

Thorough Revising

is no such thing as good-writing-in-general. You must make it good for this purpose with this audience.

Next, *read over what you've written and mark the important bits* (just as in quick revising).

Next, *find your main point or center of gravity*. This is the same step as in quick revising, but this time you don't take No for an answer as you sometimes had to do when you were revising in a hurry. Sometimes, of course, you knew precisely what your main point or focus was even before you started writing; the whole reason for sitting down to write in the first place was to focus on exactly that one thing which you had already formulated in your head. (But don't hold too tenaciously to it. The process of writing will often lead you to better things.)

But if you haven't found your main point during the writing process, now you must demand it. This is often a crucial, delicate, frustrating process. You have lots of good stuff, but as you turn it over and over, you can't find the center, the main point, the one thing that sums it all up. You are trying to wrestle a powerful snake into a bottle. It writhes and writhes and you can't get control over it. You have two main options, putting it aside and wrestling some more.

Putting it aside for a couple of days is easiest and best. The main point will often come perfectly clear to you all by itself, as you are walking around doing something entirely different or else when you sit down again after your vacation. Your mind will chew on the problem by itself while you are supposedly ignoring it. But if that doesn't work, you'll just have to wrestle some more with that snake. Indeed, you probably get the most benefit from a vacation if you wrestle a bit first to get the problem fully permeated into your mind for your unconscious to work on it.

Here are the ways of wrestling that I have found most useful.

- Arrange the good bits in the order that makes most sense. That helps you see where they are coming from or trying to go.
- Think some more about who will read these words. You're not looking for some main point in general but the best emphasis for getting through to those readers.

- Summarize each of the good bits in one sentence (or in two or three sentences if there are two or three separate points in one passage). By making each point *assert* something in a full sentence with a verb, you clarify half-thought ideas. If you put

Where the leverage in quick revising comes from stepping out of your skin and being someone else, the leverage in thorough revising comes from time. Not just work time, but putting-it-away-and-forgetting-about-it time. What you can accomplish in three hours of wrestling with your draft can be accomplished in one hour—and a much less frustrating hour, too—if you first set it aside for a day or two. Indeed, there are some improvements you can never achieve through wrestling alone, such as a fresh conception of your material. Often you can only find a new shape for your piece if you take a vacation—a time for forgetting, for preconscious work, for letting it get bumped out of shape by an experience from an entirely different part of your life. So make sure that at least on two occasions during the thorough revising process you put your writing aside long enough to forget about it—a couple of days or better yet a couple of weeks: once during the first half when you are hammering out and organizing the thing as a whole and once during the second half when you are cleaning up and polishing and paying more attention to details of language.

Shaping Your Meaning

First step in thorough revising: if this piece is intended for an audience, *get your readers and purpose clearly in mind*. Just as with quick revising or any revising, you must now keep your audience and purpose clearly in mind, especially if you allowed yourself to ignore them while you were getting words on paper. There

these sentences then into a logical order you will almost invariably find your main point.

- Do more raw writing. Abandon the detached consciousness of critical revising and plunge back into uncritical, involved writing. This new burst of unworried words, after you have been wrestling, helps you find that main idea.

- Last resort. If you still can't find the main point, make a "false" main point. Distort or oversimplify what you are saying and force as many of your points as possible into a slightly wrong focus that is easier to find than the right one you are seeking. Or adopt the opposite point of view and quickly make up an outline of assertions in support of it. Summing things up into this simpler or distorted or dead-wrong point of view will often produce the idea you have been looking for.

- And of course another vacation is always a good idea if wrestling doesn't go well.

Next, *put your parts in order on the basis of your main idea*. If the pieces don't fall easily into an obvious order you must make an outline that consists of full-sentence assertions: find each idea in your best bits of raw writing, force yourself to summarize it in a sentence that asserts something, then put those sentences into the order that tells the most coherent story. (Of course there are likely to be gaps you must fill in to make a coherent story.)

Next, *make a draft*. Using your outline as a blueprint, write out a rough draft of the whole thing. You may be able to use large chunks of your original writing. Scissors and a paste can carry you a long way (if you were smart enough to write on only one side of the paper). But often you must write lots out new. The goal, however, isn't perfect, clear, graceful language. I, at least, fare better if I just try to get my thoughts *said* and don't worry too much about awkwardness, repetition, roundaboutness—even imprecision—at this stage. There are all these decisions I must make as I write a draft: can I use this favorite word again here? does this distinction belong here or later? which of two similar words is the right one? These decisions are always easier to make *after* I have written out a draft of the whole thing. (The general principle here is to bring the whole piece along gradually: don't polish any particular section very much *more* than any other, since *final* decisions here always depend on final decisions there. It feels like keeping lots of balls in the air at once, but it's easier in the long run.)

