes used to recreate, to revise. In my experience, almost all basic writers will produce works that are too short. In addition to the pervasive problem of skimpy content, some problems of organization, imprecision, and vagueness can also be addressed and expressed to them by the slogan: "Add meaning". In a sense, clarifying can also be thought of as adding meaning. Although revision for advanced writers involves more and more complex kinds of "changing" meaning, most of the content revision done by basic writers can be labeled simply "adding meaning."

Just as any usage exercise begins to teach revision for correctness, choosing topics to write on is the beginning of teaching revision for meaning, and helping our students find good topics is an important task. While focus on error has an

unavoidable negative aspect, focus on meaning and content gives us a more positive perspective that gives us the chance, if not the duty, to develop good relationships with our student and to build their self-confidence. By helping students generate their own content, their own meanings, we help make them aware of their own knowledge, experience, and powers of reasoning and expression. Not by accepting every random, confused or trivial thought, but by engaging in gentle and open-minded dialogue to help develop their thoughts, we honor our students' humanity, individuality and adulthood. At my institution, self-confidence is an express goal of the basic writing course, particularly for those students, many of them older, who are taking the course voluntarily. For some students, working through usage issues systematically does build self-confidence, but success in creating meaningful written content should do so for everyone.

Since many "basic writers" express themselves better orally, oral content development is helpful. For this reason, I recommend class "brainstorming" sessions, with the teacher leading discussion and taking notes on the blackboard, then showing different ways the material could be organized into essays. (Two topics I have had good sessions on are the merits of country, town or city life and the school prayer issue.) Such discussions demonstrate the connections between thinking, speaking, and writing and the all-important planning by jotting down rough notes. "Brainstorming" can also be done in pairs or small groups. Options involving brainstorming in the written

mode include Robert Denn's "Delphi Technique" (having students revise and comment in writing on each other's papers) and Joseph Tsujimoto's techniques of revising from memory, which his research supports, and of revising by "assuming the opposite stance." (Qtd. in Bauer and Cook, pp. 12 & 13). To encourage any type of re-shaping of content, the slogan "Stay rough longer" is a good reminder not to rush into a finished draft too soon.

Oral or written "brainstorming" sessions can show how topics can be narrowed or broadened and sub-topics thought out; they should demonstrate a combination of imaginative, all-inclusive gathering and more systematic questioning techniques. Ray Kytle, in his book on Prewriting, lists five steps to the "brainstorming" process: exploration, limitation, discovery, classification, and selecting and ordering. (p. 67) He also explains analysis by use of four systematic questions: "What are the characteristics of my subject? How does my subject differ from other similar subjects? What is the range of variation of my subject? What is the context of my subject?" (p. 81) Dean Memering and Frank O'Hare analyze brainstorming as a systematic questioning process involving focusing and expanding within the focus by considering the journalistic questions "who? what? when? where? why? how" and the analysis of "action, agent, agency, scene, and purpose." (p. 67-73) A word of caution: such analyses of the writing process should be presented, one topic at a time, only if they are well supported with examples and applications. Few basic writers are interested in abstract lectures on composi-

tion theory. Sequence: A Basic Writing Course by Rory D. Stephens, is one useful text that supports key theoretical issues with exercises applying and explaining them.

Some of the aspects of revision by "adding meaning," include supplying examples or details left out, adding specific information to support generalizations, straightening out problems of logic or otherwise clarifying a text. When meaning is thus revised, some language problems are likely to be solved also, a fact that warns against premature editing for correctness. If students can be shown examples of meaning clarification resulting in correction of language errors, they may gain important insights concerning the value of correctness and the connection between content and form. Some discussion of usage issues on the basis of meaning without use of grammatical terminology is useful in conveying this connection. James L. Collins is one scholar who has pointed out that "we need to place a greater priority on teaching for meaning," (p. 198) noting that "making meaning should come before making meaning conform to standard English." (p. 199) In helping students revise by adding meaning, he notes that our job is "discovering and elaborating the meaning which is latent in language." He continues "we need to ask for more information that connects and expands what has been written. When student writing only suggests or 'points toward' meaning, we need to ask for complete representation of meaning." (p. 205) Note that asking what is meant can also be done by fellow students or other readers without using any

