The "4S" Method for Helping Students Revise Their Writing

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Abstract

Research suggests that basic writers are willing to edit but reluctant to revise their writing. In other words, they make surface-level changes to grammar, spelling, and punctuation but tend not to re-conceive content, structure, style, and cohesion. This paper argues that we need more instructional strategies that will help students understand what revision is, why it is essential, and how it can be done effectively. It presents the "4S" Method for Helping Students Revise Their Writing." The Method reminds students they must reconsider structure, substance, sequence, and style as they revise successive drafts of their texts. It also recommends instructional strategies that will help writing teachers help students revise their work to improve its content, structure, cohesion, and style.

Key Words: revising, editing, structure, substance, sequence, style

The "4S" Method for Helping Students Revise Their Writing

Revision is the process of making alterations and improvements to a piece of written discourse at the overall structural and/or paragraph levels. It is distinct from its rhetorical cousin, editing, which is the process of making changes and corrections to the words and/or sentences within a piece of writing. Revising is a recursive process; it is not a final or penultimate stage in the creation of a written text; writers usually revise their work as they write a draft, not only after a draft is done. Writers revise to clarify the purpose, the thesis of their text. They revise in search of the best way to impose an order and structure onto their work, an order and structure that will best help readers follow along and understand the content of the text. They revise to make that order and structure clear to their readers. They revise to add the information—the examples, details, definitions, comparisons, contrasts, causes, effects—their readers need to comprehend the texts they are creating. They revise to remove the information readers would find superfluous. Writers undertake all aspects of the writing process for the benefit of their readers—to make their texts "reader friendly,"—but no component of the process is more selfless than revision.

The ability to revise writing effectively separates, rhetorically at least, the girls and the boys from the women and the men. Mature writers, as a rule, edit <u>and</u> revise their work; immature writers, as a rule, edit but give revision short shrift. In their study of revising

practices, Flower et al. found that beginning writers were more inclined to proofread than revise their texts. Any inclination to revise they might have had was stymied because they had no clear sense of what the thesis, the "gist," of their text was. They had trouble detecting sections of their texts in need of revision, and, when they did realize where changes were needed, they had trouble assessing the exact nature of the problem and implementing the required revisions. Successful writers, on the other hand, composed texts that had a clear purpose, a goal to achieve, and, when they revised, they did so to clarify and enhance and thereby reach that goal.

Studies by other compositionists have reached similar conclusions. Nancy Sommers examined the revision strategies of student writers and experienced adult writers. She found that student writers are more concerned with changing the words in a draft than in adding content or in reshaping existing content. When they did revise, they tended to restrict revision to their opening paragraph. Richard Beach, similarly, found that weaker writers tended not to revise for content, while stronger writers revised to clarify their thesis and to reconsider the need to develop ideas in more detail. Robert Yagelski examined the editing and revising strategies of twelfth-graders and found that surface changes accounted for 81.7% of the changes they made to their texts, while substantive structural and content changes accounted for only 18.3% of the changes they made. Experienced writers, on the other hand, tend to change the structure, add to the content, and clarify the ideas of an early draft. Student writers often seem unaware of the need to change the big picture in ways that help the reader see it.

Why are student writers reluctant to revise their work? It is partly because students too often equate correct writing with good writing: as long as there are no errors in

grammar, spelling, and punctuation, they reason, their work will be good, and the teacher will give them a good grade. It's partly because word-processing programs, whose spell and grammar checks are, at least, somewhat helpful in editing, do not offer effective programs to help students revise. It's partly because revision is hard work, demanding the metacognitive ability to reflect critically on work in progress and to alter that work in the context of that reflection. And it's partly because we lack simple but effective instructional strategies that will encourage students to revise and provide them with some basic guidelines for doing so.

The aim of this paper is to present a simple revision taxonomy that should alert students to the importance of revision and provide them with an easy-to-remember framework for beginning and sustaining the revising process. It is a "4S" taxonomy, the S's representing the four components of the revising process: structure, substance, sequence, and style. I stress "components" and not "stages" because the revising process is recursive and because writers often work with two of the components—substance and style, for example—concurrently.