Possible detour: deal with a mess. This is a stage in revising when you have to be ready with a mess. Perhaps just a minor mess. For example, as you write out sentences they tug against the structure you have carefully worked out. Perhaps you are writing out the third idea in your list of assertions, but it keeps grabbing the reins out of your hands and leading to the seventh assertion instead of the fourth one. Three-to-four seems so logical in an outline, but three-to-seven feels unavoidable as the words themselves flow into sentences. The question is whether the writing-out has led you to a better order or whether you should resist that tug and force the sentences to follow the original organization. To make up your mind you need perspective and taking a break is probably the best way to get it. Often, in fact, it doesn't much matter which way to go, but you need new perspective to see that clearly.

But sometimes it's a major mess, or at least it threatens to be one: not just a possible minor shifting of points but a major coming apart. Perhaps you have to change your mind about what you thought you were saying.

Here's how it's apt to happen. You know your main point and your organizing shape and you are writing out a draft, but now in mid-stride, as you are explaining some small detail or bringing in some small illustration you hadn't thought of before, suddenly that detail turns into a land mine and blows up your whole draft in your hands. You've stumbled onto a specific case that seems to deny or disprove your main idea. Or perhaps as you are arguing some point you try to think of what an opponent might say—as you should—and suddenly you think of an opposing argument that you cannot answer. This is the most discouraging moment in expository or conceptual writing. It helps to realize not only that this kind of thing is common in writing, but that, despite how you feel right now, something *good* just happened to you.

For this is how new and better ideas arrive. They don't come out of the blue. They come from noticing difficulties with what you believed, small details or particular cases that don't fit what otherwise feels right. The mark of the person who can actually make *progress* in thinking—who can sit down at 8:30 with one set of ideas and stand up at 11 with better ideas—is a willingness to notice and listen to these inconvenient little details, these annoying loose ends, these embarrassments or puzzles, instead of impatiently sweeping them under the rug. A good new idea looks obvious and

inevitable *after* it is all worked out and the dust has settled, but in the beginning it just feels annoying and the wrong old idea feels persuasively correct.

So when you first stumble onto this difficulty as you are engaged in writing out a draft, you don't know whether it is just an unimportant exception or whether it is trying to lead you to a new better view of things. You've struggled to work out your thinking and your organization and now this pesky detail calls it into question but gives you nothing to replace it with. You have nothing but a doubt, a difficulty, and some bent edges where you tried to force this puzzle piece into the only available opening.

It's at this point you have to make a decision. If you don't have the time or willingness to let things really come apart, then you'd better retreat and save this interesting dilemma till later. Since you can't make the puzzle piece fit your structure, you must somehow sweep it under the rug or put it in your pocket and hope no one notices. Distract your reader away from the unfilled hole to other issues. You can hope that your original idea and structure are in fact right and that this (now pocketed) detail only *looks* like an exception.

But if you are willing to follow this unravelling thread where it leads, you have to put aside everything you have already done. The most useful tactic at this point is usually to plunge into new, open, unworried writing: to think on paper and let this difficulty or seed of doubt grow. Follow new thoughts where they lead; plunge deeper into the forest of confusion. Here, in my experience, are the outcomes you can expect:

- Your new exploration may lead you quickly to a happy ending. You discover how to explain this apparent contradiction, and happily your main idea and original structure remain solid—indeed strengthened. The apparent contradiction may be unimportant and not worth mentioning or it may be very helpful to you as a vivid detail to illustrate your main idea.

- But sometimes this exception or anomaly, when you really let yourself explore it in a burst of new writing, leads you to a genuinely new idea or new way of looking at everything you have been saying. Perhaps your old idea is all wrong and must be scrapped altogether.

- Sometimes you go through an interesting change. First you see your new idea as right and your old idea as wrong, and you

immerse yourself in all the implications of the new idea. But then gradually you come around to see how the old "wrong" idea is nevertheless right *in a sense* or *in certain cases*. For now you see it through new eyes and you can explain it more fruitfully as a sub-case of your new idea.*

- The most frustrating outcome is when you pursue your contradiction farther and farther into the woods and you just get more and more lost. You are left entirely stuck. You have lost your faith in your original idea, but you haven't figured out anything coherent or complete to replace it with. In the long run this is a happy state of affairs: you are likely to be on to something important, you are charting new territory, this is the best kind of thinking—the kind that makes you smart and creative. But for the moment, you are stuck.

The most effective way to deal with this frustrating case is of course to take a break. Put your writing away and forget about it for more than a day or two. You should be doing this periodically throughout revising. But there is another tactic that also helps: stop trying to solve the dilemma and simply *accept* it and *describe* it. Stop beating your head against the wall, stop pushing so hard against an immovable object, take the pressure off your shoulders. Pretend that things are just fine as they stand now, in their state of contradiction or confusion, and *describe* the conflicting details or ideas as accurately and happily as you can. This will often lead to new perspective and a solution.