technical terms. In a profound statement, Collins summarizes: "Asking what is meant is probably the most fundamental and important question we can present to our students." (p. 213) I would add the related question: "Does this mean this?" for we need to intervene as skilled reflective responders; drawing from the student by skillful questioning is the process of Socratic teaching. Joann B. Johnson has examined the use of questioning by writing tutors, noting the limits of the technique and the great value of active listening and paraphrasing along with posing questions. (pp. 1-4) Along with adding meaning, revisers must subtract material that does not contribute, or even detracts from the emerging messages. Here we come upon another "unfairness" to guard against. We must take care in making assignments of a particular word or page length that we do not encourage generation of meaningless words. We must be careful not to write "Cut this, omit this," all over the paper and "Make this paper longer on the bottom: Frustrating as the idea may be, we do need to tell our students that adding and subtracting are two sides of the same process. I have two related slogans for revising: "Cut it out or spell it out" and "Add meaning, take away words." Both refer to the same essential idea: the essence of an essay is the meaning expressed in as few words as necessary. An important aspect of editing is removing deadwood, words or details that are vague, roundabout, repetitive, obvious, unnecessary, or contradictory. Sentence combining exercises and exercises involving shortening ridiculously wordy passages are

excellent and amusing ways to practice this aspect of revision. A game can be made of shortening a passage as much as possible while retaining meaning. Other relevant activities include distinguishing expressions that are vague or precise, general or specific, abstract or concrete.

Perhaps all writing teaching is in a sense the teaching of rewriting, but we cannot expect the processes of rereading ones own work and rewriting it to come automatically. Like all good teaching, teaching these skills rests upon truly knowing our subject matter, our students, and a variety of ways to bring the two together.

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A College Basic Writing Course: Sample Topic Syllabus

A. Following assignments/Setting goals/Addressing reader.

B. Correct Writing:

1. Writing in sentences (no more, no less)
 - a. Avoiding fragments
 - b. Avoiding runtogether sentences
 - c. Avoiding clauses with conjunctions that cannot stand alone
2. Consistency and agreement
 - a. Making subjects and verbs agree
 - b. Making pronouns and antecedents agree
 - c. Avoiding tense shifts
 - d. Avoiding subject shifts
 - e. Avoiding faulty logic
 - f. Avoiding misplaced/dangling modifiers
3. Correct word choices
 - a. Tricky pairs (examples: to/too; there/their)
 - b. Verb and auxiliary verb usage
4. Correct spelling
 - a. Dictionary use
 - b. Improving your spelling
 - c. Correct word endings ("s", "ed")
5. Correct punctuation

C. Content:

1. Topic choice and topic boundaries
2. Using specific details, examples, or reasons to support generalizations
3. Expanding the length of your papers
 - a. "Brainstorming" techniques
 - b. Adding meaning, taking away words
4. Revising content

D. Organization:

1. Paragraphs (topic sentences, length)
2. Introductions and conclusions
3. Transitional expressions

E. Types of Essays:

1. Informative (Narration, Description, Summaries)
2. Persuasive (Backing up a thesis statement)

F. Style:

1. Cutting repetition of words and ideas
2. Using a variety of sentence patterns
3. Best (most exact) word choices
4. Using formal language

Teaching Rereading and Rewriting to "Basic Writers": Summary

by Pamela S. Saur, Ph.D.

Suggestions for teachers:

1. Analyze your own writing and revising processes.
2. Select limited, manageable goals; define what is "basic."
3. Allow flexibility to respond to students' psychological and educational needs. For example, address "advanced" topics if they cause problems; consider introducing some.
4. Teach revision by focussing on:
 1. Correctness
 2. Creating and adding meaning
 3. Cutting out words that do not add meaning.
3. Try flexible revision assignments:
 1. Vary revision tasks assigned.
 2. Vary lengths of writing assignments, and revision tasks following.
 3. Assign several distinct tasks of reading and revision of a single piece.
 4. Vary the timing of rereading or the amounts reread.
 5. Assign collaborative rereading and rewriting.
 6. Suggest rereading aloud.
 7. Intervene directly in the rereading and rewriting process with conferences or your red pencil.
 8. Explain revising by "bells" and "jolts."
4. Useful slogans for students:
 1. Revise by "bells" and "jolts."
 2. "Stay rough longer."
 3. "Brainstorm" to develop meaning.
 4. "Cut it out or spell it out."
 5. "Add meaning, take away words."