Structure

Students should revise their written work to tighten its structure, to make certain each paragraph supports, elucidates, develops their thesis. A sound structure enhances clarity and readability; a random or rambling structure breeds ambiguity, a virtue for a poem, perhaps, but not for a college essay.

Basic writing students need to know that the writing process involves much more than filling out a plan developed during the pre-writing stage. Planning is an important part of pre-writing, but a pre-written plan is clay not granite and will be re-shaped as the writing process unfolds and takes the writer places the plan did not anticipate. A pre-written plan is useful in that it provides some guidance and some substance, but plans change as writers cast the points of the plan into sentences that provoke new ideas. We must encourage our students to make an outline of their work not only before they write but also <u>after</u> they believe their text is complete and ready to be turned in. It is at this point—the point where writers believe their work is over—that an outline will reveal structural flaws that need to be corrected with another round of revision. A writer should have some idea where she is going before her journey begins but must know exactly how she got there when it ends.

I endorse, in a limited way, assigning the infamous five-paragraph theme, as a way of alerting students to the importance of structure. With its clear thesis at the end of the first paragraph, its three paragraphs to elucidate the thesis, and its concluding paragraph to summarize the body and reaffirm the thesis, the five-paragraph essay reminds us of the relationships among meaning, clarity, and structure. It is widely condemned because it is artificial, it constricts the creativity important to the writing process, and it is anomalous, existing as it does only in writing classes for beginners. Its detractors have a point and even basic writing students should soon move beyond its confines to more complex writing assignments. But if it has pedagogical value, it should not be condemned simply it is not a genre within which journalists, academics, and other professional writers work.

Concert pianists don't play the scales in public, but they were an essential part of their apprenticeship, and their public performances are better for having learned them.

Substance

We must urge our students to check each paragraph of their drafts to make sure they contain the examples, details, comparisons, contrasts, definitions, causes, effects, anecdotes readers will require to understand completely the points the essay is making. I tell my students the old joke about a traveling salesman who went into a pet store in Costa Rica and found there a bird that could speak eight different languages. The bird cost $10,000, but he had to buy it as a gift for his mother who was a linguistics professor. So he sent her the bird with this note: "Dear Mom: I know how much you are going to enjoy this bird." Two weeks later, the salesman received his mother's reply: "Thank you. You were so right. I did enjoy the bird. It was delicious." The salesman failed to revise his letter, failed to explain or elaborate on the crucial infinitive "to enjoy" and— literally—paid a high price for his rhetorical incompetence.

Lack of substance is especially problematic in the paragraphs in the body of student essays. The conventions for effective introductions and conclusions are generally straightforward. The introductory paragraph (or introductory discourse bloc, in a longer paper) needs, basically, to engage the reader and present the thesis. The concluding paragraph (or concluding discourse bloc in a longer paper) needs to reaffirm the thesis and establish a sense of closure. Students may have problems with introductions and conclusion but lack of substance is not usually one of them.

Students need some strategies so they can, first, recognize an underdeveloped body paragraph when they re-read it and, second, revise it to give it the substance it needs. The average paragraph in an exemplary student essay is about 132 words long (Soles), so our students should be on alert if they have paragraphs shorter than that average, especially if they have a succession of paragraphs that are too short. These paragraphs won't necessarily be under-developed, but their less-than-average length marks them as paragraphs that the writer should consider revising.

Having determined that a paragraph lacks substance, student writers need strategies to develop that paragraph in more detail. Since a paragraph might lack substance because it does not have a clear topic and, hence, has nothing upon which to hang needed information, instruction in revising for substance begins by explaining to students that a body paragraph needs a topic sentence. The topic sentence might be implied, often is, in fact, in effective writing, as researchers who have studied the frequency and placement of topic sentences have discovered (Braddock). But even if implicit, the paragraph's topic must be clear enough that a student writer <u>could</u> express it in a single sentence, even if she chooses not to include that sentence, word-for-word, in the paragraph. Once the student identifies the topic sentence, implicit or explicit, she can reflect upon the information necessary to elucidate the topic to the extent readers need to grasp its meaning and implications, then add the details, examples, definitions, causes, effects, comparisons, contrasts, and anecdotes readers need and expect.