Of course you don't always have to take this detour through a mess. Most of the time you just write out your new draft as planned. I could make my story simpler by ignoring this occasional problem. But when the mess lands on you, you badly need assurance and help. And I suggest you be tolerant or even welcoming toward this whole process of things coming apart in your hands after you thought you had them all organized. It is the most trust-

* I went through this process numerous times, but I wasn't able to see clearly what was happening to me—it felt simply like fumbling—till I read Thomas Kuhn's interesting book on how the scientific community moves from one explanation of things to a new one, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1970). The classic case is Einstein discovering that Newtonian mechanics are all wrong—strictly speaking and from the largest perspective—but that in fact the Newtonian model still works for most events of human scale. In a sense, Einstein leaves all of Newtonian mechanics still standing validly in place, but forces scientists to understand it in a different light—as a special limited case of the larger principles of relativity.

worthy way to create new ideas. If these messes never happen to you, perhaps you are not listening sympathetically enough for pesky examples and contrary arguments.

At the end of this messy detour you *may* have to begin the revising process over again: mark the good bits, find your main point, make an outline, and write it out. But usually, once you have really thought through your reconceptualization, you can make adjustments to your draft without too much discomfort.

These detours reflect the fact that in any serious or difficult piece of writing you must sometimes move back and forth between getting words on paper and revising. Sometimes the producing process is given some focus by standing back and trying to revise and shape and make sense of things; and sometimes the revising process is perked up by a new immersion into the creative process of writing quickly—perhaps even writing off into an unknown direction. (See pp. 349–51, Chapter 28, for a fuller account of my own experience with this kind of alternation.)

Strengthening Your Language

Next, *tighten and clean up your language*. The hardest work is done now. You have a newly written draft that says what you want to say in the right order. Nevertheless it is liable to be imprecise, wordy, and awkward. You need to stop being the writer and read over your draft with the fresh eyes of a reader. The best way is to put it aside for a while and then to read it over out loud.

In cleaning up your language you have two goals: precision and energy. The more you zero in on the precise meaning you have in mind, the more you can strip away unnecessary words and thereby energize your language. The key activity is crossing out words and sentences. Your new draft may have large chunks from your raw first-draft writing, rearranged with scissors and staples. These sections may need extensive cutting. When you wrote them during the producing process you were permitting yourself to write without necessarily making up your mind what you were saying. You were hurrying and allowing for ambiguity and ambivalence—driving a small crowd of horses down the road without making up your mind which one to ride on. It's natural to end up with too many meanings, too many words, too many strands—sometimes in one sentence. But now you have forced yourself to choose among

strands and decide exactly what you mean; you must ruthlessly throw away all the words that were part of abandoned strands. Some may feel very precious to you.

And even your new writing probably needs cutting. Although you were engaged in saying, as it were, only *one* thing instead of allowing for multiple possibilities, you probably didn't say it as clearly and economically as you can now when you look back as a *reader* instead of as a writer.

Remember that every word you throw away means another unit of energy preserved, another reader who may hang in there a bit longer before giving up. The psychological transaction that helps most in cutting is to read your words out loud. Look for places where you stumble or get lost in the middle of a sentence. These are obvious awkwardnesses that need fixing. Look for places where you get distracted or even bored—where you cannot concentrate. These are places where you probably lost focus or concentration in your writing. Cut through the extra words or vagueness or digression; get back to the energy. Listen even for the tiniest jerk or stumble in your reading, the tiniest lessening of your energy or focus or concentration as you say the words. Can you remember listening to someone read a story out loud and how you could tell when the reader got the tiniest bit bored or distracted and stopped giving full attention to the words? Listen for that when you read your own words. Listen for places where the words themselves seem to stop paying full attention to their own meaning.

These are all places where you need to increase the precision and energy in your language. **Y**ou don't have to know what the problem is. No need for sophisticated diagnosis. It doesn't matter whether it is a modifier or a conjunction that is acting up. Just grab yourself by the shoulders, shake yourself, and insist that you mean business: "Stop beating around the bush. Just tell me what you mean to say. Stop explaining things or talking in 'essay' or translating what you have on your mind into 'writing' language: just say it!" Pretend someone is being this firm with you because he cares about you and wants to know what's on your mind.

A sentence should be alive. Does it sag in the middle or trail off at the end? Is it fog or mush? Sentences need energy to make the meaning jump off the page into the reader's head. As writer you must embed that energy in the sentence—coil the spring, set the trap. The meanings should spring up when the reader steps on the

first word. If you just leave your meanings lying around on the ground, readers will have to stoop over to pick them up. You won't have many readers except those who are doing you a favor or already want to know what you have to say—and even those readers won't get experiences from your words, only meanings.