It is true that student writers need reader feedback while they are revising because they lack that radar experienced writers have that alerts them to an inadequately developed paragraph. The peer and/or teacher conference that focuses on revising a

draft of a writing assignment is effective in helping students identify and develop anemic paragraphs. Another great pedagogical strategy is to share with your students successive drafts of one of your own pieces of writing, one, especially, that needed to be revised to make it more substantial. Explain to your students how you determined the need for additional content and how exactly you revised your text to make it more substantial.

Sequence

While revising their work, students need to consider the sequence within which their paragraphs and sentences are arranged and presented. Effective writers use cohesive ties to establish clear and logical sequencing between and among the sentences within a paragraph and between and among the paragraphs within the text as a whole. Research indicates that better writers use more of these cohesive ties than less skilled writers do (Witte and Faigley). A sound structure certainly helps create the impression that the paragraphs within a text are sequential. But an effective text will have other cohesive signals, within paragraphs, to clarify relationships between and among sentences and so guide readers smoothly along the journey on which the text is taking them.

There are essentially three kinds of cohesive signals, based upon the important rhetorical principles of transition, repetition, and substitution. Transitional words and phrases, such as but, on the other hand, moreover, for example, however, and in addition signal readers that the writer will contradict or elaborate upon the subject of the previous sentence or, if the sentence is the first in the paragraph, the previous paragraph. Writers often repeat a key word, or a variation of it, to establish cohesion within a paragraph. In

the paragraph before this one, for example, the word "sequence" is in the first sentence; the word "sequencing" is in the second sentence; and the word "sequential" is in the fourth sentence. Since too much repetition is a solecism, writers often achieve cohesion by using a synonym for, or a pronoun in place of, a key word.

The rhetoric or handbook your program uses will likely discuss, in some detail, cohesive ties and how student writers should use them to improve their work. Given the indispensable role cohesive ties play in the construction of a well-ordered and sequential text, this is an important chapter to cover thoroughly. Call attention, as well, to the ways in which the authors of the model texts you read and discuss in your class use cohesive ties to maintain the order and flow of their essays.

Of course, students need to recognize a lack of sequence in their own writing before they can revise to improve that text's cohesion. Peers and teachers, after reviewing a draft of a student's work, will often spot places where the text's cohesion needs to be tightened, especially those places the writer misses because she knows the text so well she makes the transitions subconsciously and forgets to add them for the benefit of her readers. Also encourage your students to read their work aloud as they revise; when a writer hears her text, she will often find places where transitions need to be tightened, places she would miss during a silent re-reading. Indeed, the read-aloud is a most effective strategy for discerning weaknesses not only in the sequence of a text but in its structure, substance, and style, as well.

Style

Finally, insist your students revise their written work to reconsider and, if necessary, improve its style. Style is the image a text presents, the way in which it is turned out, how it is dressed. Like style in clothes, style in writing can be formal, informal, slovenly, whimsical, hip, retro, appropriate, inappropriate, athletic, gothic, or punk, depending, as usual, upon the writer's purpose and context and the needs and expectations of her readers. Reflecting on the efficacy of their style, then, our students need to make certain the style of their text suits its purpose and is appropriate for its audience. Usually, in a writing class, this equates to a narrative or to an academic essay that presents information to or develops an argument for an English teacher.

Research indicates that students with a robust writing style use subordination effectively to vary the length, structure and rhythm of their sentences and to establish cohesion and indicate relationships between and among elements within sentences in sophisticated ways. They often begin their sentences with subjects but have at their disposal other effective strategies for beginning sentences, in the interest, again, of rhythm, variety, and cohesion. They have vocabularies broad enough to select appropriate, concrete, and specific words for a variety of rhetorical contexts. They adhere rigorously to the conventions of Standard English. Strong student writers tend to be cautious and conservative in their use of figurative language, occasionally quoting metaphors used by source authors but eschewing figurative language themselves. Their work has that upright, formal tone that their rigorous adherence to the conventions of Standard English engenders, though its probity may be undermined—in a good way—by the use of a first or second-person point-of-view, which helps deflect criticism that the style is too remote, unfriendly, pompous, or pretentious (Soles).

Knowing these qualities of an effective writing style will help your students revise their own writing to improve its style. But style is the subtlest of the qualities of good writing and, for most basic writers, the ability to recognize a good style when they see it will not translate into the ability to revise their own work to improve its style. There are a variety of time-tested instructional strategies that will help us teach our students how to revise for style.

(Re)-consider sentence combining training, as a viable instructional strategy. Influential studies conducted in the 1970's illustrated the benefits of sentence combining training (O'Hare; Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg) and convinced many English teachers to include practice in sentence combining in their composition courses. The sentence-combining star faded when later research suggested that, while sentence combining does improve syntactic maturity, it did not necessarily improve overall writing quality (Faigley; Crowhurst), and it could increase the rate of error in sentence structure, the placement of modifiers, especially. But syntactic maturity is an essential aspect of an effective style and, as such, is a worthy goal for a writing class. Used judiciously, exercises in sentence combining are a good way of improving students' writing style.

So, too, might practice in writing cumulative sentences, an instructional strategy Francis Christensen advocates. Expert writers, Christensen notes, write "cumulative sentences," ones that have a base clause onto which modifying words, phrases, and clauses have been added. Writing teachers, he recommends, should expose students to well-written cumulative sentences, then provide them with a basic sentence, which they are to expand, based upon the pattern of the model. When they can do this well, they are ready to compose their own cumulative sentences but ones still based upon the pattern

and syntax of the model. This exercise, Christensen argues, develop style while reinforcing the importance of elaborating ideas.

Jane Walpole also recommends sentence play as an ally in "the vigorous pursuit of style and grace." She has her students study a model sentence and then re-work and revise it in many ways: changing its diction; deleting, transposing, and transforming certain elements within it; reversing the sentence-combining process by reducing it to a series of short sentences; and finally generating new sentences imitating the pattern of the model.   This exercise, she hopes, will "increase our students' sensitivity to words and rhythms….enlarge their repertoires of grammatical and stylistic options….enhance their appreciation of subtle grace, apt style, clean vigor" (169).

Corbett also champions imitation as an effective exercise to improve students' sentence structure.   He presents the testimony of good writers from Malcolm X to Somerset Maugham, in support of his view that basic writers who imitate the style of accomplished writers will gradually develop their own unique and effective style. He suggests students begin by copying exemplary passages from the work of famous writers word for word, before they move on to create their own sentences, imitating the pattern, hence the style, of model sentences written, again, by accomplished writers. This exercise, Corbett claims, will pay "high dividends to those who use it conscientiously" (495), though most writing teachers are going to need more convincing before they assign any word-for-word copying in a composition class, no matter how compelling the style of the copied work might be.

Writing teachers also need to help students build a strong vocabulary if we are to help students cultivate a good style. Corbett implores students to read actively, looking up

unfamiliar words in a dictionary and reflecting upon their meaning, especially within the context of the passage they are reading (385). There is some value, he acknowledges, in simply studying and looking up unfamiliar words on a list a teacher presents to students, but he stresses the advantages of learning unfamiliar words in the context of a passage in which they appear (386). Glenn, Goldtwaithe, and Connors also champion avid and active reading, overstating their case, perhaps, when they claim that "Only avid and accomplished readers can generate and perceive style, recognizing it in a contextual continuum" (255).

They are correct, though, in their assertion that stylish prose sounds good. If the structure of the sentences is varied, if the words and phrases are ordered effectively, if the diction is precise and accurate, the prose flows; it has cadence and rhythm. Walpole recommends writing teachers read excellent prose aloud to their students, "just to let students attune their ears to the rhythm and resonance of vigorous prose" (164). Corbett encourages students to read their own work aloud before handing it in to help them create euphonious sentences, specifically "to catch awkward rhythms, clashing vowel and consonant combinations…, and distracting jingles" (408). Ronald, similarly, urges students to read their work aloud to a real person, listening to determine if their work sounds natural or if it sounds like the work of "a student performing for a grade" (205).

The 4S revision taxonomy offers a simple mnemonic that will help students remember what they are supposed to do when they revise their work. It may not guarantee that they will apply it successfully and hereafter produce well-organized, robust, sequential, and stylish texts. But if your students know exactly what the components of the revising

process are, they will certainly be more ready and willing to revise and, likely, more able, as well.

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