The best sentence is the kind that comes out during the best moments of raw first-draft writing. You are warmed up, writing fast, excited, but not worried. You are fully involved in your meaning, not conscious of anything else. The sentence flows out alive and loud so the reader hears it. Obviously much of your raw writing won't be that way, and it's harder still to achieve that kind of language as you revise—when you are using language slowly, carefully, and consciously. Revising is like constructing a difficult mathematical equation: continually you must stop in the middle of sentences to ponder the right word, to search your memory for alternatives, to wonder whether this sentence fits what came before and comes after. Instead of the producing consciousness where you bend all your efforts singlemindedly toward making contact with what you are writing about—toward full participation with your meaning—in revising you must necessarily be thinking about the reader, about the structure of the whole, about whether your words are true. In good raw writing you *give birth* to sentences, in revising you have to construct them.

Ideal revising, perhaps, would consist only of crossing out and rearranging live words born in the producing process so that every word in the final draft has psychic energy invested in it. (I am exaggerating the value of your raw writing. Not all is alive. Much of it, rightly enough, is produced by slogging onwards when the spirit is dead. One of the main reasons for learning freewriting is so that you can keep on writing even when you are not in the mood.)

But if your raw writing doesn't contain the sentences you need ready-made or uncoverable, there's nothing for it but to *construct* the best sentences you can. Here are a few suggestions:

- After you have constructed the meaning that is right, force yourself to *say* the sentence out loud. It must sound strong and energetic.

- Think in terms of energy. If it's not there, make changes till it is. There is something important about clenching—clenching your jaws or your arms or hitting your hands against something hard.

Cut away unnecessary words and grunt energy into your constructions. Notice, for example, how I can turn an impossible sentence into one that is at least feasible by simply rearranging things as I clench for energy:

(Original): Intelligence, universalistic standards of evaluation, autonomy, flexibility, and rationally oriented legitimate achievements are features of this extended socialization.

(Revised): The extended socialization has these features: intelligence, autonomy, flexibility, universalistic standards of evaluation, and rationally oriented legitimate achievement.

It is an extreme example (it turns out to have been written by a noted sociologist) and I don't do anything to improve the worst problem of the sentence: the string of arrogant abstractions. But I want to illustrate how even these horrible inert lumps need not stop the flow of energetic syntax if we exaggerate the germ of energy. When the lumps of deadness come at the beginning they snuff out that fragile spark of life.

- Simplify. In your best moments during the producing process—when you are warmed up and writing with intensity and involvement, you can produce long and complex sentences, even gnarled or involuted ones, that nevertheless have energy and life. But when you are having to construct sentences as you revise, it's much harder to breathe life into something long. Clench your jaw. Break that long sentence into three short ones. You may not be able to get genuine life into your sentences as you revise, but you can at least make verbs active and lively, leave out extra words, and keep sentences from dribbling out to a flabby end, like this one does, so it drains energy from the reader.

- Use active verbs, avoid the passive voice and too much of the verb "to be." The previous section, for example, begins with the one-word sentence "simplify." Originally I had written "Be simple," and then "Use simplicity," but I realized in revising that I could slightly increase the life by using a plain active verb—which is pure energy—instead of an adjective or noun ("simple" and "simplicity") which are pieces of used up energy.

- Almost everything in *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White is good advice for this stage of revising. It's small and usable and a pleasure.

Final step in thorough revising: *get rid of mistakes in grammar and usage.* (See Chapter 15.)

Summary

The main weapon in thorough revising is time—especially for breaks and vacations. Here are the main steps.

- Fix readers and purpose in mind.
- Read over raw writing and mark important bits.
- Find your main point.
- Put the parts in order on the basis of your main idea.
- Make a draft.
- Possible detour: deal with a break down.
- Tighten and clean up your language. Reading out loud helps.
- Remove mistakes in grammar and usage.

Revising with Feedback

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Revising with feedback is the most powerful way to revise, and happily enough it is also the most interesting and enjoyable technique. No-revising relies on a magical polishing process inside you—using luck and your unconscious. Quick revising relies on a detached critical consciousness: you step out of your involvement with your writing and clean it up with dispassionate pragmatic eyes; you can make quick harsh decisions because you haven't got time to vacillate, you must cut your losses. Thorough revising relies most of all upon time—more time for careful wrestling and more time in addition for setting your writing aside, which gives you newer, fresher eyes than you could get by mere will power or any vow to be dispassionate. Cut-and-paste revising (next chapter) relies on aesthetic intuition. When you revise with feedback you are of course trying to use all these faculties, but in addition you are using the most powerful tool of all: the eyes of others.

How Much Feedback and When

You can bring feedback into the revising process either early or late. If you bring it in early you are in effect using the reactions of others as part of the very process of making up your own mind. If you bring it in late, you are reaching all your conclusions alone but using the reactions of others to help you make those conclusions *work* better on readers.

You will want to hold off on feedback till the end if you are in a